

<p>Institution: University of Essex</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 21 – Politics and International Studies</p>
<p>Title of case study: Reforming BBC News and Current Affairs’ coverage of the UK’s nations</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact Essex research on the causes and consequences of devolution substantially changed the way BBC News and Current Affairs reports on the nations of the United Kingdom. Professor Anthony King’s research on devolution underpinned a 2008 report that he was commissioned to prepare for the BBC Trust. The report examined BBC News and Current Affairs’ coverage of the UK’s nations and made recommendations as to how this coverage could be improved. The BBC Trust and BBC management accepted the bulk of King’s recommendations. The result, still in evidence, has been a transformation in the quality and quantity of the BBC’s relevant television, radio and online output, including a seven-fold increase in references to devolved institutions in subsequent years’ broadcasts.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research Between 2003 and 2007 King worked on a synoptic book, <i>The British Constitution</i>, which dealt at length with the causes and consequences of the devolution of substantial powers to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh National Assembly. Research for the book involved—in addition to extensive reading in government documents, parliamentary debates, newspapers and the secondary literature—conversations and interviews with political practitioners and journalists.</p> <p>Among King’s principal conclusions were: (i) that the current constitutional ‘settlement’ was in fact inherently unsettled; (ii) that the four nations’ party and governmental systems were likely to diverge increasingly; (iii) that the four were also increasingly likely to go their own way in policy terms; (iv) that political communications within each of the four nations were also increasingly likely to diverge; and (v) that, for all those reasons, mutual ignorance across the four nations was likely to increase. In short, not only were Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now devolved from England, but England was devolved from them – without most English people seeming to realise it.</p> <p>Aware of King’s work on the constitution, the BBC Trust commissioned him in the autumn of 2007 to prepare a report on the adequacy or inadequacy of BBC News and Current Affairs’ coverage of the devolved nations. The BBC Trust, in appointing King to write his report, made specific public reference in their press release (19.11.2007) to his book on the constitution, and King drew heavily on the research he had conducted for that book in carrying out his additional research for the BBC Trust. Among other things, it enabled him to conduct well-informed interviews with senior figures in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast as well as in London. His report, published in June 2008, reflects at almost every point the author’s knowledge of the devolved institutions and their political ramifications derived from his research for <i>The British Constitution</i>.</p> <p>Much of Chapter 1 of his report, for example, is devoted to spelling out how devolution has resulted not merely in institutional change but in rapidly diverging party systems and patterns of social policy. It predicted that devolution, seen as a process rather than an outcome, would lead both to greater divergence and to Scotland and Wales, in particular, acquiring greater devolved powers. Almost every substantive chapter of his report contains explicit comparisons between the facts of devolution and the way in which those facts were reflected—or very commonly not reflected—in the BBC network’s coverage; for example, the bogusness, not adequately reflected in the BBC’s coverage, of Gordon Brown’s 2007 pledge to train ‘British workers for British jobs’ when education and training are matters wholly devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (King, 2008, p. 38), and the BBC network’s frequent failure to make it clear, when reporting matters relating to the police and the criminal justice system, that these are matters strictly for the Scottish Executive north of the border (see King, 2008, p. 41).</p>

3. References to the research

King, A. (2007) *The British constitution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 019957698X

King, A. (2008) Independent Assessment by Professor Anthony King. In BBC Trust "The BBC Trust impartiality report: BBC Network News and Current Affairs coverage of the four UK nations, including an independent assessment by Professor Anthony King and research from Cardiff University and BMRB, June 2008", pp. 13-94.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impartiality.pdf

4. Details of the impact

King's report recommended a number of ways in which the BBC's performance could be improved, including more thorough monitoring of the network's output, a system of individual rewards and penalties for succeeding or failing to report adequately and accurately 'the new UK', improved UK-related training and career management, enhanced networking within the BBC, and putting in place one or more 'enforcers' (see Ch. 9) [corroborating source 1]. However, much of the report focused on consciousness-raising and the need to change the BBC's corporate mind-set.

In welcoming King's report, the BBC Trust said it was "concerned at Professor King's assessment that the BBC is not reporting the changing UK with the range that might be expected" and that it was also "concerned at the finding by Professor King that there is insufficient precision and clarity in the BBC's network coverage" (p. 7) [corroborating source 1]. The Trust charged BBC management with first producing a plan for improving the BBC's performance and then with actually improving it. The Action Plan, published in July 2008, made explicit efforts not only to change the content of its broadcasting, but sought to change its practices: "In line with the suggestion by Professor King's report, a senior individual will be given the task of driving through the day-to-day implementation of the action plan, reporting to the Director of News. We will appoint a 'devolution champion' to fulfil this role" (p. 2) [corroborating source 2].

In September 2009 the BBC Trust published a progress report on its response to King's findings. This report further demonstrates the operational changes that King inspired in the BBC, including senior editors attending workshops on matters relating to devolution, the creation of an online module on Reporting the UK by The College of Journalism, and senior network editors improving their understanding of devolution by taking part in a programme of placements around the UK. In addition to this, the progress report also highlighted the ways in which the BBC was improving the accuracy and diversity of its news coverage of the UK as a whole [3].

Since 2008 the Trust has monitored at intervals the extent to which BBC News and Current Affairs has improved its performance in this regard. Its verdict, while not unqualified, has been positive. At the time Professor King was appointed, in 2007, the Trust commissioned detailed content-analysis research from Cardiff University – the findings of which had pinpointed serious failings in the content and accuracy of the BBC's coverage [4]. The Trust commissioned similar research from the same source in late 2009 (published in March 2010) and that research reported substantial improvements in almost every regard [5]. The most dramatic increase was in the number of explicit or implicit references made to devolved powers, which increased from 71 to 480 across the BBC, meaning every one in eight news items carried a reference to devolved powers, as opposed to the previous figure of one in fifty. Other findings showed an increased awareness of devolution, including a rise from 7.8% to 14.2% in news items on BBC TV about Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. Coverage of matters explicitly to do with devolution also increased across all BBC platforms, most notably online (from 1.7% of news items to 3.5%) and also on TV (0.7% to 1.2%) (see pp. 4-6) [5]. Responding to the Cardiff group's findings, the BBC Executive said it welcomed "the recognition in the new study of the work done since the King report to improve the BBC's journalism", adding that it recognised "that the momentum needs to be kept up" (p. 6) [6].

The figures from the Cardiff study demonstrate that King's report had a significant effect on news coverage of the devolved nations on the BBC. However, a critic may suggest that this could have been due to there being more relevant issues to cover or that the BBC is simply catching up with other broadcasters. This is shown not to be the case, as the Cardiff findings compare the BBC's TV coverage to that of Sky, ITV, and Channel Four. For instance, whereas BBC TV increased its coverage about devolved issues from 0.7% to 1.2% of news items, for the other broadcasters taken as a whole the figure fell from 0.6% to 0.3%. While a reference to devolved powers was found in one in every eight BBC news items, this figure was only one in thirty for other broadcasters – admittedly an improvement from these broadcasters' 2007 figure of one in ninety (see pp. 4-6) [5].

Further evidence of the specific effect of King's report comes from senior figures at the BBC who have informed King of the impact of his work. For instance, BBC Scotland's Political Editor, in an email to King on an unrelated matter in October 2008, remarked, "En passant, I should say that your report continues to cause a substantial (and I mean substantial) reaction in the Beeb. I think it's bringing about real change" [7]. More recently, the Chairman of the BBC Trust went out of his way to tell King how important his report had been and how much impact it had had. Indeed, a number of senior figures at the BBC have agreed to corroborate the claims made in this case study.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

All documents are available from HEI on request.

[1] BBC Trust (2008) The BBC Trust impartiality report: BBC Network News and Current Affairs coverage of the four UK nations, including an independent assessment by Professor Anthony King and research from Cardiff University and BMRB, June 2008.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impairtiality.pdf

[2] BBC Executive (2008) Management response to Trust Review of Network news coverage of Nations and Regions: Action plan, 16 July 2008.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/action_plan.pdf

[3] BBC Trust (2009) BBC Trust Review of BBC News and Current Affairs coverage of the four nations of the UK: Progress Report from BBC Management.

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/network_news/management_report.pdf

[4] Lewis, J., S. Cushion, C. Groves, L. Bennett, S. Reardon, E. Wilkins and R. Williams (2008) Four Nations Impartiality Review: An analysis of reporting devolution. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University. Published as an appendix to BBC Trust (2008).

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/appendix_a_cardiff_u_analysis.pdf

[5] Cushion, S., J. Lewis and G. N. Ramsay (2010) Four Nations Impartiality Review follow-up: An analysis of reporting of devolution. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media Studies and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, March 2010.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2010/nations_impairtiality_analysis.pdf

[6] BBC Trust (2010) BBC Network News coverage of the four UK Nations: Follow-up.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2010/nations_impairtiality.pdf

[7] Email from BBC Scotland's Political Editor.