

Institution: Cardiff University

Unit of Assessment: 36

Title of case study: Improving the quality of news coverage across the BBC in a devolved UK

1. Summary of the impact

Political power in the UK has been significantly devolved since 1999, transforming the policy landscape. Our research in 2007 found that broadcast news failed to reflect this new landscape, and that citizens were routinely being misinformed about major areas of policy such as health and education - a lack of information and understanding that is a potential barrier to democratic engagement. Our research was used to inform the King Report, as well as being published by the BBC Trust as part of that report, and our recommendations were adopted by the BBC which took action based on our findings to improve news coverage across all its outlets. Our follow-up study, conducted a year after this intervention, found that BBC news coverage had changed to become more accurate, and better reflected post-devolution politics in the UK.

2. Underpinning research

The Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies (JOMEC) has conducted independent research with a range of media industry bodies (e.g. the BBC, Channel 4 and the NUJ), and has established a reputation for its policy-related research. This case study is therefore illustrative of a larger body of work with the broadcast industry including: an AHRC/BBC funded project on user generated content (resulting in a new training package delivered to over 5000 BBC journalists); a further BBC Trust impartiality review (which led to the appointment of 'story champions' for important news stories and the creation of a pan-BBC forum on religion and ethics); and a Channel 4 funded study of coverage of British Muslims (which informed subsequent documentaries on Channel 4 and BBC Radio 4). It also sits within a body of policy work such as the Hargreaves Review of Intellectual Property Law and our work on journalism safety (see Impact Template).

In 2007, following a competitive tender, the BBC Trust commissioned JOMEC to conduct research assessing the performance of BBC news - across all TV, radio and online outlets - in reflecting the new realities of devolved UK politics. JOMEC was chosen, in part, because of its record of applying more qualitative and discursive forms of analysis to large, quantifiable samples. The project was led by **Professor Justin Lewis** (joined JOMEC 15th August, 2000) and **Dr Stephen Cushion**, Lecturer, promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2012 (joined JOMEC 1st January, 2006).

The UK policy arena, following the devolution settlement in 1999, is complex. Since devolution, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are free to pursue different approaches in key areas like health and education, while powers over a number of other areas (like planning and the environment) are partially devolved. Evaluating the ability of journalism to reflect this post-devolution world accurately was a difficult challenge, one that obliged us to be more interpretive than a conventional content analysis.

Our research (analysing over 4,500 news items) examined a range of BBC television, radio and online news outlets and the other main UK broadcasters (ITV, Channel 4 and Sky). We found a series of shortcomings in both the quality and accuracy of broadcast and online journalism. In particular:

- in defining nationhood, England was often represented as a stand-in for the UK as a whole. So, for example, policies only applicable to England were often (misleadingly) reported as if they applied to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;
- in a broader sense, the 'centre' (especially London and the South East of England) received a disproportionate level of coverage at the expense of 'the periphery' (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland);

Impact case study (REF3b - UoA36_Case Study 1)

- the distinct policies of devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were rarely acknowledged or discussed;
- although devolved policy areas like health and education received significant coverage, opportunities to *compare* and *contrast* policies across the four nations (and thereby inform the democratic choices available) were routinely ignored.

These findings were detailed in a 102 page report produced by the researchers and published by the BBC Trust in June 2008 (see section 3 publication 1). This then informed a series of recommendations from BBC management, in September 2008, designed to improve coverage.

We were then commissioned by the BBC Trust to do follow up research in 2009 to assess the impact of these recommendations. Our follow up study (also conducted by Lewis and Cushion) showed that BBC coverage had, across the board, become significantly more attuned to the new world of devolved UK politics (see section 3 publication. 4).

Key researchers: the work was led by Lewis and Cushion (both established members of staff at JOMEC) with Groves (for the 2007 study) and Ramsay (for the 2009 study) as the research associates employed in JOMEC for the duration of the projects. A team of PhD student coders were also employed on the projects for a few weeks.

3. References to the research

1. **Lewis, J., Cushion, S.,** Groves, C., Bennett, L., Reardon, S., Wilkins, E., and Williams, R. (2008) *Four Nations Impartiality Review: An analysis of reporting devolution*, London: BBC Trust at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/appendix_a_cardiff_u_analysis.pdf Grant funding (Sep 2007 - Feb 2008, Lewis J and Cushion S, BBC Trust, £63K)
2. **Cushion, S., Lewis, J.,** and Groves, C. (2009a) 'Reflecting the four nations? An analysis of reporting devolution on UK network news media, *Journalism Studies*, 10:5, 655-671, DOI: 10.1080/14616700902797242 (peer reviewed)
3. **Cushion, S., Lewis, J.,** and Groves, C. (2009b) 'Prioritizing hand-shaking over policy-making: A study of how the 2007 devolved elections was reported on BBC UK network coverage', *Cyfrwng: Media Wales Journal*, 6: 7-32 (Supplied on request) (peer reviewed)
4. **Cushion, S., Lewis, J.,** and Ramsay, G. (2010) *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up: An analysis of reporting devolution*: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2010/nations_impartiality_analysis.pdf Grant funding (Sep 2009 - Mar 2010, Cushion S and Lewis J, BBC Trust, £69K)
5. **Cushion, S., Lewis, J.,** and Ramsay, G. (2011) 'The impact of interventionist regulation in reshaping news agendas: A comparative analysis of public and commercially funded television journalism', *Journalism*, 13(7), 831-849, DOI: 10.1177/1464884911431536 (output listed in REF2 - 2287/3118) (peer reviewed)

4. Details of the impact

For news broadcasters accustomed to a policy landscape centred on Westminster, the devolved landscape of contemporary UK politics represents a major new challenge. If citizens are to understand where democratic responsibility and accountability lie, as well as appreciate a range of policy options, the news media need to cover political issues in a way that makes policy differences and areas of responsibility clear. This is especially true of broadcasting which remains the dominant and most trusted source of information about political issues for most people. So, for example, the four UK nations have all pursued different policies on education, from free schools to university tuition fees. On a practical level, citizens in each nation need to understand these differences. On a broader political level, an appreciation of these differences allows citizens to understand the range of possibilities, to judge their governments accordingly and hold them to account.

Our research (2008; 2009a; 2009b - see section 3) revealed that news coverage did not provide enough information for viewers/listeners to understand the policy differences and practicalities of a devolved UK, and worse, coverage was often misleading about where power and responsibility lay.

The research was one of two studies used to inform the King Report, as well as being published by the BBC Trust as part of that report. The King Report adopted our main findings and recommendations, urging the BBC to improve coverage to more accurately reflect post-devolution politics in the UK. The BBC accepted these findings and made a commitment - through guidelines - to report political issues in ways that would allow citizens to understand what their own governments were doing and the options pursued elsewhere. The BBC also ran a training and awareness raising programme for staff, including Senior Editors and Producers of major news programmes. This included visits to the devolved nations outside England to better understand differences in policy and delivery.

In order to see whether BBC coverage had changed as a result of this intervention, the BBC Trust commissioned us to conduct follow up research in 2009. This research suggested that a number of challenges remain - notably the London-centric nature of much UK television news. However, it also found that, through a range of different measures, this intervention made a difference - reshaping the news agenda of BBC news and ensuring that programming provided a more accurate and representative picture of politics and policy in the UK and its devolved political institutions.

So, for example, our follow up study (2010) found that:

- all BBC outlets were more likely to let viewers/listeners know when policy areas applied only to England;
- all BBC outlets significantly increased their reporting from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, both in general and with specific reference to devolved areas;
- a number of BBC news outlets have begun to use a 'compare and contrast' approach, reporting on some of the differences in policy across the UK.

Our findings indicate that other broadcasters - who were beyond the report's jurisdiction, operating under a different regulatory/governance framework - have changed very little, and continue to replicate the same forms of misleading and limited coverage we found in our 2008 report. In short, our follow up research demonstrated the impact of the intervention based on our initial research.

The immediate beneficiary, in terms of impact, was the BBC, who used the research to significantly improve the quality and accuracy of their news coverage across their many news outlets. However, the BBC's reach and scope - as the principle news provider in the UK - means that there is a much wider societal benefit, with citizens being provided with better access to information about the nature, responsibility and outcomes of democratic decision making.

Sir Michael Lyons, BBC Chairman in his farewell speech, 2011 highlighted the impact of our research:

"...one of the Trust achievements of which I am proud is our decision to require BBC News to dramatically improve its performance in reporting the devolved nations of the UK both to themselves and to one another. We now take it for granted that when a new piece of legislation is announced, BBC journalists will make clear which parts of the UK it applies to, and which parts it does not. We now take it for granted that the BBC will make regular comparisons in its reporting between the way big social issues - university tuition fees, say, or prescription charges - are dealt with in Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland as compared to England. We now take it for granted that BBC news adopts a much less London-centred view of the UK. This was not always the case. Our 2008 report into the impartiality of coverage of the Nations...marked a real turning point here" (see section 5, source 7)

The chronology of the research and its impact was as follows:

Project 1:

- Spring 2007: Cardiff University successfully tender for the BBC Trust's review of coverage of the 4 UK nations and politics in a post-devolved UK
- June 2008: The research report published by the BBC Trust as part of the King Report, which adopts its main recommendations (BBC network news coverage of the four UK nations: the Trust's conclusions 11 June 2008) (see section 5, corroborating source 1):
- The research is widely reported (e.g. Gibson, Owen (2008) 'BBC Journalists accused of London bias' in *Media Guardian*, 12 June 2008) (see section 5, source 2)
- July 2008: BBC management publish their response, including a series of recommendations for improving coverage. These recommendations are manifested in various forms, such as guidelines issued by the BBC College of Journalism (see section 5, source 3 & 5)

Project 2:

- Summer 2009: Cardiff University commissioned by the BBC Trust to conduct follow-up research to assess whether BBC coverage had overcome the shortcomings detailed in the 2007 report and the King Report (see section 5, source 1)
- July 2010: BBC Trust publishes findings that suggest a number of key improvements in BBC Reporting (see section 5, source 4, 6, & 7)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact:

1. King Report (June 2008), adopting the main recommendations of the research:
 - a. http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/network_news.html
 - b. http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impartiality.pdf
2. Example of prominent media coverage:
<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/jun/12/bbc.tvnews>
3. BBC management publish their response, including a series of recommendations for improving coverage:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/news/mngt_response_nations_review.pdf
4. The follow up impartiality review (March 2010) and the BBC Trust response to it:
 - a. http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2010/nations_impartiality_analysis.pdf
 - b. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2010/nations_impartiality.pdf
5. BBC College of Journalism -corroborates the impact claim that it has used the findings of the report to instruct journalists how devolution should be reported, both generally and during the General Election of 2010 coverage. See, for example: *BBC College of Journalism 2010 Election Checklist (Television Journalism, Cushion 2012, 139-140)* Output listed in SOURCE2: 2285)
6. In more general coverage of devolution, the BBC College produced the guide
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20130702112133668>
7. Sir Michael Lyons, Chairman of BBC Trust when the report was produced and the BBC Trust's reaction to the follow up study (29/11/2011):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/speeches/2011/lyons_michael_trust.html