BBC Trust

BBC Network News coverage of the four UK Nations: follow-up

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Getting the best out of the BBC for licence fee payers
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About this review

Two years ago the BBC Trust published independent research it had commissioned that revealed clear shortcomings in BBC network news reporting of devolution – the shift of power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The concern was not about the impartiality of the BBC’s reporting, but about the accuracy, clarity and balance of the reporting, and about missed opportunities to report the rich variety of the UK.

The Trust asked the BBC Executive to remedy matters and in October 2009 the Trust published an assessment by the Executive of improvements in coverage made since the publication of the original research. The Trust said it was encouraging to see that operational changes had been made to ensure network news and current affairs coverage reflected more precisely the different politics and policies around the UK. However, the Trust still saw further room to build on this groundwork and it commissioned its own independent research to assess progress.

Today the Trust is publishing that research, which was carried out by Cardiff University and included a detailed content analysis of four weeks of network news and current affairs in October and November 2009.
Summary and Trust conclusions

In general the new research for the BBC Trust demonstrates that there has been real improvement in many areas and that BBC network news now does very much better than other broadcasters in reporting the devolved UK. The Trust commends the Executive for the work done and the improvements achieved. In particular the Trust notes:

- A significant increase in the proportion of news items related to or about Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland on BBC television with a much smaller increase on non-BBC television outlets
- A significant increase in BBC television reporting from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland compared with a drop by other broadcasters
- The proportion of news items referring to devolved powers almost doubled on the BBC overall while remaining the same on other broadcasters
- The number of explicit or implicit references made to devolved powers increased dramatically (from 71 to 480) on the BBC and more modestly on other broadcasters
- The number of news items making a comparison between the policies of devolved nations remains low but has doubled on the BBC while falling on other broadcasters

However, the Trust notes that although real progress has been made in significant areas of the BBC’s reporting of the politics of devolution, there are areas which require further work. The Trust is concerned to note that:

- The research shows that some BBC network journalists still do not make it absolutely clear which devolved issues affect which parts of the UK. The result of this lack of clear labelling is that a significant number of stories about devolved issues (such as health, education or policing) that apply only to England – or to England and Wales – are reported as if they apply to the UK as a whole. The Trust is looking to the Executive for speedy improvement here.
- BBC network news coverage continues to show a preponderance of stories about England in some areas. For example, in the weeks sampled every single BBC network news story about business, the arts and about policing related only to England. There is evidence of more comprehensive reporting in some other policy areas – health and education, for example – but the Trust will continue to
press the BBC Executive for further progress here. One of the key ways the Executive has responded to the Trust’s pressure over the last two years to report devolution better has been to introduce new training for BBC programme makers. The Trust is encouraged by the progress made here and notes that the Executive has confirmed that this training will continue and that as new people join the BBC they too will be trained. In addition, new editorial leaders now and in the future in news and current affairs will benefit from an editorial leaders workshop similar to those held in 2008/9. All new network editors will also spend at least one week in a BBC newsroom in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and in an English region within 12 months of starting their jobs.

The Trust is keen that this exposure is not a one-off and has asked the Executive to ensure that programme editors continue to engage with the Nations and English Regions through visits, swaps and regular editorial discussion.

The Trust has asked for an update on progress on BBC network news reporting of the devolved UK to become a standing item in the six-monthly complaints and compliance report.

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1 The original workshops focused on what leadership is required in the proper reporting of the whole UK. The sessions used expertise from across the Nations and Regions as well as content analysis. They looked at background knowledge, language and terminology and mindsets, as well as the BBC’s internal lines of communication. All editorial leaders in BBC News then in place went through this programme by the end of March 2009.
Background

The Trust published the original findings in June 2008, based on research done in 2007. It consisted of an independent assessment by Professor Anthony King, supported by research from Cardiff University and the British Market Research Bureau.

- The key concerns uncovered by the research related to:
- The accuracy and clarity of reporting
- The balance of coverage
- Missed opportunities to draw on the rich variety of the UK
- Too great a focus on Westminster in political coverage
- A general bias in favour of stories about England, or of telling stories from an English perspective
- Failures by network news to report stories from the nations of significance to the whole UK

The Executive responded in July 2008 with an action plan, and in October 2009 the Trust published an assessment by the Executive of improvements in coverage made since the publication of the original research. The Trust said it was encouraging to see that operational changes had been made to ensure network news and current affairs coverage reflected more precisely the different politics and policies around the UK. However, the Trust still saw further room to build on this groundwork and it commissioned its own independent research to assess progress.

This research - published today - was carried out by Cardiff University. The centrepiece of the research was a detailed content analysis of four weeks of network news and current affairs in October and November 2009. The Cardiff team examined output on BBC TV, radio and online, as well as output on ITV, Channel 4 and Sky News.

On the positive side, the research shows that, in general, BBC coverage was more sensitive to devolution-related issues in 2009 than in the earlier research. By contrast, the non-BBC broadcasters showed little evidence of enhanced or increased coverage of devolved issues.

- There was a significant increase in BBC coverage of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - not just about devolution-related issues - especially on television. 14.2% of news items on BBC television related to these nations in 2009, compared with 7.8% in the earlier research. The non-BBC broadcasters showed a much smaller increase.
- Location reporting by the BBC from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland increased - to 12.3% on BBC television in 2009 compared with 7.7% in the
earlier research. In sharp contrast, equivalent location coverage by non-BBC broadcasters dropped from 4.6% to 2.8%.

- Coverage of specifically devolution-related issues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland increased on all BBC outlets, especially online. By contrast, the proportion of such items halved on the non-BBC broadcasters.
- The proportion of BBC news items referring to devolved powers or authorities almost doubled between the earlier research and the 2009 exercise, while the proportion on non-BBC broadcasters stayed the same. By 2009 BBC outlets were three times as likely as ITV, Channel 4 and Sky to refer to the existence of devolved powers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Against this positive picture, however, the research shows that concerns remain about misleading or confusing coverage of devolved issues when stories that apply only to England (or England and Wales) are reported as though they apply to the UK as a whole.

- Four out of ten BBC network news items about devolved issues in England (or England and Wales) failed to make it clear that the story applied only to England or England and Wales.
- BBC radio is more likely to be unclear in this way than BBC television or online. This may reflect shorter deadlines and high re-use rates – so that an original omission is repeated in later transmissions.

The researchers point out that this problem is made more difficult because English institutions and Westminster political parties often announce policies and initiatives without making clear to which parts of the UK they apply. This places the onus on reporters to contextualise the story correctly.

One of the most striking findings of the original 2007 research was the bias in favour of stories about England. There were 136 BBC network news items about health and education – key areas of devolved policy – and every single one related only to England. The research published today shows that things are changing, although more remains to be done. Of the 112 BBC items about health and education, 104 related to England and eight to the other three nations. However, all the news stories about the arts and about policing (and in a number of other subjects) in both the 2007 and 2009 samples related only to England and both of these are area where it is reasonable to expect to see Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represented.
Response from the BBC Executive

The Executive response welcomes the recognition in the new study of the work done since the King report to improve the BBC’s journalism. But the Executive also recognises that the momentum needs to be kept up. In particular the Executive accepts the criticism of BBC journalists’ failure to make clear the reach of certain stories.

In order to improve performance:

- The head of news programmes and the head of the multi-media newsroom will remind editors of their responsibilities, and the guidance on labelling will be reissued to all journalists.
- A daily ‘devolution reminder’ section will be added to programme running orders in the newsroom computer system.
- Programme editors will be reminded of the need to compare and contrast policy areas in the devolved nations where appropriate.
- Steps will be taken to ensure that the fruitful co-operation with the nations and regions built up during the general election campaign will be continued.
- Regular monitoring of coverage will pay particular attention to these issues.

The Executive wish to record some reservations about one aspect of the content analysis, which, it suggests, gives more weight to quantity than quality. The BBC is committed to better coverage of the devolved nations, but the quality and richness of BBC reporting remains the most important priority. UK-wide programmes will continue to have to judge the strength of a ‘devolution story’ relative to events elsewhere in the world, and it is important that content analysis takes account of this.