

2016 Nations Impartiality Review: A snapshot picture

Report authors

Dr. Stephen Cushion

Prof. Justin Lewis

Prof. Richard Sambrook

Research team

Rob Callaghan

Dr. Allaina Kilby

Marina Morani

Richard Thomas



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Section 1: Introduction and Overview

The scope of the study

Following the *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up: Analysis of Reporting Devolution* submitted in December 2015, we were asked by the BBC Trust to carry out a further snapshot review of BBC coverage of the nations and devolved politics at the beginning of 2016, shortly after the BBC Executive's response to our study in January 2016.¹ The aim of this review is to identify any changes to BBC news output *between the sample period in 2015 and a sample period in 2016*.

We carried out a two-week analysis of BBC and non-BBC output (between 25 and 31 January, and between 22 and 28 February 2016). The time frame of the study was chosen to avoid untypical periods, notably the run-up to the devolved elections and EU referendum (in March, April, May and June 2016). Rather than comparing the findings to our previous 2007, 2009 and 2015 studies, we will only present the 2015 and 2016 findings to explore specifically whether or not coverage changed within this time period. There were no major news stories that dominated the agenda over the two-week period, but there were a number of high-profile sport-related issues, particularly on television news.

We should make clear a number of points about the scope and approach of this report.

Media content analysis is a purely quantitative exercise. Although our case studies explore how devolution is communicated, content analysis cannot, by its nature, take into account the qualitative news judgements which editors are employed to make. However, the results of the analysis provide a baseline from which to judge whether on-the-day editorial judgements deliver the level of coverage over time which the BBC believes appropriate. Any sampling of output is little more than a snapshot. However, the sampling period here was agreed in advance with the BBC Trust, and designed to avoid obvious potentially distorting events like elections in the nations. Although a sample, the results show a remarkable consistency with the previous three analyses Cardiff University has undertaken since 2007.

A quantitative analysis does not imply coverage should be driven by quotas or numbers of references. How the BBC reports devolution is entirely a matter for the BBC. If parts of this report indicate where devolution *could* have been mentioned it is for the BBC to decide whether that would have been appropriate or not.

Our study is primarily informed by a detailed media content analysis (see Appendix for inter-coder reliability scores). We have reproduced the categories used in the 2015 study to enable direct points of comparison, but, where appropriate, we explore issues in greater qualitative detail. In this 2016 study, we examined a total of 2,169 news items across a range of BBC (television and radio) and other non-BBC television outlets. Online news was excluded from the sample because we could not retrospectively access archive coverage. Unless stated, we have excluded online news from the 2015 sample to allow a more meaningful comparative analysis. Sky News (between 5pm and 6pm weekdays, and 6pm and 7pm weekends) was also

¹ The Director of BBC News and Current Affairs required his team to take action in January 2016 as a result of the findings of the 2015 report.

excluded, so all non-BBC news coverage refers to ITV's News at Ten and Channel 4 News (and, for comparative purposes, we have modified the 2015 data to exclude Sky News).

The full sample includes:

BBC television: BBC News at One, BBC News at Six, BBC News at Ten, BBC News (BBC One Saturday and Sunday afternoons), Newsnight, Sunday Politics, and one hour per day of the BBC News Channel (5-6pm Monday-Friday, 6-7pm Saturday, Sunday).

BBC radio: Today (7.30-8.30am), World at One, PM, Six O'Clock News (all Radio 4), 5 live Breakfast (7.30-8.30am).

Non-BBC: ITV's News at Ten and Channel 4 News (including weekends).

This study is primarily a two-week snapshot picture of coverage. However, we also examined two of the BBC's flagship programmes – the News at Ten on BBC One and Today on Radio 4 – over a longer six-week period (between 18 January and 7 February, and 22 February and 13 March 2016, so avoiding the periods when the UK's political institutions were on recess). While Today and News at Ten do not reflect *all* BBC news output, analysing both programmes over a six-week period gave us a longer time period to check whether or not our findings might have been any different if the entire study had been extended over a longer period (if, for example, there were unusual news events that perhaps distorted our two-week sample). As it turned out, the findings from the six-week sample were broadly similar to the more comprehensive two-week sample, suggesting that the two-week period was not untypical and that, had we examined a longer period for all the analysed output (as in all our previous studies), the findings would have been much the same.

For the most part, we compare the findings of the six-week study with BBC coverage over the two-week sample period. Since the raw comparative numbers are relatively low, any percentage point changes should be cautiously interpreted. The total amount of news items examined on Today and News at Ten over six weeks was 1,232 (including 816 items examined outside the two-week sample period). Overall, the total sample size of the 2016 study was 2,985 items.

Consistent with our previous content analysis for BBC impartiality reviews, the unit of analysis is a 'news item', which denotes a single unit of news coverage on a particular bulletin – so, for example, a presenter's introduction followed by a reporter's package. This means that on some news programmes – especially radio – there may be more than one news item about the same news story. This allows us to distinguish between two news items in the same programme about the same story. The term 'story', by contrast, usually consists of several linked but discrete news items.

Overview

The combined proportion of reporting about (or in) Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fell significantly across BBC outlets. So, for example, on BBC television news outlets there were more than twice as many items from Westminster as items about *any topic* reported from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The proportion of items about devolved issues also fell significantly, with stories about England dominating the domestic agenda. Devolved politics outside England represented just 1% of the overall news agenda. This picture was reinforced by our six-week analysis of BBC flagship news programmes – News at Ten and Today – suggesting the volume of news about or from the nations beyond England or stories about devolved politics would *not* have increased if the sample time frame had been extended.

When news relevant to devolution (mainly items about England) was reported on BBC news we found a mixed picture, with some evidence of improvement in the clarity of coverage as well as some missed opportunities. So, for example, previous studies found the BBC often reported devolved areas of responsibilities – in particular health or education – without signalling that it was only relevant to England. In 2016, the BBC (along with ITV and Channel 4) communicated the geographical relevance of UK policy items more regularly. The proportion of BBC items that did so was 78% – its highest level in any of our studies – but still leaving 22% that *could* have been reported with greater clarity. By contrast, just over half of devolved relevant items on ITV and Channel 4 stated the geographical relevance of policy items, a far lower ratio than on BBC outlets.

On BBC television (but not radio), we found an increase in the number of times an English news item was signposted geographically (mainly by using locaters such as ‘in England’). These references remain largely implicit rather than explicit. So, for example, it is generally assumed that when a story about the junior doctors’ dispute uses the phrase ‘junior doctors in England’, this effectively signposts to audiences an area of devolved responsibility that only applies to England, (and that, as a consequence, this is not the case in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland). To what extent these cues register with audiences – particularly when they are said just once or twice in a lengthy news package - remains open to question.

The number of news items making comparisons between nations fell (as a proportion) between 2015 and 2016. Health in England and Wales was compared in a few items in 2016 without including the NHS records of the administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, this was a follow-up to the UK government’s repeated assertion that the NHS in Wales (run by the Welsh Labour Party) performs poorly compared to England.

Although the BBC communicates news about the four nations with greater regularity and clarity than commercial television, overall devolved politics continues to represent a fraction of UK network news. For some years now the four national governments have all been controlled by different parties pursuing distinctive policies. However, we continue to find in our content analysis studies few instances where policies are compared or contrasted across the nations.

This snapshot study was only two weeks long so any percentage point changes compared to 2015 should be cautiously interpreted. In some cases, the decrease in sample size combines with the decrease in coverage of devolved stories in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to give very small numbers of news items. As we pointed out in our previous report, the sample period is subject to the particularities of the major news stories that may emerge, which may push certain types of story up the news agenda.

Section 2: The Broad Pattern of News Coverage of the Four Nations

Overall, the 2016 sample consisted of 2,169 news items gathered over two weeks in January and February (2,985 in total if we include the additional Today and News at Ten programmes examined over six weeks). Table 2.0 shows the distribution of the two-week sample across BBC television and radio as well as ITV and Channel 4 (labelled Other TV), which were broadly similar in 2015 and 2016. In total, we draw on 6,408 news items to compare coverage of four nations and devolved politics in BBC and other TV news outlets between 2015 and 2016.²

Table 2.0: Percentage of media sample in 2015 and 2016 (N in brackets)

Media	2015	2016
	%	%
BBC TV	36.1	38.7
Other TV	15.4	14.6
BBC Radio	48.5	46.7
Total	100 (4239)	100 (2169)

In 2015 we found items about the UK nations beyond England had increased compared to 2007 and 2009 (excluding international news or stories about the UK as a whole). In 2016, even if we exclude Westminster-based stories (which may be about the UK as a whole), in news items based in (or about) one of the four nations, England was clearly the dominant location, increasing its share from 78.4% to 85.8%. The proportion of domestic news items specifically related to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland reduced significantly, from 21.7% to 14.2% (see Table 2.1).³ This was due to far fewer news items about Scotland and Northern Ireland. News about Scotland may have dropped because the 2015 sample period coincided with the SNP conference. Coverage of Wales increased, albeit from a fairly low base, and the total amount of news about Wales was less than the drop in the proportion of items about Scotland.

As pointed out in previous reports, we should not assume that that the proportion of news items about the nations that make up the United Kingdom should correlate with the proportion of the UK's population to be found in each nation. Even so we note that in our 2016 study items about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland *combined* were less than the share of their *combined* populations. So, for example, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represent 16.1% of the UK population, but received 14.2% of coverage specifically about the four nations. While people in England and Wales make up 83.9% and 4.8% of the total UK population respectively, coverage about each nation was higher than their population size. However, the amount of coverage about Scotland and Northern Ireland was less than their populations (8.1% and 2.9% respectively).

If we compare the geographical relevance of items on Today and News at Ten over six weeks, the focus on England is almost identical – 84.5% – as the two-week sample period.

² Throughout the report we refer to *percentage point drops* not by an overall percentage.

³ As we did in previous reports, for the purposes of clarity we focus on news items only about one of the four nations, excluding other items.

While coverage of Scotland and Wales was roughly the same as the two-week study (6.8% and 6.3% respectively), the proportion of items about Northern Ireland was slightly higher (up to 2.4% from 1.1%).

Table 2.1: Area of geographical relevance (by percentage) of news items (excluding Westminster and UK-wide items)⁴ (N in brackets)

Location	2015	2016
	%	%
England	78.4	85.8
Scotland	14.4	7.1
Wales	2.3	6.0
Northern Ireland	5.0	1.1
Total	100 (1142)	100 (452)

If we include items about Westminster politics (Table 2.2), this reduces the overall proportions of domestic news from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which then (combined) represent 10.2% of domestic news coverage on BBC television and 11.1% of radio coverage in 2016.

Coverage thus remains England-focused: so, for example, of the 17 BBC news items about arts, history or culture in one of the four nations, 16 were based in England and just one in Wales (the Cardiff Festival of Voice). All seven arts, history or culture items on ITV and Channel 4 were stories relating primarily to England.

The proportion of news items about Westminster also fell from 22.0% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2016 on BBC television news, and from 25.9% to 18.0% on BBC radio. Despite this drop, coverage of Westminster continues to far outweigh all stories (political or otherwise) about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. While Westminster stories may be relevant to all four nations, it suggests that the Westminster ‘beat’ remains at the heart of news coverage about UK politics in a way that the devolved nations are not. Of course, news about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can be accessed on the BBC’s opt-outs. But on UK network news our content analysis shows Westminster politics receives far more attention than all categories of news from outside England.

We found a similar spread of UK domestic coverage on Today and News at Ten over six weeks. News about England made up 72.4% of items (up by 0.4%), but the proportion of news about Westminster was down – from 18.1% to 14.3% – compared to the two-week sample. The proportion of items about Northern Ireland in the six-week sample rose to 2.0% from 0.7% in the two-week sample, with a more modest increase in coverage of Scotland and Wales (up to 5.8% from 5.5% and up to 5.5% from 3.7% respectively).

⁴ In this and subsequent tables, percentages have been rounded up and may not add up to 100%.

Table 2.2: Geographical relevance by media outlet (by percentage) including Westminster (N in brackets)

Media	England		Scotland		Wales		N. Ireland		Westminster		Total	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%										%	
BBC TV	61.4	72.3	10.2	5.9	1.4	3.6	5.0	0.7	22.0	17.5	100 (577)	100 (303)
Other TV	60.4	74.7	9.8	4.4	0.4	/	0.4	/	29.0	20.9	100 (255)	100 (91)
BBC Radio	56.1	71.0	11.6	5.4	2.4	4.8	3.9	0.9	25.9	18.0	100 (690)	100 (334)
Total	58.8	72.0	10.8	5.5	1.7	3.7	3.7	0.7	25.0	18.1	100 (1522)	100 (728)

We also looked at the location of *reporters* in news coverage. Excluding studio-based and international news items, Table 2.3 shows that coverage from reporters on location in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fell on BBC television news (from 12.3% in 2015 to 9.9% in 2016) with a more dramatic fall on radio (from 25.2% to 14.7%). The proportion of reporters on location from one of the three nations also fell significantly on ITV and Channel 4 (from an already low level) from 7.9% to 2.8%, with most of this due to a sharp decrease in reporting from Scotland (the only one of the three nations to receive much coverage on non-BBC stations in 2015).

Table 2.3: Number of items with a reporter on location (by percentage) in one of the four nations by media outlet (N in brackets)

Media	England		Scotland		Wales		N. Ireland		Westminster		Totals	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%										%	
BBC TV	69.6	68.8	9.1	4.2	0.5	5.2	2.7	0.5	18.0	21.4	100 (550)	100 (192)
Other TV	67.9	70.8	6.4	1.4	1.2	1.4	0.3	/	24.2	26.4	100 (343)	100 (72)
BBC Radio	63.5	74.7	17.8	8.4	3.7	4.2	3.7	2.1	11.4	10.5	100 (219)	100 (95)
Total	67.9	70.8	10.0	4.7	1.3	4.2	2.2	0.8	18.6	19.5	100 (1112)	100 (359)

**There were occasions when reporters were in England and Scotland or England and Wales within the same news item*

The trends in reporter location match those of story location. Reporting from Scotland more than halved on both BBC television and radio between 2015 and 2016. Reporting from Northern Ireland also fell, particularly on BBC television news (from 2.7% to 0.5%), while reporting from Wales increased significantly (although from a fairly low base in 2015), from 0.5% to 5.2% on BBC television and on BBC radio from 3.7% to 4.2%.

There is a decrease in reporting from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland overall. On BBC radio, this is accompanied by an increase in the coverage of England, while on BBC television it combines with an increase in the coverage of Westminster. The proportion of

reporters in England remained broadly the same on BBC television, while on radio the proportion rose by 11.2%. By contrast, the proportion of Westminster-based news items increased by 3.4% on BBC television news, while remaining at broadly the same level on BBC radio.

On BBC television, more than twice as many items come from Westminster as from any part of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (on any topic) combined, while on ITV and Channel 4 the ratio is nearly nine to one. Overall, it appears that television continues to be reliant on Westminster-based reporters.

The spread of reporters across the UK on Today and News at Ten was broadly the same over six weeks. While the proportion of journalists conveying news from England was slightly lower than for the two-week study – 68.1% – the proportion of reporters from Westminster – 19.0% – was almost identical. Reporting from the nations beyond England increased marginally up to 5.5% in Scotland and Wales, and 1.8% in Northern Ireland.

The main story subjects reported by different news media in 2015 and 2016 are presented in Table 2.4. As with previous studies, the categories ‘Devolution (S, W, NI) and ‘Westminster Politics’ are highlighted to reflect our focus on political stories. We have excluded some categories which accounted for a small share of coverage (so overall subjects do not add up to 100% in Table 2.4).

As a proportion of all news, coverage of devolved issues (outside England) fell from an already low percentage of 3.7% in 2015 to 1.0% in 2016. On both BBC television and radio, coverage of devolved politics made up 1.1% of all news coverage over the sample period. The fall in coverage of devolved politics was not a consequence of an increased focus on Westminster on BBC outlets (we see a disparity in news agendas here, with a greater focus on Westminster on ITV and Channel 4 and notably less Westminster reporting on BBC radio, with television remaining roughly the same). A similar picture of coverage was evident in the six-week study of Today and News at Ten, with 1.2% of all news about devolution (outside England) and 15.3% about Westminster Politics.

Table 2.4: Main topics covered by news items (by percentage) in 2015 and 2016 (excluding some subjects)

Media	BBC TV		Non-BBC TV		BBC Radio		Total		
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	
	%								
Devolution (S, W, NI)	3.7	1.1	2.8	0.6	3.9	1.1	3.7	1.0	
Westminster Politics	13.4	13.0	13.2	19.6	17.7	11.2	15.5	13.2	
Business	4.0	4.2	3.5	3.2	6.5	5.8	5.1	4.8	
Celeb/Entertainment News	3.0	3.7	2.6	4.1	1.8	2.1	2.4	3.0	
Crime	8.0	9.7	5.7	6.3	8.3	8.8	7.8	8.7	
Disaster/Accident/Tragedy	8.5	4.6	6.4	3.8	6.3	3.8	7.1	4.1	
Economy	1.8	1.0	1.8	1.9	1.8	0.7	1.8	1.0	
Education	0.2	0.8	0.2	0.9	0.1	1.8	0.1	1.2	
Environment	0.7	0.8	1.4	0.9	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.0	
Europe EU	2.5	3.6	1.5	3.5	2.5	6.4	2.3	4.9	
Health NHS	0.8	1.7	1.5	0.3	1.0	1.8	1.0	1.5	
Health general	2.9	1.4	2.6	1.9	2.2	3.6	2.5	2.5	
Immigration/refugees	3.6	3.8	6.7	8.9	2.9	5.4	3.7	5.3	
International	13.7	15.6	19.2	20.1	13.8	14.9	14.7	15.9	
Iraq/Afghanistan	0.9	0.1	1.2	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.9	0.2	
Sport	8.8	18.1	4.8	7.0	7.2	10.5	7.4	12.9	

Table 2.4 should be seen in the context of the wider news agenda over the sample period. In both the 2015 and 2016 samples, for example, international news was high on the agenda (which is a broad category that encompasses politics overseas, terrorism and issues around war and conflict). In 2016 a number of high-profile sport-related issues dominated the news agenda, particularly on television news. This included stories such as the athletics doping scandal which led to Adidas pulling out of its sponsorship deal with the IAAF; the vote for Fifa's new president; allegations of match fixing in tennis; and Johanna Konta and Andy Murray's progress in the Australian Open.

It is worth noting, however, that some topics continue to dominate coverage in both periods. Coverage of Westminster politics, crime, business and sport remain routine, while coverage of the economy, education and the environment do not (in both periods, all three topics received less coverage combined than business news). With the exception of news about sport, this is a broadly consistent pattern of coverage shown in our previous content analysis studies in 2007, 2009 and 2015.

If the small 'devolved politics' sub-sample is broken down (see Table 2.5), we can see that while news about Scottish politics continues to claim the largest share of BBC coverage about the devolved nations, there has been a significant shift in focus from Northern Ireland to Wales. While this might appear dramatic, the numbers in 2016 are so small (the total sample being only 1% of news coverage) that it constitutes only a handful of news items. Over six weeks on Today and News at Ten we see a slightly more even pattern, with exactly half about Scotland and 27.8% about Wales and 22.2% about Northern Ireland.

Table 2.5: Devolution items (by percentage) about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2015 and 2016 (N in brackets)

News items related to	BBC		Non-BBC	
	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%		%	
Scotland	60.2	57.1	100.0	100.0
Wales	9.3	42.9	/	/
N. Ireland	30.5	/	/	/
Total	100 (118)	100 (7)	100 (14)	100 (2)

In previous studies we isolated all news about health and education – two key devolved areas of responsibility – to explore the proportion of items specifically about England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Of the 181 BBC news items about health and education in 2015, 174 – 96.1% – were primarily focused on England. In 2016, 73 out of 82 – 89.0% – were about England, with five in Wales, four in Scotland and none in Northern Ireland. All of the 38 items about health and education on ITV and Channel 4 in 2015 were principally about England compared to 13 out of 15 – 86.7% – in 2016 (with two related to Scotland).

Overall, while the NHS in Wales was seen as a little more newsworthy, stories about health and education on UK network news continue to be dominated by an English perspective. Indeed, the major story that enhanced health coverage in Wales in 2016 was about NHS Wales waiting times being (unfavourably) compared to NHS England. The differences between health in England and Wales have moved up the news agenda due to repeated Conservative Party claims that NHS Wales is being poorly run by a Labour administration compared to the UK government’s handling of the NHS in England. This was acknowledged on 28 January on Radio 4’s Today:

In the run-up to last year’s General Election, the Welsh NHS suddenly became front page news in the UK papers as the Conservatives claimed that waiting times problems in Wales were a symptom of Labour mismanagement. Now actually hospital waiting times have tended to be longer here in Wales even before the Labour-led government.

This explains the increase in health coverage in Wales on network news (the NHS in Scotland and Northern Ireland did not get more coverage). In other words, a key devolved area – health – became more newsworthy in Wales because the UK government has regularly drawn attention to the different records between the English and Welsh NHS.

This pattern is confirmed by the extended six-week study of Today and News at Ten: of the 47 news items about education and health in one of the four nations, 40 were about England and 7 about Wales.

Summary of findings in Section 2

Overall, our two-week snapshot sample found:

- A reduction in the proportion of news items related to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a significant drop in coverage of devolved politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined.
- This fall is explained by a decrease in the coverage of Scotland and Northern Ireland. An increase in the coverage of Wales – both in terms of devolved issues and news in general – came from a low base.
- While the BBC featured reporters on location in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined less frequently than in 2015, it still does so significantly more often than commercial television news, which is becoming increasingly England/Westminster focused.
- The two largest areas of devolved responsibility – health and education – relate primarily to stories about or based in England, rather than Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, although coverage of the Welsh NHS has increased.
- The six-week analysis of Today and News at Ten revealed that the volume of news about or from the nations beyond England was roughly the same as for the two-week sample period.

Section 3: News Relevant to Devolution and Devolved Issues

Of the 2,169 news items examined in the general sample, we found 171 news items – 7.9% – that had some relevance to devolution (152 from BBC and 19 from ITV and Channel 4). This is a significant fall from 13.5% of news items in 2015. In our extended study of Today and News at Ten over six weeks in 2016, 111 news items – 9.0% – were relevant to devolved issues. These samples include items that may have involved devolved powers or authority in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, *as well as* in England. So, for example, many stories about health and education involve devolved areas of responsibility in (at least) one of the four nations.

As in the 2015 review, we split the sample into four broad categories:

- **Relevant powers referred to (outside England).** These include news items making specific reference to devolved powers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, even if the story was not primarily about these powers.
- **Devolved political process.** This includes news items referring to politicians, parties or elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- **Whole UK, no reference to devolution.** This category refers to news items that are about general UK-wide issues or events, but which involve areas of devolved authority that are not referenced in the news report.
- **England, or England & other.** This includes items about England (or England and at least one devolved nation, usually Wales, as in the case of stories about criminal justice) concerning policy areas where devolved powers exist. These items may specify that they refer to England (or England and at least one other nation).

Table 3.0: Number of news items (by percentage) relevant to devolution by media in 2015 and 2016 (N in brackets)

Devolved power	BBC TV		Non-BBC TV		BBC Radio		Totals		
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	
	%								
Relevant Powers Referred To	14.8	13.2	11.3	10.5	13.5	11.1	13.6	11.7	
							(78)	(20)	
Devolved Political Process	14.8	/	9.9	/	11.2	0.1	12.2	0.6	
							(70)	(1)	
Whole UK, No Ref. to Devolution	12.6	9.4	21.1	10.5	12.2	5.0	13.4	7.0	
							(77)	(12)	
England, or England & Other	57.7	77.4	57.7	78.9	63.1	82.8	60.7	80.7	
							(348)	(138)	
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
	(182)	(53)	(71)	(19)	(320)	(99)	(573)	(171)	

Previous studies – including in 2015 – have found that many devolved news items relate to the process of politics, such as stories about the leadership credentials of the SNP’s Nicola Sturgeon or the possibility of another Scottish referendum. But in the 2016 sample these types of devolved news stories virtually disappeared (with just one story on BBC radio). This has not, however, meant a shift towards a more issue - or policy-oriented agenda: the proportion of news items on BBC outlets that referred to devolved powers in Scotland, Wales

and/or Northern Ireland also fell (though by a much smaller margin) on both television and radio (from 14.8% to 13.2% and 13.5% to 11.1% respectively), as well as ITV and Channel 4 (from 11.3% to 10.5%).

The proportion of items in the ‘Whole UK, No Reference to Devolution’ category also fell across the board. These items made no reference to areas of devolved power/policy so were not necessarily inaccurate, but they did cover areas with some devolved responsibilities. So, for example, a story about an NSPCC survey of UK health professionals discussed children’s mental health services without exploring the devolved aspects of the findings.

Table 3.0 shows that an increasing proportion of news items relevant to devolution in 2016 was about England only (or England and at least one other nation). The focus on English devolved issues is far higher than in all our previous studies. Since 2015, this proportion has increased by 19.7% on both BBC television and radio (from 57.7% to 77.4% and 63.1% to 82.8% respectively) and by 21.2% on ITV and Channel 4 (from 57.7% to 78.9%). This is consistent with the greater focus on items about England identified in Section 2 in the 2016 sample period. Once again, the extended study of Today and News at Ten over six weeks provided almost identical findings.

Our previous studies have drawn attention to the lack of clarity in some stories about aspects of policy that are *only* relevant to England. So, for example, in 2015 we found that the coverage of a story about the opening of a new grammar school on 15 October in England did not always point out that grammar schools do not exist in Scotland or Wales (or that they do in Northern Ireland), and that education is a devolved area of responsibility to these nations.

We examine all those items in the ‘England, or England & other’ category (identified in Table 3.0) to assess how often it was stated that a policy related to *England only* (or, in some cases, England and Wales only). Table 3.1 suggests an improvement across the board, with all news outlets being more accurate in communicating a story’s geographical specificity (to England). In 2015, we found that 39.1% of news items on BBC outlets failed to mention the geographical specificity of England-only (or England and Wales only) stories. In 2016, this fell to 22%. It is also notable that we saw the biggest improvement, to date, in non-BBC outlets: in 2015, just under two out of three news items on ITV and Channel 4 failed to mention that English stories applied only to England, a proportion that dropped to less than half in 2016.

On the surface this suggests that *all* broadcasters improved their regularity of communicating the geographical relevance of UK news items between 2015 and 2016. In 2016, however, there was a higher proportion of items about health than education that were in the ‘England, or England and other’ category (from a ratio of two to one to three to one). We raise this because reporting health issues can be more easily signposted than education stories, since the inclusion of ‘NHS England’ alone can help signal the geographic relevance of an item. Indeed, of the 16 BBC items about health that stated a policy was relevant to England only in 2016 on television news, six included a reference to ‘NHS England’ and ‘England’. In other words, the improvement in communicating the relevance of UK news on both BBC and commercial news outlets may have been due, perhaps, to the nature of stories covered in 2016, where the England-only relevance was easier for journalists to identify. This would certainly explain the apparently unprompted improvement in non-BBC outlets. The BBC, nonetheless, remains significantly more accurate by this measure in 2016 than 2015, and

continues to state the geographical relevance of UK items more regularly than ITV and Channel 4.

There are, however, still a number of news items (22.0%) – where the policy relevance to England (or another nation) could have been communicated more clearly. So, for example, although the majority of items about the junior doctors’ dispute included a reference to the story being ‘in England’, a few – such as a package about PMQs when the issue was debated – did not. Another example was a widely reported story on 25 January by a Parliamentary select committee about reforming the regulation of charities. It was a report primarily relevant to England and Wales⁵, but this was only acknowledged once – on Radio 5 live – in BBC coverage. The proportion of items *not* stating that a policy related to England was precisely the same – 22.0% – for the six-week study of the BBC’s Today and News at Ten.

Table 3.1: Proportion of England (or England and...) based news items involving devolved authority that specified their applicability (N in brackets)

Media	Stated policy only related to England		Did not state policy only related to England		Totals	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%					
BBC TV	56.2	75.6	43.8	24.4	100 (105)	100 (41)
BBC Radio	63.4	79.3	36.6	20.7	100 (202)	100 (82)
Other TV	36.6	53.3	63.4	46.7	100 (41)	100 (15)
All BBC	60.9	78.0	39.1	22.0	100 (307)	100 (123)

In 2015 we also quantified the number of references to ‘in England’ *within* a news item (since mentioning it once at the beginning of an item is perhaps less likely to stick with a viewer or listener than mentioning it several times *throughout* a news item). In this respect, Table 3.2 suggests there has been a modest increase in the repetition of signalling the relevance of the item to England (or England and Wales) in BBC television coverage. So, for example, in 2015, 62% of news items made more than one reference to location, increasing to 70.5% in 2016 (most of this involved a shift from one to two references). On BBC radio, the pattern of mentions remains broadly the same, while ITV and Channel 4 were less likely to make more than one reference to the story’s geographical specificity. These findings are broadly the same as Today and BBC News at Ten over the six-week period.

⁵ Indeed, in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee report entitled ‘The 2015 charity funding controversy: lessons for trustees, the Charity Commission, and regulators’, part of the introduction read: ‘While the findings and recommendations of both reports have a direct bearing on charity law and regulation, and on charities in England and Wales, we hope that the devolved administrations in Scotland and in Northern Ireland will also be able to draw lessons from both Reports’. See http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmpubadm/431/43104.htm#_idTextAnchor005

Table 3.2: Number of times the location is mentioned in news items about devolved issues in England (or England and Wales) (N in brackets)

Media	1 mention		2 mentions		3 mentions		4+ mentions		Total	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%									
BBC TV	38.0	29.4	33.8	41.1	8.5	14.7	19.7	14.7	100 (71)	100 (34)
Radio	58.8	55.8	25.0	31.2	7.4	5.2	8.8	7.8	100 (148)	100 (77)
Non-BBC TV	45.0	66.7	30.0	16.7	10.0	16.7	15.0	/	100 (20)	100 (6)
Total	46.2	48.7	24.2	33.3	8.5	8.5	21.1	9.4	100 (239)	100 (117)

Table 3.3 should be read with some caution, since the number of devolved stories outside England in 2016 was so low. The notable increase in the proportion of stories which make only one reference to their location (in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) is accounted for by a few news items, and largely involves references to devolved issues in passing (so, for example, an item comparing the NHS in England and Wales made one brief passing reference to Scotland and Northern Ireland).

Table 3.3: Number of times the location is mentioned in news items about devolved issues in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (N in brackets)

Media	1 mention		2 mentions		3 mentions		4+ mentions		Total	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
	%									
BBC TV	37.0	60.0	22.8	15.0	10.9	/	29.3	25.0	100 (92)	100 (20)
Radio	37.1	47.4	18.1	15.8	14.7	15.8	30.2	21.1	100 (116)	100 (19)
Non-BBC TV	29.2	60.0	8.3	40.0	16.7	/	45.8	/	100 (24)	100 (5)
Total	36.2	54.5	19.0	18.2	13.4	6.8	31.4	20.5	100 (232)	100 (44)

In order to explore the clarity of devolved reporting, we examined whether references to policies across different UK political institutions (when they were made) were *explicit* or *implicit*.

- Explicit references refer to the ability of a devolved assembly (or Westminster in the case of legislation in England) to make and enact policy.
- Implicit references usually state where the story takes place, without detailing devolved powers or why the story does not apply elsewhere.

We identified, in total, 383 references (implicit and explicit) to devolved powers in BBC output in 2015, and 120 references in 2016 (reflecting both the smaller sample size and the decrease in proportion of devolved stories in 2016). Table 3.4 shows that the increase in the proportion of references to geographical specificity (identified in Table 3.2) generally involves an *increase in implicit rather than explicit references*, (although since there are

fewer news items with no geographical references we do see both increase on BBC outlets. Of the 152 BBC news items relevant to devolution in 2016, 67.8% contained an implicit reference (an increase of 18.2% from 49.6% compared to 2015) and 9.9% an explicit reference (up by 3.3% from 6.6%). Of the 19 news items on ITV and Channel 4 in 2016, by contrast, 42.1% contained an implicit reference (a rise of 11.1% from 31.0% in 2015) but featured no explicit references (a drop of 5.6%).

Overall, these findings suggest that while the BBC may have been more sensitive to signposting the relevance of England in ‘England-only’ stories in 2016, the increase in levels of clarity (making multiple or explicit references to its devolved nature) was, at best, modest. So, for example, we found that 10 out of 15 news items that related to the junior doctors’ dispute located the story in England. However, they often only did so once, typically at the start of a package, and usually only implicitly. In a 2 minute and 49 second BBC News at Six item on 23 February, for instance, the package began by a reporter referring to ‘junior doctors in England’, a signposting that was not repeated or further clarified. This reinforces the findings of the case study presented in our 2015 report.

In the six-week study we identified 78 implicit and 23 explicit references. This was, proportionately speaking, similar to the two-week sample which contained 27 implicit and 5 explicit references on just Today and News at Ten. In items relevant to devolution, 69.6% featured an implicit reference and 20.5% an explicit reference, which was again a broadly similar ratio to the two-week study of BBC radio and television outlets.

Table 3.4: Number of explicit and implicit references in devolved relevant coverage by BBC/non-BBC outlets

Devolved Powers	BBC				Non-BBC			
	Explicit		Implicit		Explicit		Implicit	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
Total	62	15	321	105	5	/	30	10

The most explicit way to explore devolved politics is to compare issues, policies and powers between nations. In 2015 we found 59 BBC news items that featured a comparison between either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, most of which – 56 – were passing references with just three substantively comparing the nations (see Table 3.5). While acknowledging the number of devolved news items in the sample was proportionally lower in 2016, we identified only seven passing comparisons between the nations on BBC radio and television. Or, put another way, we identified 59 comparisons (passing and substantive) in four weeks of monitoring BBC television and radio in 2015 but just ten in our two-week 2016 snapshot sample. While ITV and Channel 4 had four passing references to the nations in 2015, we identified none in 2016.

We did find the same number of *substantive* comparisons on BBC news in 2016 – three – a far higher proportion of comparisons made in this category than in 2015 (from 5% to 30%). However, two of these references were to all four nations (the same item reported on BBC News at One and Six), with the substantive comparative part being about England and Wales. It featured in a story on 28 January about NHS waiting times, unpacking the differences between England and Wales. So, for example, in one part of the package a reporter pointed out that:

...It's the difference in the waiting times that's causing some political pain. For a new hip the wait in Wales is 122 days longer than in England. For another key treatment; cataract surgery, the wait in Wales is an extra 54 days. On a few measures like cancer diagnosis, four months is broadly similar, but only on one, kidney transplants is the wait in Wales shorter by two days.

At the end of the package, however, Scotland and Northern Ireland were only mentioned in passing: 'Lengthening waiting times is a big problem in Scotland and Northern Ireland too. The NHS is trying to cope with a rise in demand.'

We found a similar ratio of comparisons in the six-week study on Today and News at Ten, with 10 passing and one substantive made between the nations (as opposed to three passing and one substantive comparison over two weeks on these programmes).

Table 3.5: Comparisons made (by frequency) between nations in 2015 and 2016

Comparisons	BBC		Other TV		BBC		Other TV		Totals	
	2015				2016				2015	2016
	Pass	Substantive	Pass	Substantive	Pass	Substantive	Pass	Substantive		
England and Scotland	18	2	1	/	/	/	/	/	21	/
England and Wales	/	/	/	/	2	/	/	/	/	2
Scotland and Wales	3	/	/	/	2	/	/	/	3	2
England and N. Ireland	2	/	1	/	/	1	/	/	3	1
Scotland and N. Ireland	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
England, Scot and Wales	3	/	/	/	2	/	/	/	3	2
Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland	9	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	10	/
England, Wales and N. Ireland	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	/
England, Scot and N. Ireland	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	/
England, Scot, N. Ireland and Wales	19	/	/	/	1	2	/	/	19	3
Total	56	3	2	/	7	3	/	/	61	10

Finally, Table 3.6 shows the political contributors interviewed in news items relevant to devolved issues or powers in 2015 and 2016. The largest share – 71.1% – on BBC news is from UK (Westminster) politicians acting as interviewees or sources (up by 6.4% from 64.7% in 2015). We also see a much smaller range of sources than in 2015: on the BBC, this involves a reduction from 16 different types of political source in 2015 to seven in 2016, and on ITV and Channel 4, a reduction from four different types of political source in 2015 to just one in 2016.

Correspondingly, sources from parties based outside England on BBC outlets reduced by 18.2% (from 29.8% in 2015 to 11.6% in 2016). No Northern Irish political contributors were interviewed in 2016, while the SNP and Welsh Labour each made up 5.8% of the total amount of sources. On ITV and Channel 4, only interviews with UK Conservative politicians were conducted in news relevant to devolution.

The dominance of Conservative sources increased in 2016, both at the UK level and with Conservative councillors in England becoming the third most quoted source on BBC outlets. Since the Conservatives are in power in only one of the four nations, this is striking, reflecting in part the increased preponderance of English stories.

Over six weeks, parties from outside England made up 18.7% of interviews on Today and News at Ten, a little higher (7%) than the proportion in the two-week sample. The Conservative party, once again, represented the largest share – 53.0% – of interviewees appearing in news items relevant to devolution.

Table 3.6: Politicians interviewed (by percentage) in devolution-related items in 2015 and 2016 (N in brackets)

Politician	BBC		Other TV		Total	
	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016
%						
UK Labour	17.0	19.2	17.9	/	17.1	18.2
UK Conservative	46.4	50.0	56.4	100.0	47.9	52.7
UK Lib Dem	0.4	1.9	/	/	0.4	1.8
UK Green	0.9	/	/	/	0.8	/
UKIP	/	/	/	/	/	/
SNP	5.8	5.8	10.3	/	6.5	5.5
Scot. Labour	3.6	/	/	/	3.0	/
Scot. Conservative	/	/	/	/	/	/
Scot. Lib Dem	/	/	/	/	/	/
Scot. Green	/	/	/	/	/	/
Plaid Cymru	2.2	/	/	/	1.9	/
Welsh Labour	/	5.8	/	/	/	5.5
DUP	1.3	/	/	/	1.1	/
Sinn Fein	0.4	/	/	/	0.4	/
UUP	/	/	/	/	/	/
SDLP	/	/	/	/	/	/
Alliance Party	0.4	/	/	/	0.4	/
Eng. Council Con	1.3	11.6	/	/	1.1	10.9
Eng. Council Lab	1.3	5.8	/	/	1.1	5.5
Eng. Council LD	/	/	/	/	/	/
Independent	/	/	/	/	/	/
Scot SNP	12.5	/	15.4	/	12.9	/
NI Assembly DUP	2.7	/	/	/	2.2	/
NI Assembly SF	1.3	/	/	/	1.1	/
Other	2.2	/	/	/	1.9	/
Total	100 (224)	100 (52)	100 (39)	100 (3)	100 (263)	100 (55)

Summary of findings in Section 3

- News relevant to devolution reduced significantly across all media, from 13.5% in 2015 to 7.9% in 2016. The proportion of relevant devolved news items was a little higher on BBC outlets (8.2%) than ITV and Channel 4 (6.0%).
- In 2015 we found an increase in process-related devolution news in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but in 2016 this type of story almost disappeared from news coverage.
- In 2016 all news outlets increased the proportion of items that identified when an issue was relevant to England only. While the BBC remains more likely to do this than ITV or Channel 4 – 78.0% compared to 53.3% respectively – the percentage point improvement on the BBC and the commercial channels was roughly the same.
- We found a modest increase on BBC television in the number of mentions of geographical relevance within news items. BBC radio remained much the same, while ITV and Channel 4 were more likely to make only one such reference.
- The increase in the proportion of news items that make reference to a story's geographical relevance is mostly due to an increase in implicit rather than explicit references (which remain the exception).
- There were proportionally fewer items that made passing references to the policy differences between the four nations, with the same (low) number of substantive comparisons (the main comparative story was about the English and Welsh NHS, a comparison that has been repeatedly raised by the UK government).
- The six-week study of Today and News at Ten showed broadly the same trends as the larger two-week sample, with the proportion of news about devolved politics roughly the same, along with the regularity of items stating if a story was relevant to England only (or another nation) and the ratio of implicit and explicit references.

Appendix

Four Nations Impartiality Review 2016 Instructions for Coders

Guidelines for completing coding sheet

- 1) **TV/Radio:** Circle one option
- 2) **TV** – Circle appropriate programme
- 3) **Radio** – Circle appropriate radio programme
- 4) **Online** – Circle appropriate page
- 5) **Duplicate** – Indicate whether this story is duplicated from an earlier online or broadcast story
- 6) **Date** – add date programme was aired
- 7) **Type of Item/Convention** – Choose the relevant category. Apart from the ‘Anchor’ category, it is assumed that most items will contain a short introduction by the presenter.
Do not include headline summaries. Also, do not include adverts/links, or – especially on Radio 5 Live, studio chatter or UGC/audience text/email summaries

Pre-Edited

Anchor only – report presented by presenter in studio. If item being delivered only by the anchor as a standalone, with or without images or film. If the anchor piece is an introduction to a subsequent item, just add to the longer item that follows in terms of time and code the entirety as the longer item – e.g. 30 second anchor introduction to a two-way

Main presenter & package – Pre-recorded report introduced by presenter

Reporter package on location – reporter on location introduces pre-recorded report. Not in the studio and not indicated as ‘live’

Studio interview – pre-recorded interview between presenter and reporter/guest/

Studio Discussion – pre-recorded discussion between presenter and two or more respondents

Live

Anchor/reporter both live on location – live conversation between both parties in the same location (outside of main studio)

Live 2 way – Live conversation between either anchor/journalist or journalist/journalist while in different locations

Anchor/Reporter/Respondent studio interview – live interview between presenter and another reporter or respondent

Anchor/Reporter/Respondent studio discussion – live discussion between presenter and two or more respondents

Online

Stories 123 – Main stories on page; listed top, then lower left, then lower right

Top Stories – Stories in ‘Other Top Stories’ list on right hand of page

Also in News/Sport – Stories in the ‘Also in the News’ and ‘Sport Headlines’ on the relevant page

Features, Views, Analysis – Stories in the ‘Features, Views, Analysis’ bar underneath headlines

Supplementary to Story 1 – Links beneath story one, linking to related stories

- 8) **One-sentence summary of story** – summarise content of story as concisely as possible
- 9) **Story Subject** – tick one category to indicate the *main* subject focus of the story. The exception to this is if a devolution item is ticked or Westminster located in the bold outlined region of the code sheet. If this is so, you can mark another category in the main table with an ‘S’ to indicate a subsidiary focus for the story.
NB: The first category, ‘Devolved Politics (S/W/N)’ denotes devolution in, Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland.
- 10/11) **Story/Reporter location** – indicate with an ‘S’ the main location to which the story is linked. Indicate with an ‘R’ the location of the reporter, if known. (For example, if the subject of the story is relevant to the UK as a whole, but the reporter is based in Westminster, these would be coded as ‘S’ next to ‘Gen. UK’, and ‘R’ next to ‘Westm./Downing St.’)

12) **Devolved political focus** – Tick the category that applies to the story. Only ONE category is to be ticked

A. Irrelevant: Story has no connection to devolved politics. This is the most common category. If this is selected there is no need to continue coding.

B1. Devolution, Relevant Powers – Story about or relevant to devolution, in which explicit reference is made to devolved powers in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Concerns direct mentions of devolved powers.

B2. Non-devolution, Devolved Powers Referenced – Story in which devolution is not the main topic, but where reference is made to devolved powers in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. This usually occurs at the end of the item.

B3. Devolved Political Process – Story about ‘process’ in devolved politics in England, Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland, where specific devolved powers are mentioned (specific devolved powers doesn’t just relate to ‘policy’ but also the party itself being ‘devolved’ and the nation too. ‘Process’ here means non-policy-based political coverage, e.g. party infighting, scandals, personality driven etc.

C. Whole UK, No Ref to Devolution – news items that are about general UK-wide issues or events, but which involve areas of devolved authority that are not referenced in the news reported. E.g. a news report about the need for citizenship education to increase political engagement in the UK that did not reference devolved education policy would be coded in this category

D1. Stories about England, or England & Other (stated) - News items about England (or England and at least one other devolved nation) concerning policy areas where devolved powers exist and where it is clearly stated that this is the case. E.g. A news item based on an Ofsted report on English schools would be coded in this category, regardless of whether the report specified that it only applied to England.

D2. Stories about England, or England & other (not-stated) – Stories about either England (or England and at least one other devolved nation), where no reference is made to this fact, or where England and Wales for instance is confused with the UK

13) **Relevant devolved powers referred to** – where *explicitly* referred to, mark ‘E’; where story *implicitly acknowledges* that relevant devolved powers exist, mark ‘I’. Indicate which nation(s) the powers belong to. In each case indicate which nation the powers belong to (E, S, W, N).

Stories identified as implicit when journalists state where the story does apply (generally England), without detailing where and why it doesn’t apply.

Stories where references to devolved powers would have clarified the remit of the story but were not included. Mark these instances as (NR) for no reference.

14) **Comparisons made across nations** – tick either yes, or no, depending on whether some reference has been made to comparing powers across different nations. If ‘yes’, then tick the relevant boxes, ‘E’ for England, ‘S’ for Scotland, ‘W’ for Wales, and ‘NI’ for Northern Ireland. If the story gives a substantive description of differences in powers, mark ‘D’; if the differences are only mentioned in passing, mark ‘M’.

15) **Political Party sources** – if a direct contribution from a political source is used in the report, indicate to which party they belong, using numbers for each category.

INTERCODER RELIABILITY SCORES

Approximately 10% of the 2,169 items in the two-week sample were recoded to generate intercoder reliability scores. We also re-examined the same proportion of news relevant to news about devolution (171 in total), since this was coded by two researchers. As the table below demonstrates, there are high levels of agreement across each variable. We also carried out statistical tests on relevant variables using Krippendorff's Alpha or Cohen's Kappa. All variables received strong reliability scores.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Level of agreement</u>
Item convention	93%
Story subject	92%
Story location	92%
Reporter location	94%
Devolved focus Q	100%
Countries mentioned	94%
Countries Mentioned (multiple times)	94%
Implicit / explicit	100%
Comparisons	100%
Political Sources	95%