BBC Trust Impartiality Review: Network news and current affairs coverage of the four UK nations: 2015 and 2016 follow-up to 2008 review

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Trust conclusions

A major theme of the BBC Trust’s work over the past ten years has been to ensure that the BBC’s network services better serve and reflect the four Nations of an increasingly devolved UK. In 2008 the Trust carried out an impartiality review of BBC News and Current Affairs’ network coverage of the Nations. That review assessed the amount, clarity and depth of coverage and drew on bespoke content analysis from Cardiff University. Thereafter the Trust continued to monitor progress, commissioning further content analysis in 2010 as well as regular reports from the BBC Executive.

Last year the BBC Trust once again asked Cardiff University to carry out content analysis. That analysis suggested that, although the amount of network news coverage about Northern Ireland and Scotland and about devolution as an issue had all increased since the previous report in 2010, issues remained with the accuracy of the way stories were delineated and signalled to audiences. In one important respect – the likelihood of network television news audiences receiving clear information about the Nations to which individual news items applied – coverage appeared to have slipped back compared to the original study.

In response, in January 2016 the BBC Executive put in place a range of specific measures to ensure the systematic oversight and determined focus the Trust wished to see. The Trust also commissioned Cardiff University to carry out one final programme of content analysis in the spring, so that the results from the 2015 and 2016 samples could be published side by side.

Although a number of key programmes were analysed over a number of weeks, the sample periods remain snapshots and cannot convey a complete picture of coverage of the Nations by BBC network news. They do, however, provide useful data for help in assessing trends and for identifying issues.

The Trust welcomes the progress between 2015 and 2016. In particular it notes the high proportion of news items relevant to England only, or to England and Wales, that now make clear, through either implicit or explicit reference, the Nation or Nations to which a story applies. This is at its highest level since the Trust first looked at the issue. The latest analysis found that 78% of network news items are now clear in this respect – a significant improvement and well ahead of the other main broadcasters. The Trust welcomes this but believes audiences are entitled to expect invariable accuracy in this respect, so we look to the BBC to continue to improve on this figure.

By contrast, the 2016 analysis suggested an overall reduction compared with last year in the proportion of network news items about stories from UK Nations other than England. There appears also to have been an overall reduction in the proportion of items from reporters on location in these Nations. The Trust is absolutely clear that news programmes must be based on editorial judgements on the day, and must never be subject to quotas or even to targets. The Trust notes that the greater proportion of stories emanating from Westminster in the 2016 sample, rather than from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, belies the fact that many “Westminster stories” are applicable, or at least relevant and important, to audiences across the whole of the UK. However, the Trust does expect the BBC’s editors to keep at the very forefront of their minds the proper expectation of audiences in each of the four Nations to see and hear their own key events and concerns aired and shared at network level. Devolution is one of
the key ways in which the diversity of the UK is increasing, and there is every reason to believe this will be an increasing challenge to content producers seeking to serve the entirety of the United Kingdom. It is a challenge that the BBC must address and the BBC must lead the broadcasting industry in addressing this.

The Trust notes that Wales was the one devolved Nation to receive a greater proportion of coverage in the 2016 sample. This may well have been the result of the Executive’s efforts to deliver specific improvements following the 2015 sample. The Trust expects to see a similar focus on all the Nations and welcomes the structural changes the Executive has made to its newsgathering and output, including the appointment of a Scotland Editor, the daily input of news editors from around the Nations in programme conferences, and the strategic oversight and responsibility of the News Editor, BBC News and Current Affairs, for delivery in this area.

The Trust believes that, to remain fully effective as a network news broadcaster in an increasingly devolved UK, the BBC’s journalism must increasingly examine, understand, illuminate and contrast the different challenges and priorities of each of the four Nations. The BBC must help us all learn from, as well as about, one another. “Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation” is a useful guiding principle, even within the context solely of the United Kingdom.

Finally, and as the Trust prepares to make way for a new regulatory and governance regime, we greatly welcome the emphasis in the draft Royal Charter, published in September, on the BBC’s obligations to reflect the whole of the United Kingdom in its programmes and other content. We believe this will be fundamental to the BBC of the future. From next April internal scrutiny of the BBC’s performance will be a matter for a new Unitary Board. The Trust has taken unprecedented steps to monitor systematically network news coverage of the Nations. The Nations Impartiality Review and follow-up content analysis have been invaluable in tracking and assessing the BBC’s record over the past eight years. We urge the Unitary Board to continue to hold the Executive robustly to account on this vital issue, and to conduct, and to publish, independent assessments of the BBC’s performance.
Executive response

The BBC welcomes the Trust’s scrutiny of news about the four Nations of the UK. The constitutional arrangements in the UK are changing. So, too, are audience expectations. In response, BBC News has been changing too: we have invested in reporting, improved the sharing of information between editors, devolved decision-making in news gathering, insisted on clear labelling of stories and expanded news coverage from each of the four Nations.

BBC News strives to keep everyone informed, reporting the news that matters in the world, across the country, in each Nation and in the community. Getting that balance right is one of the central tasks of editors and reporters. It is, of course, a job that’s never done. It is a matter of independent editorial judgment. And, in the dynamic, devolved UK we live in, it is more important than ever.

The Trust’s review both praises the BBC’s output and points out where there is more to do.

Let’s deal with the compliments, briskly, first. The 2016 study by Cardiff University concludes the BBC communicates news about the four Nations with “greater regularity and clarity” than other broadcasters. It says that the BBC is “significantly more accurate” in communicating the geographical relevance of news items than competitors.

The most important point raised by the Trust review is the need to keep improving the labelling of stories. It is essential that audiences know how or whether a story affects them. While the Trust notes the significant and sustained progress on this front, the BBC recognises that it must be relentless: relevance is critical, both in the clear reporting of stories and judging where they sit in running orders.

The BBC responded in January to the initial findings of the review, (based on the 2015 study) which underlined that we had to work harder on labelling. The 2016 study found the proportion of BBC items applicable to England only or to England and Wales which communicated their geographical relevance was 78%, “its highest level in any of our studies”. The Director of News issued an instruction reminding all news staff of the requirement to flag devolved stories in the planning system and on air. A feedback system is in place with the Nations asked to highlight lapses to the News Editor.

The BBC takes seriously the concerns raised by the Trust in this review. It would also like to acknowledge the valuable work done by members of each of the Audience Councils for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. As a result of the Trust’s scrutiny and following Audience Council meetings, the BBC has:

- Introduced a “Nations news belt” on the News at Six, guaranteeing a profile for stories from around the UK when they do not cross the threshold to be included in the small number of stories given a fuller treatment. The new format has fitted seamlessly into the programme without any adverse reaction from audiences. Audiences for the Six, in fact, have proved extremely robust. After an initial trial period, the new approach has been confirmed on a permanent basis.
- Scotland Editor, a new post, has been created to raise the profile of Scottish news given the recent significant shift in the constitutional and political landscape.
• The Heads of News from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland attend the 9 am news conference by video conference, chaired by the Director of News. So, too, does a representative of the English regions. They offer stories from the Nations and regions and advise output editors on how coverage is being seen and heard in each of the four Nations.

• The main weekly news planning meeting has now adopted the same model. News editors from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and English regions give greater profile to forthcoming events, provide time for preparation, highlight significant longer-term developments and surface opportunities for comparative treatments of stories between the Nations. We expect this development to reinforce the importance of reporting thoroughly from around the whole UK.

The BBC recognises the importance of academic evaluation of output but, as the authors make clear, the quantitative approach of this study does not capture the news judgments made in response to the specific news agenda of the period covered. In 2014, there was a referendum in Scotland; in 2015, a General Election; in 2016, the EU referendum. From Tata steel to junior doctors in England, to the performance of Northern Ireland and Wales (and for different reasons England) in Euro 2016, there have been stories that made the news and ran high on the bulletins because editors rightly judged them interesting and important.

Content analysis treats each minute of news the same regardless of meaning; it compares one period with another regardless of what is happening. The risk of this is news by tick box impartiality and we therefore welcome Cardiff’s statement that “quantitative analysis does not imply coverage should be driven by quotas or numbers of references”.

The requirement to provide audiences with accurate and informative reporting which reflects the whole of the UK to the whole of the UK has been given additional importance following the vote in a referendum for the United Kingdom to leave the EU. This has potentially differing implications for politics and society in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, we reported on some of the ramifications in the Nations, including the Scottish Government’s moves towards a possible second independence referendum, the questions in Northern Ireland on the future status of the border with the Republic and Sinn Fein demands for a referendum, concerns from the First Minister in Wales about replacing current EU funds and reporting from areas of England which expressed strong support for Brexit over concerns about immigration and economic exclusion.

Reporting on the political and constitutional dimensions of the Brexit process will continue to form a significant part of network coverage as the process unfolds. More broadly, BBC News will continue to give high priority to reporting the news from across an increasingly devolved UK.