

BBC | Trust



**THE BBC TRUST IMPARTIALITY REPORT:
BBC NETWORK NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS
COVERAGE OF THE FOUR UK NATIONS**

Including an independent assessment by
Professor Anthony King and research from
Cardiff University and BMRB

JUNE 2008

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BBC TRUST CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Devolution of power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the last ten years represents a major change in the governance of the United Kingdom. For the BBC, as for all broadcasters, it inevitably adds to the complexity of network news and current affairs coverage of the four nations. The BBC has a particular responsibility to serve the whole UK, not least because it draws the same licence fee from citizens wherever they live. From a variety of sources, however, concerns were expressed to the BBC Trust that the BBC was not covering the different policies of the nations in a way that enabled audiences to understand fully what was happening in different parts of the UK.

The Trust accordingly commissioned an independent assessment from Professor Anthony King, with research from Cardiff University and the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB), to assist it in reaching a view on the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC's network news and current affairs coverage of the four nations. This work is now complete. Among its important findings, it indicates a clear desire on the part of audiences to learn about all parts of the UK. It also indicates that the BBC's coverage is generally seen as fair and impartial.

But the analysis also points out shortcomings in the BBC's coverage of the whole UK. It suggests that the BBC is missing opportunities to reflect more consistently the reality of devolution, and that it needs to go further in reporting the changing UK with the range that audiences are entitled to expect. It also sets out concerns about the precision and clarity of reporting.

Audiences across the UK need to be confident that the BBC understands and accurately reflects policy debates and decisions in each of the four nations of the UK. We are encouraged that the BBC Management is committed to getting this right. We have asked Management for a clear final action plan by the summer, and shall track vigorously their progress in achieving it.

Context

The BBC Trust represents licence fee payers in its oversight of the BBC. It listens to their opinions and expectations and uses them to inform its own decisions. It expects Management to deliver public value within the Public Purposes established by the Charter through bringing distinctive services of the highest quality to audiences across the UK. It also expects the BBC's journalism to meet the highest standards of accuracy and impartiality in order to underpin the BBC's independence and to sustain public trust.

In keeping with a practice established by the BBC Governors, the BBC Trust assesses the impartiality of BBC output through independently-led reviews, underpinned by research as appropriate, in order to provide information to the Trust in holding the Executive to account for the impartiality of its services.

Devolution of power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represents transformational change within the United Kingdom. Following elections in May 2007, each of these nations had political parties in power or sharing power which advocated independence. For everyone and for all opinions this represented a significant development a decade on from the start of devolution. Meanwhile, the Trust was hearing concerns from audiences that the BBC was not covering the different policies of the nations in a way that enabled them to understand fully what was happening in different parts of the United Kingdom. This was emerging in a variety of ways:

- through comments from the BBC Audience Councils, which are made up of licence fee payers who advise the BBC Trust on how well the BBC is delivering its Public Purposes and serving licence fee payers in different parts of the UK;
- through extensive Purpose Remits research carried out for the Trust in 2007 which identified relevant performance gaps – that is the difference between the importance that the audience places on provision and the extent to which it perceives it is being fulfilled by the BBC. In this area, two gaps were identified in relation to the two Public Purposes Representing the UK, its nations regions and communities, and Sustaining citizenship and civil society in the Charter:
 - in relation to the first, audiences in the different UK nations believed that the BBC could do better in catering for their own communities, and in representing their area to other parts of the UK. The Trust said at the time that "the priority to represent the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK is one where licence fee payers across the UK see room for improvement";
 - in relation to the second, one of the priorities is helping audiences to understand how the UK is governed. Research showed that in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales audiences believed the BBC could do better in helping them understand how their nation was politically governed. The Trust noted that there was a clear interest amongst audiences in the nations for news provision which reflects the changing realities in the United Kingdom as devolution unfolds; and
- through direct comments to Trustees from the audience at public meetings and through radio phone-ins.

Accordingly, the Trust commissioned Professor Anthony King to offer his assessment as to whether the BBC's network news and current affairs output was impartial, accurate and clear as to which facts and views applied to the individual nations and to consider if the nations' policies were properly reflected and explained. The project has also been supported and evidenced by two substantial items of research commissioned by the Trust: content analysis by Cardiff University and audience research by the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB). The reports of both research projects are published as appendices A and B to Professor King's report.

Findings

Professor King's report and the accompanying research analysis address serious questions for the BBC. Does its news and current affairs output meet the high editorial standards expected of the BBC, and does it meet the Public Purposes which require the BBC to sustain citizenship and civil society and to represent the nations of the UK?

As a backdrop to these questions, Professor King's report illustrates the significant ways in which the UK has changed in recent years, economically, socially, culturally and institutionally. Such developments inevitably make the reporting of public policy in the UK more complex, and pose challenges and opportunities to BBC network news and current affairs. Professor King acknowledges that BBC Management is fully aware of the issues posed by this large-scale and constant change. The BBC Management's submission to the review can be found at appendix C of Professor King's report.

Among the research findings from Cardiff University and BMRB, indications are that the vast majority of people are interested in what is happening elsewhere in the UK and want to learn more. The BBC's performance in reporting the whole UK is seen as consistently superior to that of other broadcasters. Audiences who consume the BBC's output appear to approve of what they listen to and watch, with nearly 70 per cent considering that the BBC accurately and fairly represents their nations and communities to the rest of the UK. Those who watch or listen most frequently to BBC news and current affairs programmes are consistently among the best informed. Professor King's review finds little or no evidence that BBC network coverage in this area falls short on grounds of impartiality. On the contrary, the BBC has received praise for the impartiality of its coverage of politics and policy in all four nations of the UK.

Notwithstanding examples of good practice, however, and supported by findings from the Cardiff research, the review highlights concern that BBC network news and current affairs programmes taken as a whole are not reporting the changing UK with the range and precision that might reasonably be expected given the high standards the BBC itself aspires to. There are specific concerns as to accuracy and clarity of reporting, the

balance of coverage, and missed opportunities of drawing on the rich variety of the UK and communicating it to multiple audiences. As examples, political coverage is seen as unduly focused on Westminster in volume and style; there is seen to be a general bias in favour of stories about England or telling stories from an England perspective; and there is evidence that several stories in the nations which may have been significant to the UK were not taken up by the network. Overall, Professor King concludes that the BBC has not responded adequately and appropriately to the UK's changing political, social, economic and cultural architecture. In the closing sections of his report, he offers a range of suggestions and issues for consideration in resolving the concerns he has highlighted.

Trust Conclusions

The Trust appreciates the substantial work undertaken by Professor King, Cardiff University and BMRB. We accept the broad findings, which provide evidence and context for concerns expressed to us by licence fee payers.

The Trust welcomes the clear conclusion that BBC network coverage of politics and policy is impartial. This is an important conclusion and central to the Trust's duty of ensuring the impartiality of BBC coverage. We also welcome confirmation of the value placed on BBC output in this area by a majority of users, as evidenced by the BMRB research which says that most people agree that the BBC has better coverage of UK news than anyone else and that watching the BBC has raised their awareness of the key political processes within the UK nations.

However, we are concerned at Professor King's assessment that the BBC is not reporting the changing UK with the range that might be expected, given the fact that audiences have expressed a desire to learn more about other parts of the UK in the BBC's coverage. This echoes a wider concern expressed to the Trust that audiences see the BBC as too preoccupied with the interests and experiences of London, and that those who live elsewhere in the UK do not see their lives adequately reflected on the BBC. It is not acceptable that a BBC funded by licence fee payers across the whole country should not address the interests of them all in fair measure.

We are also concerned at the finding by Professor King that there is insufficient precision and clarity in the BBC's network coverage. The BBC's output must meet the high standards expected by the licence fee payer. It is essential that accurate information about political developments in the four nations is reflected in network news and current affairs so that the authority of the voice of the BBC is maintained, and the audience has confidence in that voice. To achieve full accuracy, the audience needs to be made aware by clear labelling which facts are applicable to which nations of the UK.

For all the strengths of the BBC's coverage, these are weaknesses which must be remedied. They are central to audiences' trust in the BBC and to the BBC's delivery of the Public Purposes.

This is an urgent challenge if the BBC is to meet the objective of serving the interests of licence fee payers in all parts of the UK in equal measure. We welcome the BBC Management's commitment to respond to the important concerns raised by the review, as evidenced in their initial response which is attached as an appendix to our conclusions. The issues we highlight for immediate action are around the accuracy and clarity of reporting, missed opportunities and balance of coverage. From our initial discussions with the Management, the BBC's readiness to provide the platform for all parts of the UK to engage in this changed democracy is not in doubt.

We have asked the Management to provide a final plan by July which sets out how they will deliver their proposed actions over the next year. We shall publish this. Subsequently, the Trust proposes to seek the cooperation of the Audience Councils in tracking the success of action taken in meeting the challenges ahead, and within eighteen months we shall ourselves repeat the research undertaken to provide a clear assessment of whether the BBC's performance is improving.

BBC Trust
June 2008

APPENDIX TO TRUST CONCLUSIONS: Initial BBC Management response

We take the issues raised in this Trust review very seriously and are determined to respond energetically to the important challenges raised by the Trust

- We recognise that the BBC must remain in step with the changing face of the UK and that our UK-wide journalism must deliver a range of perspectives and richness of coverage that reflects the diversity of the nations and regions of the UK. While there have been improvements in performance in recent years, we accept that we can do better and need to do better - Management is determined to get this right. The BBC's Journalism Board will take responsibility for driving through the changes that are required to improve the BBC's performance
- As the BBC Trust recognises, the review indicates that BBC News upholds high standards of impartiality and fairness in its reporting of politics and policy in all four nations of the UK. It is also clear that the BBC's reporting of the UK is seen as consistently superior to that of other broadcast outlets.
- While the focus of the review is on network (UK wide) coverage, it is important to recognise that the BBC plans its journalism around a portfolio of services across TV, radio and online that are UK wide and nations and English regions specific, and that work together. Our overall performance suggests that the majority of licence fee payers value this mix. The review understandably concentrates on the devolved nations, but the BBC also face editorial challenges in reflecting the English regions on the network particularly the north of England.

The specific ideas and suggestions for improving performance are, in our view, generally appropriate and we intend to implement most of them

- In chapter 9, of his assessment Professor King sets out a thoughtful and measured package of ideas and suggestions for improving performance. Our view on the key suggestions is:
 - (i) *Monitoring*: we have a monitoring system in place for Europe, Middle East and Business; this involves regular updates to the Journalism Board and has helped to strengthen the output. We intend to designate an experienced person to do this work and report on a quarterly basis to Journalism Board and the News Editorial Board.
 - (ii) *Priority/incentives*: this has been discussed with the Director of BBC News, and she is setting a clear objective for 08/09 for the BBC News division focused on improving the reporting of the UK including better labelling of stories, more policy comparisons and greater richness of coverage from across the nations & regions. This will be cascaded to all Heads of Department and Editors in BBC News across television, radio and online.
 - (iii) *Ownership*: following publication of the Trust review, we will communicate to all staff its importance and ensure that it is discussed throughout the journalistic community – as was the case with the major study on Impartiality last year and the last report on Business.
 - (iv) *Programmes*: We are committed to using those outlets with most time and space (e.g. bbc online, BBC News channel, Today, Newsnight, Breakfast etc) to provide richer coverage of the nations; with more policy comparisons and devolved politics coverage.
 - (v) *Co-operation between network & nations*: the nations will be encouraged to put forward more ideas for network coverage and we will develop a stronger dialogue between network and nations & regions editorial teams building on current arrangements such as the daily 8am & 8.40am meetings. Work has been underway on this for several months – the 'news diary' flags stories especially important to the nations and includes information on policy developments and how they will apply across the nations. Specialist correspondent teams in the nations will be strengthened for the benefit of both UK wide and nations output.
 - (vi) *Out of London career development*: we agree that all network editors should have direct experience of perspectives from the nations and regions – we have plans to develop a programme of attachments and placements – based on an audit of existing staff - to help deliver this over the next two years.

- (vii) *Training*: current training has helped to reduce factual errors, but we need to focus more directly now on greater sensitivity to the changing UK and increased clarity of language especially in cues and packages; we are currently developing bespoke training programmes for Editors within the College of Journalism which will address these issues. We agree that a high level of knowledge of the 'changing UK' is required amongst our Editor team.
 - (viii) *'Parachuting' in London-based correspondents* for big stories has reduced dramatically and is now only undertaken where necessary in order to support geographically based correspondents with more resources and is done in close liaison with the local editorial team.
 - (ix) *Drivers*: we will seriously consider the idea of a UK Editor, but will need to examine how the new remit would tie in with the current Home Editor post; the appointment of Director of Nations and Regions to the Executive Board is a matter for the DG.
 - (x) *'Daffodils'*: We agree with the review that the BBC needs to be alert to evolving trends and movements over time in the shaping of the UK as well as to on the day news pegs. Reporting the UK and its evolving identity will continue to be a core part of the BBC's 'big stories' programme. We intend to build on the success we've had with Home Editor Mark Easton's recent series on "the changing face of Britain".
 - (xi) *Better networking between BBC specialists around UK*: Head of BBC Newsgathering will be charged with bringing together subject specialists across the UK, especially in devolved subject areas like Health, Education, on a regular, organised basis in order to liaise on key themes and stories and to identify creative opportunities.
 - (xii) *Strengthened editorial policy guidelines*: a more detailed section on nations and regions will be taken forward as part of the revision of the BBC's Editorial Policy Guidelines by Director of Editorial Policy and Standards, to be developed in the coming year.
- However, one of the suggestions in Professor King's assessment is not, in our view, appropriate: the idea of considering moving the BBC's main UK news centre to outside London would not be beneficial to UK wide audiences in either editorial or operational terms; the key for the future is to develop a network of hubs around the UK that are in close dialogue; the planned move to Salford will strengthen newsgathering in the north of England and involve the appointment of a UK Affairs correspondent to enhance coverage of major themes reflecting changes in UK society. In Scotland, we have re-focused one of the network reporters to concentrate on on-going devolution themes, and have agreed a new editorial remit with the network team based in Scotland to better reflect devolution. Overall, there needs to be stronger collaboration – building on current practices - between the network operation and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland through improved dialogue and planning.

The identification of longer-term issues for BBC journalism understandably will require on going consideration and debate.

- We agree that the BBC's portfolio of news services in the coming years must remain a broad mix of both high quality linear television and radio news programmes combined with the development of a strong interactive, on-demand offer.
- The suggestion of 'parallel TV news programmes' for the nations is much more challenging than indicated; unlike radio, in television spectrum scarcity on DTT means that the BBC would still need to make a choice between UK-wide or integrated news provision on BBC One. Decisions on the best way forward must be for the BBC's Executive Board and ultimately the BBC Trust.
- The BBC's broadband proposals are designed to complement and enhance linear TV & radio news coverage as consumption patterns change – not to replace it. Broadband is already a big growth area for news particularly among under 45s. But traditional outlets will remain a central part of our news portfolio for many years to come.
- A key component of Journalism's online plans is the development this year of a 'digital democracy' portal that will enrich the BBC's coverage of UK and EU political institutions – Westminster, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly and European Parliament – as well as local government institutions. The portal will offer live, on-demand and searchable video coverage from all the institutions, complemented by rich analysis and depth on key debates and on each institution's elected representatives. It will include an interactive guide to devolved powers and the differences in policy-making across the nations. The aim is to help audiences understand how the UK, and its Nations and Regions, are governed, and to reduce the current purpose gaps in this area.
- Our proposal for local news via broadband is a response to the high priority that licence fee payers across the UK place on locally relevant news services. It will deliver an additional, local tier of BBC

newsgathering across the UK; it will not lead to any dilution in the BBC's strong commitment to providing UK-wide news and also in the nations services for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, indeed it will enhance these services.

While the BBC clearly has a lot to do to improve the clarity and richness of its UK coverage, it is important that we build on recent progress

We recognise and accept that there is room for necessary improvement. But the assessment suggests that cases of explicit factual inaccuracies are rare (around 1% of sample) – a bigger issue seems to be the need for greater clarity to avoid, for example, blurring the distinction between England and the UK. And whilst appreciating the constraints of time and space within the linear TV news bulletins, we agree that we must offer a richer mix of policy comparisons there.

- Clearly, licence fee payers and their perspective are important. While the Cardiff University content analysis is important, we believe it needs to be placed in a wider context. The BMRB audience research suggests that the majority of consumers of BBC news output approve of what they listen to and watch; while there are certainly issues with accuracy and relevance for some viewers, the research does not support the contention that a large number of viewers and listeners are alienated by the BBC's failure to cover devolution properly
- In the Management's contribution to Professor King's assessment we highlighted the current reach and approval performance of BBC network news programmes in the nations and regions. This data provides a revealing picture: Wales has the highest weekly reach in the UK for the *Six* and the *Ten* at 25% & 31% respectively. Reach to the *One* & *Six* is higher in Scotland at 17% and 24% than for the UK average as a whole. In terms of approval of BBC news, Wales & Northern Ireland are higher than the UK average (77% in Northern Ireland & 71% in Wales, 7-10s) – we accept Scotland is lower
- However, we are not complacent and we recognise the need to raise our game. We will take forward the Trust's conclusions and, as a top priority this year, we will implement the relevant ideas with vigour such that, as Professor King himself writes, by 2010 the BBC "will be more orientated to the whole UK".
- We are committed to providing the BBC Trust with an action plan in July and we will provide regular reports on progress, as requested, and liaise closely with the BBC's Audience Councils across the UK

.BBC Management

June 2008

BBC NETWORK NEWS AND CURRENT-AFFAIRS COVERAGE OF THE FOUR UK NATIONS

AN INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT FOR THE BBC TRUST

**By Professor Anthony King,
University of Essex**

MAY 2008

Preface

The BBC Trust commissioned me to conduct this Review in October 2007, and I submitted the report that follows to the Trust in mid-May 2008. I am wholly responsible for it. The Trust made it clear that the Review was to be an entirely independent piece of work and that it would not seek in any way to censor my findings or influence my conclusions. It has not done so.

My own background is that of a university teacher and freelance journalist and broadcaster. Although I have often appeared on BBC radio and television programmes, I have always done so in a freelance capacity; I have never been employed by the BBC. It is probably also relevant that I do not live in London and have never lived there for any extended period. My home is on the Essex-Suffolk border. I am, in that sense, a provincial. More than some people who live in the south of England, I imagine I feel a certain affinity with the rest of the UK, having good friends in other parts of the country and, perhaps more to the point, having written a book about the new British constitution which devotes a good deal of space to the phenomenon of devolution.

Like any large and complex organisation, the BBC has evolved its own in-house language, with its own in-house vocabulary, replete with words and phrases that are largely unintelligible to outsiders. Partly because I do not speak that language myself, I have tried to write this report in a style that can be understood by outsiders and the uninitiated.

In conducting this Review, I have drawn on multiple sources of information and evidence: conversations and meetings with BBC executives, editors, producers and journalists in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, conversations with politicians at Westminster and in the three devolved nations and meetings in various parts of the country with the chairmen (mostly women) and members of the BBC's national and regional Audience Councils. The Audience Councils exist to reflect back to the BBC Trust their own views and the views of the BBC's audiences and licence-fee payers. In addition, I read the scripts of dozens of BBC radio and television programmes and watched and listened to many more. I also studied the findings of independent pieces of research conducted by a team at the University of Cardiff and by the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB). I did not – for the simple reason that no one possibly could – watch, listen to and read more than a minute fraction of the BBC's vast output. My consumption of the output had to be, and was, highly selective. I would only claim that I tried to select what I chose to watch, listen to and read on a reasonably comprehensive, balanced and fair-minded basis.

It should be understood that this report relates to the BBC's output in the fields of news, current affairs and factual programming. It does not deal with sport, drama, quiz shows and so forth. Under its terms of reference, it is also concerned only with the BBC's UK-wide network – with the main television and radio news bulletins, Newsnight, Panorama, Analysis, BBC Online and so forth – and not with the extensive output of organisations such as BBC Northern Ireland, BBC Wales, BBC London and BBC East. In other words, it is concerned only with network output: output that can be seen, heard or read across the entire country. The names given to the various news bulletins in this report are the names they had while I was conducting my Review and before the May 2008 revamp. Thus, BBC News, as it now is, is usually referred to in what follows as News 24.

This report is my sole responsibility, but conducting the Review and drafting this report was by no means a solo effort. During the early stages of the Review, Rebecca Asher provided essential administrative support. During its later stages, Helen Nice provided the same high level of administrative support and also spent hours, days and weeks seeking out the transcripts, CDs, DVDs and printouts of online material that we were looking for. She also acted as the Review's principal quality controller: if an idea, sentence or paragraph could be got past Helen, it was probably all right. At all stages of the Review, my indispensable colleague was Mike Robinson, a recently retired BBC current-affairs programme editor. He worked at least as hard on the report as I did, he acted as an additional quality controller, and he had the great advantage over me of having intimate knowledge of the BBC's inner workings and some of its personalities. He also had the advantage – though in this case not over me – of being an admirer of the BBC but to be in no way beholden to it or dependent on it. I am more grateful than I can say to all three of the people just named, but especially to Mike.

Needless to say, if any factual errors or logical howlers remain in this report, they are my responsibility, not in any way theirs. The aim of the whole exercise, in all our minds, was not to knock the BBC but to help it to address a problem that senior management knows to exist but that it has not yet turned its corporate mind to.

Anthony King
Wakes Colne, Essex
12 May 2008

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1 The background – and the foreground

The United Kingdom has been transformed during the past ten or twenty years. It is not too strong to say that there is a new UK. The transformation has taken a variety of forms. One is the revival in the confidence, prosperity and vibrancy of the UK's great cities outside London together with their hinterlands. The provinces are provincial no more. More people are moving into than out of Belfast for the first time in generations; house prices in recent years have soared. In Leeds the Victorian arcades are again resplendent, and new restaurants and high-rise blocks of flats line the River Aire. Edinburgh is the fastest growing commercial centre in Europe and home to the world's fifth largest bank. The Tyne as it descends to the sea between Newcastle and Gateshead is spanned by a Millennium Bridge far more imaginative than London's, with the Baltic Centre and the Sage anchoring its southern extremity. Thousands of visitors flock during the evenings and at weekends to Manchester's rejuvenated city centre and the shores of Cardiff Bay. Liverpool in 2008 is a European Capital of Culture. In Glasgow the once massive shipyards along the banks of the Clyde have given way to the equally massive Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, the Glasgow Science Centre and BBC Scotland's imposing Pacific Quay building – as well as to the usual high-rise blocks of flats and even higher-rise hotels. Birmingham is host to an international festival of dance. The list could be extended indefinitely.

Many people in London and the south of England seem unaware, however, of the scale of the changes currently taking place – on the ground, so to speak – elsewhere in the UK. They appear to have an image of Northern Ireland, the Midlands and the north of England, urban Wales and even urban Scotland as constituting a sort of British 'rust belt': old, behind the times, rundown, forlorn, grey and dreary, not parts of the world that anyone would want to visit, let alone live in. That image may have had some validity several decades ago. It has none now. If there were some way of mapping a country's vitality, the majority of the UK's vitality today would be found lying outside London and the English south-east.

The UK is also being transformed institutionally. Most people throughout the UK are probably at least vaguely aware that Scotland now possesses its own parliament and government and that Wales and Northern Ireland also possess their own national assemblies and governments. But most people, as we shall see in a later chapter, are clearly unaware of the scale of the changes that have taken place. The devolution of power from Westminster and Whitehall to Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont probably constitutes the largest voluntary handover of power in history from the central government of any central state to one or more of the constituent parts of that state.

The governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are now responsible, within their own nation, for almost every aspect of education (primary, secondary, tertiary and higher), for public health, for the organisation and delivery of medical care (general practitioners, clinics, home nursing care and hospitals), for personal social services and for economic development, local government, housing, agriculture, many aspects of ground transportation and much else besides. In field after field, the writ of 'UK' ministers does not run beyond the borders of England.

Inevitably, the policies adopted in these fields by governments of the UK's four nations, including England, have begun to diverge; and, like the spreading branches of trees in a forest, they will increasingly diverge as time goes on. In that sense, England has itself become a devolved nation along with the other three. Moreover, although Scotland has so far acquired more autonomous powers than Wales and Northern Ireland, both Wales and Northern Ireland seem certain as time goes on to acquire for themselves many, perhaps most, of the powers that Scotland now has. Meanwhile, there is every reason to think that the Scottish Parliament – and quite possibly the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies – will acquire substantial tax-raising powers on top of the powers they already have. As has often been pointed out, devolution is a process, not at all a determined or determinate outcome.

The National Health Service is a case in point. Most people in the UK, at least in England, seem to imagine that there is still such a thing as the National Health Service. But they are wrong. There is no one national health service in the UK any longer: there are four of them, one each in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The fact that they all choose to continue calling themselves 'the National Health Service' merely serves to obfuscate matters. Each of the four is presided over by its own health minister (for most purposes, the grandly named United Kingdom Secretary of State for Health is merely the English health minister). Each has its own internal organisation, with, for example, trust hospitals functioning in England but not in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Each has its own way of relating to the private health-care sector. Each has its own policy with regard to prescription charges. Indeed the Scottish Parliament could, if it wanted to, abolish the Scottish version of the national health service entirely and replace it with something different. The Scots will almost certainly do no such thing – but they could.

To look at devolution and its consequences from another point of view, it has always mattered, but it now matters far more than it once did, in which part of the UK an individual or family lives. Someone who moves in either direction across the North Channel, the River Severn or the border between England and Scotland is nowadays

not merely changing his or her job and moving house but is also moving into a substantially new environment of public services. His or her way of life and standard of living are likely to be affected in the most basic ways: what is taught in schools, the timing of school holidays, the presence or absence of school league tables, how parents and children pay for higher education, the scale of health-service prescription charges, the quality of care in hospitals, how to pay for care of the elderly, etc., etc. The list is a long one.

Electoral politics and party politics across the UK are also being transformed. Not only are there now markedly different electoral systems in operation in different parts of the UK, but nowadays the patterns of party competition in general elections for the UK Parliament also differ markedly from nation to nation. Compare, for example, the names of the parties winning more than 10 per cent of the popular vote in each of the four nations at the UK general elections of 1955 and 2005. Half a century has wrought a total transformation, if not in England then certainly in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

England		Scotland	
1955	2005	1955	2005
Conservative	Labour	Conservative	Labour
Labour	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem
			SNP
			Conservative
Wales		Northern Ireland	
1955	2005	1955	2005
Labour	Labour	Conservative	DUP
Conservative	Conservative	Sinn Fein	Sinn Fein
	Lib Dem		Ulster Unionist
	Plaid Cymru		SDLP

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, eds., *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 37-8, 57-8.

In other words, whereas fifty years ago electoral competition throughout the UK, except in Northern Ireland, was focused on the same two political parties, the Conservatives and Labour, electoral competition in the four nations of the UK nowadays takes four different forms, even if the main contenders for governmental

power in the UK do remain the Conservatives and Labour. Thus in the 2000s, four different nations, four different configurations of political parties.

Moreover, in three of the four nations there is now substantial support for at least one separatist party – i.e. a party that advocates, in effect, the break-up of the United Kingdom. Support for the SNP in Scotland at UK-wide elections increased from 0.5 per cent in 1955 to 17.7 per cent in 2005, for Plaid Cymru in Wales from 3.1 per cent to 12.6 per cent and for a variety of republican parties in Northern Ireland from 26.1 per cent to 41.8 per cent. In some ways more to the point, following devolved elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland last year, one or more of those separatist parties found itself with a substantial share of governmental power in every one of those three nations: the SNP as a minority administration in Scotland, Plaid Cymru as a coalition partner with Labour in Wales and Sinn Fein as a coalition partner with the Democratic Unionists in Northern Ireland. In other words, although it seems unlikely, it is at least conceivable that 2007 will be remembered at some time in the future as the year in which the United Kingdom as we now know it began to disintegrate.

In connection with the transformation of the UK, three additional points need to be borne in mind. One is blindingly obvious. The other two are perhaps less so.

The blindingly obvious point is that one of the UK's four nations is a great deal larger than any of the other three and is, indeed, a great deal larger than all of the other three put together. In the absence of a genuinely federal system in the UK, and in the absence of elected institutions in the English regions, England, still a single political entity, resembles a huge whale in a small bathtub. Those who refer to the United Kingdom as Greater England may be unkind, but they are, or were, not wholly wrong. In 2006 the populations of the four nations were roughly as follows:

	Number	%
England	50,800,000	83.8
Scotland	5,100,000	8.4
Wales	3,000,000	4.9
Northern Ireland	1,700,000	2.9

To put these figures in context, the population of Greater London, some 7,500,000 at present, is greater than the population of the whole of Scotland; the population of Kent, England's most populous non-metropolitan county, 1,400,000, approaches that of Northern Ireland; and the population of the largest single UK nation, England, exceeds that of the next-largest, Scotland, by a ratio of ten to one. In the US, the population of the largest state, California, exceeds that of the next-largest state, Texas, by a ratio of

less than two to one. The UK in that sense is an exceedingly lopsided country: it is, in effect, England-plus.

Be that as it may, the second perhaps less obvious point to be borne in mind is that there are not four separate and separated nations, the English, the Scots, the Welsh and the Northern Irish. Quite apart from recent incomers from the Continent and overseas who do not answer any of those descriptions, the English, Scots, Welsh and people from Northern Ireland move with ease from one nation to another, frequently intermarry and typically have friends and relatives in at least one, often more, of the other three nations. Trains, coaches and airplanes from one part of the UK to another are crowded as well as frequent, and the accents of each nation can frequently be heard in all of the others. However strong feelings of national identity may be in different parts of the union, millions of UK citizens routinely behave – except at rugby and football matches – as though they belonged to the same nation.

The other less obvious point that needs to be borne in mind relates to the passage of time. Generations are now growing up in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who will soon never have known a time when those nations were not governed by devolved governments with substantial powers, including powers over their own lives. Just as no one under the age of 21 in the UK today can have any personal recollection of when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister, so increasing proportions of the populations of the devolved nations will soon not be able to remember any pre-devolution era. Every UK-wide institution will shortly have to begin to take account of the differing political, educational and social experiences of different sections of the UK's population, especially, at least to begin with, as they relate to the young.

It is against this background of transformative change in the UK that the BBC Trust asked us in this Review to answer, essentially, one simple question: in recent years, has the BBC's UK-wide network news, current-affairs and factual programming kept pace with – and responded adequately and appropriately to – the United Kingdom's changing political, social, economic and cultural architecture? Has BBC Online done the same? The rest of this report seeks to answer those simple, or at least simple-seeming, questions.

2 Challenges and opportunities

In responding to the changes that have taken place and continue to take place across the UK, the BBC's UK-wide network of news, current-affairs and other factual programmes faces a number of challenges. Most of these challenges, though perhaps not all, have already been identified by the BBC itself. The transformation of the UK at the same time offers the network new opportunities. It is less clear that the BBC has identified these opportunities.

However, before we consider some of these challenges and opportunities, we need to acknowledge some of the constraints that are present every working day in the world of those who make news programmes and, to a lesser extent, current-affairs programmes. One of them, obviously, is time. Time in two senses. First, many of those who make the BBC's radio and television news programmes throughout the day (and, in many cases, throughout the night) have to work at great speed. They have to meet deadlines, and those deadlines are often hours, if not minutes, away. They do not have the luxury of sitting at home writing leisurely reports for the BBC Trust. In a competitive media environment, they have to put the news on air as quickly as they can. That means that they do not always have the time they would like to think issues through carefully. It also means that inevitably they make occasional mistakes. It is only when mistakes become frequent, and begin to look as though they conform to a pattern, that the onlooker is entitled to be worried.

And time also matters in another sense, a completely different one. Except on occasions of extreme emergency or crisis, such as the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in the US and London, even the longest television and radio news bulletins, such as the Six O'Clock or the Ten O'Clock News on television, are restricted to roughly half an hour. That means that only a limited number of items can be reported. That, in turn, means that tough – and necessarily contestable – judgements have to be made several times every day about what items to put in and what to leave out. More of one thing inevitably means less of another. That is the nature of the beast, and it affects all the news media, the print media as well as broadcasters. That said, it is obvious that this kind of time constraint affects some broadcast programmes more than others: the Ten O'Clock News on BBC1 and the World at One on Radio 4, for example, more than on News 24 (as it used to be called), Radio 5 Live and Radio 4's Today programme.

Another constraint, easily overlooked by the casual onlooker, is the implacable quality of the first commandment of all broadcasting: 'Thou shalt not bore.' A news or current-affairs programme serves no useful purpose if it reaches the point (and that point is easily reached) when thousands of viewers or listeners switch channels, switch

off or simply leave the radio or television on while they go and make themselves a cup of coffee. A teacher has a captive audience. No broadcast audience is remotely captive. Programmes may be worthy; on a public-service broadcasting organisation such as the BBC, they often should be. But they must also strive to avoid being dull. The BBC has a particular duty not to bore because its listeners and viewers – and non-listeners and viewers – are also licence-fee payers, whose reasonable requirement not to be bored needs to be met. The challenge of good journalism, especially good public-service journalism like the BBC's, is to be informative without being tedious. Civics lectures have their place, possibly, but not on network radio and television.

Another constraint, evident to all on the inside but not to everyone on the outside, is financial or – perhaps better put – economic in the broadest sense. With regard to money and other resources as well as time, more of one thing means less of another. To activate a remote studio costs more than to summon a contributor into an already manned studio that happens also to be nearby. To despatch a camera crew from Glasgow to Rothesay costs more (and takes more time) than to despatch the same crew from Glasgow to Paisley. The answer to the question 'Why was an event covered from X rather than Y when it could equally well have been covered from either?' is often – and quite possibly rightly – 'Because X was closer at hand than Y and we already had someone there.' Quality also comes into it. Radio producers may calculate – and they are not necessarily wrong – that a slightly inferior interview broadcast in good-quality sound may, taking everything into account, be preferable to what might have been a slightly better interview but one conducted down a poor-quality telephone line. Quality of personnel must also be an ever-present factor in the judgements that editors and producers make – and have to make. 'What if A, who may be inexperienced and about whom we don't know very much, is sent to cover an important story and makes a hash of it?' If that happens – and millions are watching or listening – it is the editor or producer who made the initial decision who takes the flak.

If those are among the constraints on broadcasters in general, what are the challenges currently facing BBC broadcasters in particular, specifically the challenges that arise out of the UK's changed and changing institutional architecture?

The BBC's current Charter sets out six 'Public Purposes for the BBC', of which two are of particular relevance to our Review. One is 'sustaining citizenship and civil society' and the other is 'representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities'. For its part and with regard to these public purposes, the BBC Trust set out a range of clear expectations for BBC journalism. In the view of the Trust, BBC journalism in the new UK was, among other things, to be 'independent, accurate and impartial'. It was to

‘meet the needs of the nations, regions and communities’ and to ‘reflect them in the rest of the UK’. It was also to ‘build greater understanding of the political institutions governing the UK’. The central import of the Trust’s language was and is clear. In its stated view, BBC journalism was to be UK-wide journalism, in the sense of reporting on and reflecting the views of the various nations and regions of the UK, but also in the sense of reporting on and reflecting the views of the various nations and regions of the UK to the rest of the UK. In particular, the task of sustaining citizenship referred to in the BBC Charter was to include heightening radio and television audiences’ awareness of the ways in which the new UK is governed. It is clear that engaging in that task – or anything like it – means drawing attention to the politics and policies, as well as to the formal institutions, of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as England.

It is undoubtedly the BBC’s corporate intention to take these new responsibilities seriously. In our conversations with BBC executives in London, we consistently found an acute awareness of the new issues being raised by the UK’s new circumstances and a strong desire – a genuine desire – to ensure that all of them were addressed. Several of those we spoke to wanted us to note the fact that they were not Londoners and had no difficulty seeing the world through non-metropolitan eyes. Senior BBC executives and Sir Michael Lyons, the Chairman of the BBC Trust, have gone on record as believing that the BBC has a duty to report on and take seriously the UK in all its diversity. In a public lecture towards the end of last year, Sir Michael emphasised the point that the UK today is ‘almost unrecognisably different’ from the one that the BBC’s founders knew:

This is not just about the changes in the technology of broadcasting. It’s not just about the explosion of choice across the media. It’s also about Britain itself changing, about very different expectations in an age of customisation, of new confidence amongst minorities now able to join up across the world, about power devolving to the nations, about communities undergoing rapid change, about social and economic relationships fracturing and re-forming in new and different ways.

Our own terms of reference, set out in full in an Appendix to this report, reflect that awareness of large-scale and constant change. In terms of simple accuracy, we were asked to assess whether the network’s output makes it sufficiently clear which facts and views apply to the whole of the UK and which apply only to some parts of it (and, if so, which parts). In terms of context, we were asked to assess whether enough was being made in the network’s output of whether different nations pursued different policies and, if so, why they did and with what consequences – a process we ourselves

are inclined to envisage in terms of ‘enrichment’. In terms of balance, we were asked to assess, among other things, whether or not the network’s output gives appropriate weight to the actions and policies of the devolved administrations and to the political controversies taking place in the various devolved nations. Devolution apart, it was made clear from the outset that our Review was not to be concerned solely with the UK’s four nations qua nations: it was also to be concerned with the extent to which the network’s output reflected events and developments within each of the four nations, including in the regions of England. Our terms of reference go on to state specifically that this Review ‘takes place in the light of the BBC’s commitment to impartiality in reporting and commenting on news and current affairs, its commitment to informing citizens and its commitment to sustaining democracy.’

Taken together, the Charter, the BBC Trust’s stated expectations and our own terms of reference point to the principal challenges facing the BBC in the UK as it now exists. There is, however, an additional challenge facing the BBC, one that is not mentioned in our terms of reference – it would be surprising if it were – and one that arises out of a fact of contemporary print journalism that appears to have attracted strangely little attention.

The major London-based newspapers – The Times, the Daily Mail, the Sun and so forth – are still customarily referred to as constituting the UK’s ‘national’ press. But it is at least open to argument that the UK no longer possesses a truly national – i.e. UK-wide – press. Few London-based newspapers now have full-time correspondents based in Northern Ireland and fewer, if any, have full-time correspondents in Wales. The London-based daily papers do have full-time staffs in Scotland, but the members of those staffs are, in most cases, principally concerned with producing the Scottish edition of the paper they work for; they find it increasingly difficult to place stories about Scotland in the south-of-the-border editions of their own paper. The effect is that news of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland has become increasingly ghettoised in the print media. It is largely confined to newspapers published in those nations (the Glasgow-based Herald, the South Wales Echo, the Belfast Telegraph and so forth) and to the editions of the London-based newspapers that are distributed there. In particular, Scottish newspapers and the Scottish editions of London-based papers continue to report news of events and developments taking place in England, but it is becoming harder and harder for newspaper readers outside Scotland, including in England, to follow what is going on elsewhere in the UK.

To the extent that that is true, the BBC – unnoticed even by many people in the BBC – would appear to have emerged as one of the UK’s very few UK-wide news-

gathering and news-disseminating organisations. If that is so, that in itself constitutes another challenge facing the Corporation. ‘Nation’, the BBC has proclaimed for generations, ‘shall speak peace unto nation.’ The nations in question in the past largely comprised the outside world, but now the nations in need of being spoken to by the BBC include the nations of the UK itself – all four of them.

To speak constantly of ‘challenges’, as we have done so far, is to sound daunting and dreary, like a person totally uninterested in mountain-climbing and the great outdoors being told to climb a mountain that he or she has no desire to climb. It also speaks to a culture of target-setting, box-ticking and (to use that phrase again) civics lectures – that is, a culture of desks and offices for middle- and low-level bureaucrats with jobs to justify and nothing better to do.

Needless to say, we have something completely different in mind. We believe that the new UK, the one we described briefly in Chapter 1, affords BBC network journalists – editors, producers, researchers, reporters, presenters – tremendous opportunities. Reporting the new UK could and should be enormous fun, offering people a chance to learn more, travel more and to rediscover – probably in some cases to discover for the first time – their own country. Reporting the new UK certainly need not be a grind.

One such opportunity is to take advantage of the UK’s devolved institutions to explore issues of public policy in a more multidimensional way. The political leaders who devolved power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland did so for well-grounded reasons that were nevertheless primarily political in character. What, however, they did at the same time was, in effect, to reconstruct the UK as a vast and sprawling policy laboratory, a laboratory in which, in many fields of domestic policy, the three devolved nations’ parliaments and assemblies, and the UK Parliament in London in its England-only guise, could experiment with different policies and possibly, in time, begin to learn from each other. Often without realising it, the devolvers of the 1990s institutionalised the possibility – now become the reality – of variety. In that variety lies journalists’ – especially specialist journalists’ – opportunity. Some of the best journalism is trouble-making journalism, finding out things – and telling the public things – that those in positions of power and authority do not want the public to know; and one way in which serious journalists can now make trouble is to confront the policymakers of each nation with the actual experiences of one or more of the other nations.

Variety extends beyond policy, of course, to politics and the way in which policies are made and implemented. Most BBC network journalists grew up into a world dominated by the first-past-the-post electoral system, two-party (or at least two-and-a-

half party) politics, a climate of adversarialism and a legislative assembly that, apart from occasional revolts, largely did the bidding of the government of the day. But politics and policymaking in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not like that. Adversarialism persists to a degree, of course (wholly non-adversarial politics would be an oxymoron), but politics in the devolved nations is now the politics of proportional representation, coalition and minority governments and legislative bodies in which specialist committees play a far larger role than they do at Westminster. Network journalists not based in one of the three devolved nations now have the opportunity to learn how those other systems work, with a view to asking pertinent questions about the arrangements at Westminster and also with a view to being prepared if, as is at least possible, the UK-wide political system begins – perhaps in the event of a hung parliament – to come to resemble more closely those of the devolved systems. A member of the BBC's Northern Ireland Audience Council told us that, during inter-party negotiations at Stormont, he tended to listen to RTE's coverage rather than the BBC's, not because he thought ill of the BBC but because the RTE journalists had grown accustomed in their own country to reporting on, and making sense of, coalition and coalition-building politics.

A wider opportunity for creative journalism concerns the future of the UK itself. There will be, over the next few years and possibly over the next few decades, a story to be told: a story about whether or not the UK as we now know it continues to exist and, if it does, in what form it will continue to exist. Is Scotland, for example, to become Québec (a semi-independent province of Canada), or Slovakia (now wholly independent of the Czech Republic), or something else again? Can the UK's at present highly asymmetrical political arrangements – with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each having different devolved powers – survive? Who is to contribute how much financially? How will any new UK 'Senate' be constructed? How will the relationships develop among the politicians and peoples of Northern Ireland and their relationships with the rest of the UK and the Irish Republic? The story could, of course, be told ad hoc and episodically in terms of particularly dramatic conflicts and fallings-out, or the opportunity could be taken to make the future of the UK – to a far greater extent than it is now – a continuing theme of BBC network journalism.

Not least, the opportunity exists to make consumers of BBC journalism throughout the UK aware, far more than they now appear to be, of the changing lives of people in all of the four of the UK's nations and in all of the regions of England. Like France, whose political and cultural life was once heavily dominated by Paris but which is now developing other major urban centres that are able to compete with Paris and to draw people and industries away from the capital and towards themselves, so the UK is

developing urban centres and their hinterlands which are to a remarkable extent beyond London's magnetic pull and, indeed, are beginning to exert magnetic pulls of their own. No one at the turn of the 20th century would have dreamt of describing the UK in exclusively London-centred terms; at that time, no fewer than five of Europe's ten largest cities were British: Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester as well as London. For a time during the last half of the 20th century, those urban centres outside London seemed to have lost much of their dynamism as well as their material prosperity. That is no longer the case, and, as they revive, those four cities have been joined by others. A distinguished historian of France recently confessed that his 'professional knowledge of the country [once] reflected the metropolitan view of writers like Balzac and Baudelaire, for whom the outer boulevards of Paris marked the edge of the civilized world.' In the case of the UK, the M25 does not now, and of course never did, mark the edge of our civilized world.

In later chapters of this report, we assess how far BBC news and current affairs have succeeded in meeting their new challenges and taking advantage of their new opportunities.

3 Findings: content analysis and survey research

As we explained in the Preface, much of our work in connection with this Review took the form of conversations with BBC executives, BBC programme editors and journalists throughout the UK, meetings with Westminster MPs and members of the devolved parliaments and assemblies and, not least, meetings with the BBC Audience Councils in each of the four nations. We also solicited written evidence, in response to which we received a substantial volume. In addition, the BBC Trust commissioned two pieces of more extensive research, one a detailed content analysis of the BBC's network output, the other an opinion survey to find out as much as we could about audiences' responses to the network output. Full reports of these two pieces of research are published as Appendices A and B to this report. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview and summary of their findings. The findings are very revealing – often, from the BBC's point of view, uncomfortably so.

We begin with the content analysis, which was conducted – entirely independently of the BBC – by an experienced team at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies under the direction of Professor Justin Lewis and Dr Stephen Cushion. This analysis covered two periods during 2007. The first took in twelve weeks on either side of the spring elections for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh National Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and a large proportion of English councils. That piece of research focused solely on the BBC. The second piece of research covered four periods of a week each, chosen at random, during the months of October and November 2007. This piece of research was both commissioned by our Review and analysed on its behalf. Unlike the elections-related research in the spring, the work during the autumn and early winter ranged more widely in terms of subject matter and also took in other media outlets as well as the BBC. The researchers who carried out the October-November research examined and coded no fewer than 4,687 separate items of news coverage. Additional pieces of research, more limited in scope, included such subjects as the BBC's flagship current-affairs programmes, including Panorama (analysed throughout 2007), a number of live phone-in programmes and the way in which stories relating to devolution were covered on the BBC Six O'Clock News on television and then on the three devolved nations' 6.30 opt-outs.

The Cardiff University researchers are highly reputable and are frequently commissioned by a variety of media organisations, including the BBC. Their two pieces of research are, by a wide margin, the most comprehensive and detailed that have ever been conducted into the broadcast media's coverage of devolution and devolved matters. The overall picture that they paint is clear.

A dozen of the Cardiff findings stand out.

(1) Although the BBC network's performance in reporting the whole UK was less than wholly satisfactory, the BBC's performance was nevertheless consistently superior to that of other broadcast outlets when relevant comparisons were made. In other words, the BBC needs to be judged by its own high standards, not by comparison with other broadcasters.

(2) During the four weeks monitored in October and November, the Cardiff team identified a large number of news stories that involved devolution or one or more of the devolved policy fields. No fewer than 19 per cent of those for which the BBC was responsible – nearly one in five – were found to be vague and confusing and/or, less commonly, to contain implicit or explicit factual inaccuracies. Very occasionally, but only very occasionally, they stated explicitly that a story applied to the whole of the UK when it did not. More often, they simply assumed that a story applied to the whole UK when it did not. Very often, it was left unclear to which parts of the UK a story applied and to which it did not.

(3) Although members of the Cardiff team did not keep detailed logs, they noticed that presenters, newsreaders and interviewers not infrequently referred to 'we' or 'this country' when England rather than the whole UK was clearly what they were referring to.

(4) During the four weeks that were monitored during October and November, the Cardiff team identified 136 stories on the BBC network that dealt with education and health: that is, with arguably the two most important policy fields that are largely devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Of the 136 stories, all 136 dealt with England alone. None dealt with education or health in one of the devolved nations.

(5) It was found to be common practice for presenters and newsreaders to mention at the top of a story that the story related only to England but then never to mention that fact again, even in the course of a lengthy programme. Any viewer or listener whose attention was distracted for a moment could be forgiven for not realising that the story in fact related only to England. By contrast, stories that related to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland were almost invariably flagged up as such, often several times.

(6) Even if the presenter or newsreader stated at the top of an item that it related only to England, it was found to be common practice that, during any follow-up interview, neither the interviewer nor the person being interviewed would make any reference to the story's England-only character. For example, someone would be

introduced as 'the Schools Minister' and be interviewed as such without its being made clear that he or she was appearing as the Schools Minister only for England.

(7) It was also found to be common practice for the news to be reported and discussed with London or Westminster as the implicit or explicit point of reference, with the viewer or listener being given the impression that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were peripheral, somewhere vaguely 'out there'.

(8) Even when mention was made of the fact that a news item related only to England, it was extremely rare for an attempt to be made to compare and contrast an event or development in England with a comparable event or development in one of the devolved nations. Of the large number of BBC network stories relating to devolved policies (the ones referred to in [2] above), only thirteen (4 per cent) made any attempt at comparison and most of the few that did went little beyond referring in passing to the fact that different nations did, indeed, pursue different policies.

(9) Partly for the reasons already indicated, the politicians interviewed on network news programmes were, according to the Cardiff research team, almost without exception members of the Westminster Parliament. Apart from the Scottish First Minister, members of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly almost never appeared.

(10) Although comparisons were seldom made between English experience and policies and their Scottish equivalents, Scotland was mentioned quite frequently on the network news, both during and after the May 2007 elections and during the four sample periods during October and November. The same cannot be said, however, of Northern Ireland and, especially, Wales. The formation of the DUP-Sinn Fein coalition in Northern Ireland attracted a good deal of network interest (and it must be said that the number of items reported in the Cardiff data was artificially reduced merely as a consequence of the precise date on which the Northern Ireland election was held). But the extent to which Wales as a devolved nation failed to appear on network news programmes is striking. Almost none of the BBC's 2007 election coverage dealt with Wales in any way, and of 37 BBC stories that dealt with devolved matters during the four October-November weeks analysed by the Cardiff team only one related to Wales. That story related to the potential banning in Wales of the use of electric dog collars.

(11) Mention was made above of the fact that members of the Cardiff team monitored all of the 50 BBC Panorama programmes aired during the whole of 2007. Of the 50, none made any reference to devolution or devolved issues or policies even though

2007 was a year in which major developments were taking place in all three of the devolved nations. According to the Cardiff team, three of the programmes could have drawn attention to the fact that one or more of the devolved nations had policy competences in the areas covered by the programmes, but none did so. In contrast, BBC Radio 4's Analysis programme carried a number of reports dealing explicitly with devolution and devolution-related matters.

(12) In addition to their content analysis, the Cardiff researchers also conducted a number of focus-group enquiries with students at Cardiff University, the aim of the exercise being to find out how informative and accessible the resources of BBC Online proved to be. The students were generally satisfied, and the BBC's website provided them with the answers to most of their questions. They did not, however, find the website altogether user-friendly, given that they were mostly interested in devolution and devolution-related matters. One of them described using the website for this particular purpose as being 'like wading through treacle'.

Although a choice of sample weeks other than the four chosen by the Cardiff researchers in October and November of last year would undoubtedly have produced findings marginally different from the ones that were in fact found, the differences are unlikely either to have been significant or to have altered substantially the picture outlined above. Indeed, although a careful reading of the full Cardiff report yields a number of examples of good practice, several of which we quote in Chapter 7 below, the central thrust of the report – implicit rather than explicit but nevertheless inescapable – is that BBC network and current-affairs programmes, taken as a whole, are not reporting the new UK with the range, clarity and richness that might reasonably be expected. The BBC's reporting during the periods analysed by the Cardiff team was quite often unclear or vague, and it seldom reflected the laboratory-like properties of the new United Kingdom that we referred to in Chapter 2. We ourselves would have been surprised by the Cardiff findings were it not for the fact that our own investigations and observations pointed hard in the same direction.

The findings from the Trust's other piece of research, the BMRB's, make in many ways more cheerful reading from the BBC's point of view, but at the same time they reinforce some of the Cardiff team's more disturbing findings. BMRB, a market research company, conducted 2,000 telephone interviews on behalf of the BBC Trust during February and March 2008. Roughly 500 interviews were conducted in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the total sample was weighted to allow for the differing sizes of the four nations' populations. The interviews were relatively short – approximately 15 minutes in duration – and sought information about

respondents' knowledge of devolution and their responses to the BBC network's coverage of the UK as a whole, the three devolved nations and their own region or locality.

Large numbers of people proved remarkably uninformed – or, worse, ill-informed – about devolution. For example, the London-based Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is, with minor exceptions, in no way responsible for primary and secondary education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but fully two-thirds of BMRB's respondents either believe he is responsible for education at that level throughout the UK (43 per cent) or else have no idea whether he is or not (25 per cent). Respondents in Scotland were scarcely better informed than their compatriots in the three other nations even though UK Education Ministers, as distinct from Secretaries of State for Scotland, have never been responsible for Scottish primary and secondary education. BMRB also unearthed widespread ignorance concerning the charges made, or not made, for prescriptions in the four nations and (perhaps less surprisingly) about the locus of governmental responsibility for broadcasting across the UK. But the huge volume of misinformation or non-information identified by BMRB is certainly not – or is only to a very small degree – the BBC's fault. On the contrary, those respondents who watched or listened most frequently to BBC news and current-affairs programmes were consistently among the best informed (or, more precisely, the least ill-informed).

Among consumers of news and current-affairs programmes on BBC radio and television across the UK, substantial majorities maintain they are 'interested in what's going on in the other nations of the UK' (82 per cent) and that it is important for them to 'understand political processes and public policies within each nation of the UK' (62 per cent). How far one has to apply a discount to these figures because the answers that respondents give are so obviously the 'right' answers is impossible to say, but it was noticeable that respondents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in BMRB's sample were somewhat more likely than those in England to 'agree strongly' that they did want to know what was going on in other parts of the union.

A majority of consumers of the BBC's output certainly give the impression of approving of what they listen to and watch. Asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that 'the BBC has better coverage of news from other parts of the UK than anyone else', 61 per cent said they agreed. A mere 12 per cent disagreed. That said, whereas only 12 per cent of BMRB's respondents in England actually rejected the proposition that the BBC's performance is superior to that of other media outlets, that figure rose to 16 per cent among the people in Wales questioned by BMRB and to 21 per cent – a substantial minority – among the people in Scotland. The BBC's

standing as a purveyor of UK-wide news is clearly not as high in Scotland as it is elsewhere.

Arising out of the findings of the Cardiff research, we were particularly interested in listeners' and viewers' own sense of whether BBC news and current-affairs programmes are, or are not, 'always clear and accurate in reporting whether a particular story relates to the UK as a whole or only to England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland'. The pattern of responses that emerged was somewhat disappointing from the BBC's point of view. Although few respondents in any part of the UK believe BBC reporting is usually or almost invariably unclear and inaccurate, and although far more respondents – roughly a quarter in all – believe it is almost always both clear and accurate, the largest proportion, 64 per cent are prepared to say no more than that it is 'usually' clear and accurate, and that proportion rises to 70 per cent in Scotland. Some of those who say 'usually' are probably people who are cautious by nature and temperamentally reluctant to go to the extreme of saying 'always' clear and accurate, but, even so, the figures suggest that a substantial proportion of listeners and viewers, especially in Scotland, believe that the network makes mistakes, at least from time to time.

That impression is reinforced by the responses to another BMRB question: 'In reporting whether particular news stories relate to the whole UK or only to some part of it, how often – speaking from your own experience – do BBC news programmes make what you regard as straightforward factual errors?' Although a majority, 59 per cent, replied 'not very often' and some, 16 per cent, even said 'never or almost never', it remains the case that 17 per cent said 'fairly often' or 'very often'. That is a large number of listeners and viewers – and a large number of licence-fee payers – believing that they detect, or at least claiming that they detect, a substantial number of mistakes on BBC news programmes.

We were also interested to gauge how 'connected' people in different parts of the country, including in different parts of England, feel with the BBC's output. BMRB accordingly asked on our behalf: 'Thinking generally about the BBC's news and current-affairs programmes, how closely do you feel they relate to you and things that personally interest you?' Once again, the majority response was favourable, with nearly two-thirds of BMRB's respondents, 62 per cent, saying that BBC programmes relate to them and their interests 'very' or 'fairly often' – and, moreover, that proportion varied little across the four nations taken as a whole. However, there were, within England, substantial regional variations. Whereas in the south of England, two-thirds of people (66 per cent) felt the BBC's news output related closely to them and one third (33 per

cent) felt it did not, listeners and viewers in the north of England were more evenly divided, with only 52 per cent feeling that BBC news programmes related closely to them and their interests and fully 45 per cent feeling the opposite.

Part of the explanation almost certainly lies in the sense, widespread in much of the UK, that the BBC, despite its formal name, is an excessively London-centred organisation, with an ‘us-in-here’ and a ‘you-out-there’ mentality. To try to measure how widespread this view is, BMRB asked a deliberately toughly worded question. It asked people how often they feel, when they watch or listen to BBC news and current-affairs programmes, that some of the coverage ‘does not really relate to the real world’ and is of interest ‘almost exclusively to posh people who live in London’. Needless to say, a large majority of people – roughly three-quarters of the listeners and viewers who were interviewed – seldom or never feel that way. But a substantial minority do feel that way, and in Britain that minority is particularly large not only in northern England but in Scotland and Wales. The figures are striking. In the north of England, no fewer than 29 per cent of the BBC’s audience feel that the Corporation’s news output ‘very often’ or ‘fairly often’ fails to relate to the real world. The corresponding figures in Scotland and Wales are almost as large: 26 and 25 per cent. In those parts of the UK, there clearly exists a substantial disconnect between the BBC and much of its existing audiences, let alone its potential audiences.

But the more important of these two sets of research findings is the content analysis conducted by the Cardiff team of the BBC’s actual output. Whatever the audience’s reactions and feelings, the BBC has set itself certain objectives – or has had them set for it by the organisation’s Charter – and the evidence suggests that it is falling short of achieving those objectives. In the next three chapters, we explore in more detail specific instances of the network’s coverage in order to illustrate the circumstances in which inaccuracy and confusion arise, examples of opportunities that we believe should have been seized but were not and instances when the balance of coverage clearly went awry. We should explain at this point that in the chapters that follow we have not relied solely or even primarily on the Cardiff team’s research. As we remarked above, our own observations and investigations would have led us to very similar if not necessarily identical conclusions.

4 Accuracy, inaccuracy and lack of clarity

Covering properly all the English regions poses problems, but covering properly the distinct politics and policies of the four nations of the UK – let alone the constitutional phenomenon of devolution itself – poses even greater problems. Anyone who imagines it is easy has obviously never tried.

There are at least three problems. One is the sheer complexity of the widely differing legal and policy regimes in the four nations. Some matters are for the UK government alone. Some are for the governments of one or more of the three devolved nations – but with none of the three nations having exactly the same powers devolved to it as to the other two. Some matters are shared between the London-based government and some or all of the governments based in the other three capitals. How many readers of this report, for example, could give, off the top of their head, a comprehensive and accurate account of which matters relating to, say, public transport are devolved and which are not? UK ministers themselves sometimes give the impression of being in a muddle about what they are responsible for and what they are not.

As we remarked in Chapter 1, politics and elections in the four nations are also now exceedingly complicated, with four different configurations of parties in the four nations and no fewer than nine parties having significant electoral support in one or more of the nations. There are even more party leaders than parties. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats all have three leaders, one at the UK level, one in Scotland and one in Wales. The SNP, Plaid Cymru and the four main parties in Northern Ireland all have their own leaders, making a UK-wide total of fifteen party leaders having at least some claim on the media's attention. The electoral systems in use in Scotland and Wales resemble each other but differ widely from the systems used in Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole, which in turn differ widely from each other. Coalition building and inter-party bargaining in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – and possibly also in the whole UK in the event of a hung parliament – add an additional dimension of complexity. Let no one say that it is a simple matter to be clear about all this, and to explain it all, to viewers, listeners and online readers throughout the UK, millions of whom find even old-fashioned politics of the Westminster variety, as presented by the media, quite baffling.

The institutional architecture of the new UK is equally complicated. The UK Parliament is bicameral (House of Commons plus House of Lords), with neither House of Parliament having strong committees. The parliaments and assemblies of the three devolved nations are unicameral, with significantly stronger committee structures. The

UK has a prime minister and (currently) no deputy prime minister. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each have both a first minister and a deputy first minister. The presiding officers of the House of Commons in London and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast are both called the Speaker. The presiding officers of the other two devolved institutions are called precisely just that: the Presiding Officer. The Westminster MPs who represent Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland constituencies can vote at Westminster on everything – except the wide range of matters that are now devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It follows that they can vote on laws that affect only England, but MPs representing English constituencies, like all other MPs, are debarred from voting on matters that fall exclusively within the devolved nations' jurisdictions. The phrase usually used to describe the issues of principle that this asymmetric arrangement gives rise to, 'the West Lothian question', is itself totally opaque except to the initiated. As for the crucially important arrangements for financing the activities of the devolved nations' administrations, they are so complicated that only a select few have any understanding of them at all, and of course the phrase usually used to describe them, 'the Barnett formula', is also totally opaque. It is not everyone who can expound and explain these matters to an overwhelmingly lay – and potentially also bored and uninterested – audience.

But that is the new world of devolution, it affects the life of everyone living in the UK (not least the lives of the roughly ten million people who live in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), and it is not going to go away. It offers the BBC, as we said earlier, a number of challenges. One of the challenges – in many ways the simplest – is to be accurate: that is, to avoid saying things that are manifestly untrue, or that are misleading because of what is said or not said, or that are confusing in ways that leave the viewer or listener not knowing whether they are true or not. In the case of the new UK, being accurate involves, in particular, the minimal requirement of ensuring that viewers and listeners understand whether whatever is being reported applies to the whole of the UK or only to some parts of it.

At the moment, that minimal requirement is being met far more often than not, but too often it is not being met. The Cardiff research summarized in the last chapter revealed that, at least during four weeks towards the end of last year, roughly 19 per cent of BBC news stories relating to devolution or devolved responsibilities contained errors of commission (though only very occasionally), errors of omission (more frequently) and instances of considerable confusion (more frequently still). In this chapter, we illustrate the kinds of things that go wrong. Some of the examples we were offered during the course of our Review had an aged and somewhat musty air about

them. All of the examples we cite here are more recent. We list them in more or less chronological order.

However, we should perhaps interpolate here that by no means all of the examples we were offered by the people we spoke to turned out to be well founded. Some of the examples we were offered had acquired the status of urban myths: people believed them because they believed them: they simply took it for granted that they were true. But they were not. In Scotland, for example, we were told repeatedly that, whereas in 1995 the BBC had made much of the fact that the Commonwealth Games had been awarded to Manchester, in 2007 the BBC had made very little of the fact that the Games had been awarded to Glasgow. In fact, the opposite, if anything, was true. In 1995, the Six O’Clock News on BBC1 ran the Manchester story ninth out of ten items and did not mention it in the headlines. In 2007, the Six O’Clock News ran the Glasgow story sixth out of ten items and trailed it in the headlines. Similarly, in Wales we were told emphatically that the government’s decision to site the new UK all-services defence academy in the Vale of Glamorgan had been ignored by the network. In fact, as we learned later, the announcement of the decision had been reported extensively on both the One O’Clock News on television and the 6 p.m. news on Radio 4 and had even been broadcast live from the House of Commons on News 24. Not only on these occasions were we assured that one or another important event had not been reported by the BBC, or had not been reported accurately, only to discover on further investigation that the event in question had been reported and reported perfectly accurately. Apart from the examples reported by the Cardiff team, we have therefore checked carefully all of our own examples against audio or video recordings of the programmes in question or against full transcripts of the programmes.

During the late summer and early autumn of 2007 the Prime Minister in speeches at the Trades Union Congress and the annual Labour party conference promised that more training places would be made available to train ‘British workers for British jobs’. Accordingly, on 16 November 2007, during one of the periods covered by the Cardiff research, the UK government – in the person of the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills – announced that millions of new training and apprenticeship places would indeed be made available; but his announcement could relate only to England, almost every aspect of education and training having been devolved to the other three nations. According to the Cardiff team, that day’s three-hour Today programme on Radio 4 led with the minister’s announcement at 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. and altogether mentioned it on six separate occasions. However, the focus throughout was not on England but on the government’s making good on ‘the Prime Minister’s promise to train British workers for British jobs.’ The words ‘England’ or

'English' were used only three times in the course of the six items; the words 'Britain' and 'British' were used 46 times, and there were two unexplained references to the UK and 'the country'. By contrast, the report on BBC Online, although it set the government's announcement in a wider UK context, made it clear at the outset that this particular initiative related to England alone.

It is probably worth noting as an aside that in this case the government's own press release contributed to the lack of clarity – a lack of clarity that the BBC's subsequent coverage did very little to dispel. The press release opened with the bold statement that 'a major investment programme for the skills and learning of the country was unveiled by the Government today' (emphasis added). Only at the end of the press release, under the heading 'Notes to Editors', was the sentence added: 'This press notice relates to England only.' In other words, the government hyped its announcement and the BBC did not seriously de-hype it. The UK government has an interest in exaggerating the scope and importance of its policy announcements. The BBC might be thought to have a duty not to let the government get away with it.

A few weeks earlier, on 28 October 2007, Sir Malcolm Rifkind – correctly described on BBC Television's 7.35 p.m. news bulletin as 'a senior Conservative figure' – declared his support for the view that only Westminster MPs representing English constituencies should be allowed to vote on legislation that, if passed, would affect only England. In reporting the Rifkind initiative, the 7.35 bulletin concentrated on the effect that any such 'English votes for English laws' arrangement would have on the relations between England and Scotland; but at the same time it failed to draw attention to the fact that under any such arrangement the position of Welsh and Northern Ireland MPs at Westminster would also be called into question. What would they be able to vote on? What would they be prevented from voting on? On this point, potentially of great importance to viewers in Wales and Northern Ireland, viewers in those two nations were left totally in the dark.

A month later, on 28 November 2007, a US-based study – the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) – was published, measuring children's ability to read after receiving four (or in some cases five) years of formal schooling. The Pirls study replicated one conducted in 2001 and covered 40 countries. England and Scotland, with their different educational systems, were counted separately. The authors reported that since 2001 England, among the 40 countries, had fallen 16 places from 3rd place to 19th while Scotland had fallen 12 places from 14th to 26th. England had thus fallen further than Scotland, but Scotland, according to the study, nevertheless ranked below England on both occasions. According to the Cardiff team,

the BBC covered the story extensively on both television and radio: on the Six O’Clock and the Ten O’Clock news bulletins on BBC1 and on the PM programme and the 6 o’clock news on Radio 4. Neither television bulletin mentioned Scotland at all, and only the English figures appeared in the graphic accompanying the story. The two radio programmes did mention Scotland, albeit briefly and in passing, but their interviews and other reports focused exclusively on England (with various participants saying ‘we’ when they could only mean the English). No one from Scotland was interviewed on either television or radio, and no attempt was made to explain why reading standards in both nations had apparently fallen so far, why England’s had apparently fallen even further than Scotland’s or why Scotland, despite its alleged educational superiority over England, had trailed England in 2001 and again more recently. (As it happens, the Scotland-only segment of the Six O’Clock News – after 6.30 p.m. – also neglected to cover the report’s findings as they related to Scotland.)

Towards the beginning of this year, on 10 January, the Ten O’Clock News on BBC1 led with, and devoted a longish item to, the news that the UK government had decided to proceed with the building of a new generation of nuclear power stations. ‘We do not want’, the Prime Minister said, ‘to be dependent on other countries. We want a low carbon form of energy, and we want energy security and, of course, affordable energy for our country.’ The BBC reporter covering the story told viewers that what ministers were calling a new dawn for nuclear power ‘could see the strange domes of nuclear reactors springing up at half a dozen sites across the country.’ However, the Ten’s coverage neglected to point out that the SNP administration at Holyrood has set its face against nuclear power and would strongly oppose the building of new nuclear reactors in Scotland. In other words, ‘across the country’ did not mean across the whole UK. A viewer in Scotland drew our attention to this particular example of unclarity.

Later that month, on 30 January 2008, Anne Owers issued her most recent annual report. Ms Owers is the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (there is a separate Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland). Her report was given wide coverage that morning on Radio 4’s Today programme, but no reference was made to the fact that Ms Owers is Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales and scarcely any reference was made to the fact that her report therefore dealt only with prisons in those two countries. The fact that the report covered England and Wales was mentioned correctly during the news bulletins on the hour and half-hour throughout the programme, but the programme opened at 6 a.m. with one of the presenters referring, without qualification, to ‘our prisons’, a package in the 7 o’clock bulletin referred to the ‘Prisons Minister’ without making it clear that he was the minister only for England and

Wales, neither the interviewer nor Ms Owers herself in an interview at 7.10 referred to the scope of her remit, and neither the interviewer nor the UK Justice Minister, Jack Straw, in an extended interview at 8.10 made any mention of the fact that they were discussing England and Wales and only England and Wales. Any casual, in-and-out listener could have been forgiven for failing to realise that the various reporters, interviewers and interviewees were talking only about prisons in the UK's southernmost nations and not about prisons throughout the country; and listeners in Scotland and Northern Ireland are likely to have been confused, misled or else positively irritated by the fact that the programme made no reference to their part of the world or said anything at all about the state of prisons in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

By coincidence, on the same day, 30 January 2008, the Conservative leader, David Cameron, pressed the Prime Minister in the House of Commons to remove almost all of the restrictions currently in place on the police's powers of stop and search. On all of the main radio and television news bulletins, the BBC reported, often at some length, the Conservative leader's questions in the House and the Prime Minister's answers. However, neither the Six O'Clock television news nor the Ten O'Clock made any mention of the fact that, while policing in England and Wales is indeed a matter for the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, most aspects of policing and the criminal law in Scotland are matters for the Scottish First Minister and the Scottish Justice Secretary. On BBC2 that evening Newsnight led with a detailed report on the stop-and-search issue. No mention was made of the fact that the current debate on the issue related only to England and Wales. At one point, the reporter remarked that members of 'Britain's non-white population' were far more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by the police. At the very same moment, figures from the Ministry of Justice on the screen indicated that the evidence being cited related only to England and Wales.

The charitable organisation Macmillan Cancer Support drew our attention to similar instances of unclarity and confusion. For example, a two-part Radio 4 series, *Catching up with Cancer*, broadcast in February 2008, used expressions such as 'we as a country', 'our survival rates' and 'how well we are doing' in ways that often left it quite unclear whether the whole UK was being discussed or only parts of it. The writers of the Macmillan letter commented:

In our opinion, listeners in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland would have been left with the impression that the Cancer Reform Strategy [an England-only strategy launched in December 2007] impacted on them and that the drugs they needed would be approved by NICE (which is not the case in Scotland).

Although Mike Richards did describe his role as England-only, the presenter later referred to him as 'our Cancer Tsar'. No reference was made in the programme to the situation in Wales or Northern Ireland, where cancer plans are being developed, or in Scotland, where there has been a cancer strategy since 2001 and a new one is expected to be published later this month.

Despite the comprehensiveness of its coverage, or perhaps partly because of it, BBC Online is guilty on occasion of falling into the same traps. Maria Battle, the Acting Children's Commissioner for Wales, drew our attention to a series of online reports that blurred important distinctions among the policies being pursued in the different nations, and our own researches confirmed the truth of what she was saying. For example, on 11 December 2007 BBC Online carried a report of the government's new Children's Plan and quoted Ed Balls, the relevant UK minister, as saying that the plan's aim was to make 'our country the best place in the world to grow up'. But in fact the bulk of the plan, notably the sections dealing with education and play, affect only England. The section on youth justice does affect Wales, but the online report made no mention of that fact. Similarly, an online report in early January 2008, headed 'A year of changes in education', dealt almost exclusively with England without making it at all clear that that was what it was doing. Readers in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland would almost certainly have been left confused or irritated – or both.

Our final specific example of inaccuracy – or at least of doubtful accuracy – is also, by a wide margin, the most important because it could well be said to manifest conscious or unconscious bias. One of the most striking features of our Review has been how very seldom accusations of actual bias on the part of the BBC have been levelled against it. The BBC seeks to be impartial in its network news and current-affairs programmes, and most people – including most party politicians – seem to believe it is. In the course of our conversations with politicians and other individuals in all four nations of the UK, we were struck by the fact that almost no one claimed that the BBC network's coverage of politics and policy was anything less than fair and impartial. On the contrary, many of those we spoke to went out of their way to praise the BBC precisely for its impartiality. The response of those to whom we wrote and with whom we corresponded was similar. To us, the sound of that particular dog not barking in the night-time was all but audible.

However, there was one exception. Others drew it to our attention – an article in the Scottish edition of the Daily Telegraph was headlined 'Fibs about Scotland on the BBC' –and we could observe it for ourselves. It concerns the question of whether or not a group of people collectively called 'the English' – and, in particular, people called

'English taxpayers' – do, or do not, 'subsidise' a group of people collectively called 'the Scots'. We were not in a position to monitor the BBC network's entire output on this issue, but some of the coverage could give viewers and listeners the impression that there is a known and settled answer to this question and that the known and settled answer is that the English do, indeed, subsidise the Scots.

For example, the 7.35 BBC1 television news bulletin that we quoted above, the one that dealt with Sir Malcolm Rifkind's 'English votes for English laws' initiative, went on to feature the following commentary by a BBC journalist:

[Alex Salmond] confirmed plans today to abolish prescription charges. Other Scottish-only policies include free personal care for the elderly, introduced by the last Labour-led administration, and the scrapping of tuition fees. When devolution started, public spending in Scotland was £1,000 higher per head than in England. It's now grown to £1,500, a further increase of £500 fuelling complaints that England is subsidising Scotland. All these developments are bound to be uncomfortable for Gordon Brown, a Scottish Prime Minister in Downing Street, with several Cabinet colleagues also representing constituencies north of the border.

The same commentary was repeated, almost word for word, on the BBC bulletin at 10 o'clock later that evening.

But that line of argument raises three issues, all of them of general concern, not least to the BBC. The first of them is simply that the question of whether or not taxpayers in England are in fact subsidising the Scots is contestable and contested. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter (and powerful arguments can be adduced on either side), the fact remains that many people – including, not only but not least, the leadership of the SNP – insist that the English are not subsidising the Scots and that, if English and Scottish tax revenues were properly attributed, the contrary would be seen to be the case, with the Scots actually subsidising the English (or, at the very least, certainly not being subsidised by them). In other words, the commentary above gives the impression of assuming what needs to be proved – and has so far been proved only to the satisfaction of some people, not others.

The second issue concerns the acceptability of lumping all of 'the English' together and all of 'the Scots' together. Even if the totality of English taxpayers did subsidise the totality of Scottish taxpayers, it might still be the case – and is in fact the case – that the pattern of revenues and expenditures across the UK is far more complicated than any such simple formulation implies. Scotland as a whole may fare

better (or worse) than England as a whole, but if Scotland as a whole is compared with the various regions of England it turns out that Scotland in these terms does, indeed, fare better than all of the English regions but not a lot better than the North West – even on the basis of the kinds of calculations that the SNP takes exception to. In fact, the only parts of the UK that are not subsidised – in the sense that they do actually contribute more in revenue to the exchequer than they receive back in the form of public expenditure – are Greater London, the South East and the East.

The third issue raised by the commentary above is the impression it gives that the English are somehow paying the Scots to enjoy goodies that they themselves, the English, are denied. But what commentaries along these lines fail sometimes to mention is that, if a devolved executive, which has a budget fixed almost entirely by the UK government in London, chooses to spend more on one thing, then it is choosing at the same time to spend less on something else. If the Scots are moving towards free prescription charges (which they are), what are they simultaneously not moving towards or actually moving away from? As The Politics Show on BBC1 pointed out on the 13 January 2008, it could be claimed that what the programme's reporter called 'freebies for residents of Scotland' are actually being purchased at the price of a lower quality of policing in Scotland. Similarly, the claim is made that the provision of free prescriptions in Wales has meant lower standards of cancer care in Wales and longer waiting times for admission to Welsh hospitals. Whatever the merits of these claims and counter-claims, they do need to be reported (as well as, ideally, analysed). Objection could also be taken to the routine use of the word 'subsidise', with its heavily negative connotations. Even if the English were subsidising the Scots (which they may be), that would not necessarily be (though it might well be) a bad thing.

These are specific examples, ones we have examined in some detail, but what matters is not these particular examples in themselves but what they exemplify: namely, over-frequent lapses on the part of the network in its coverage of devolved and partially devolved matters. The fact that we were conducting this Review sensitised us to lapses of this kind. Between us, we noticed – simply in the course of casual viewing and listening – dozens of them. Needless to say, members of the BBC Audience Councils, especially in the three devolved nations, noticed even more. Occasional lapses are, of course, both inevitable and forgivable, but what we observed was a pattern: a persistent failure on the part of the network to take full account of what might be called 'the devolution factor' in the life of the newly devolved UK. Inaccuracy and unclarity were not the norm; but they were certainly too common.

In connection with this overall matter of accuracy and clarity, two final points need to be made. They are closely related, though at first glance they may not appear to be. The first point is that achieving greater accuracy does not necessarily mean, though on occasion it may mean, consuming more time and space (and therefore more of the viewer's or listener's attention span). Often the insertion of two or three words, possibly accompanied by the deletion of two or three others, will do the trick; after all, it does not take long to say 'local elections in England and Wales' or 'in England but not elsewhere in the UK'. On other occasions, a commentary can be recast without being made drearier or wordier. For example, the commentary cited above might have read:

[Alex Salmond] confirmed today the Scottish government's plans to abolish prescription charges in Scotland, in addition to the introduction by the last Labour-led administration of free personal care for the elderly and the scrapping of up-front university tuition fees, fuelling complaints that England is subsidising Scotland. Whether or not the complaints are justified, today's announcements are bound to be uncomfortable for Gordon Brown, a Scottish Prime Minister in Downing Street, with several Cabinet colleagues also representing constituencies north of the border.

Leaving aside the question of how much of the original commentary was factually accurate (and indeed how much of this version of it is), the first two sentences in this version consist of 81 words; the equivalent sentences in the version broadcast last October consisted of 98 words. But both succeed in conveying the same political message, the one relating to Gordon Brown's discomfort.

The second point is much more difficult to deal with. It is this. A large proportion of the policy-related stories broadcast by the BBC network are bound to be stories that relate exclusively to England. The UK government is the government of England, and people who live in England comprise some 84 per cent of the BBC's audience. It would therefore be bizarre and indefensible if the BBC, on the one hand, declined to tell policy-related stories that were highly relevant to the English majority (but only to the English majority) but at the same time, on the other hand, ran the risk of boring and irritating an audience living predominantly in England by regaling them with stories relating only to people living in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. In other words, if the BBC's UK-wide reporting is wholly accurate, and if it scrupulously informs its audience that what is being reported relates only to England (as it must frequently do), it inevitably runs the risk, not merely of reporting developments that are not strictly relevant to audiences in other parts of the UK but of actually drawing attention to their irrelevance. The more accurate a news report is, the more apparent it may be that it

relates to only one part of the audience, even if that part happens to be a very large one. There is a real conundrum here. In the next chapter, we consider one possible way of responding to it.

5 Opportunities missed

The BBC Trust, as we noted in Chapter 2, expects BBC journalism not only to be independent, impartial and accurate but to ‘meet the needs of the nations, regions and communities’ of the UK and to ‘reflect them in the rest of the UK’. In other words, BBC journalism, in the Trust’s view, is meant to be genuinely UK-wide journalism and not merely either journalism for England alone or journalism for each of the UK’s four nations considered separately. The nations are to speak to each other and not merely to listen to their own voices. As we also noted in Chapter 2, reporting the whole UK to the whole UK constitutes, in our view, more than a challenge for BBC journalism and BBC journalists: it offers them tremendous opportunities, to have fun, to learn, to explore, to analyse, to add a dimension to their work.

Reporting the whole UK to the whole UK also has the advantage of reducing the chances that any large sections of the BBC’s audience will reckon that much of the BBC’s coverage, however worthy in its own way, has nothing to do with them. Accuracy is not enough. Also required is a sense of the rich variety of the new UK and a desire to communicate that variety to the BBC’s multiple audiences. ‘Yes, but what is happening in other parts of the country?’ ought to be a question that BBC journalists instinctively ask themselves, not so that they can tick boxes but because they really want to know. In this chapter, we offer examples of where that simple question appears not to have been asked, instinctively or otherwise.

We begin with some of the examples cited in the previous chapter. In the case of ‘British jobs for British workers’, which turned out to be an initiative for the provision, in England, of training for people who happened to be located in England, it would have been open to the producers of the Today programme – who on weekdays have the better part of three hours at their disposal – to ask a question or two, perhaps even to commission a package, on how workers in Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland are trained (or possibly not trained) for British jobs. Is there anything, positive or negative, that the relevant authorities in England should have been learning from the experiences of the UK’s other nations? Similarly, the decline in reading standards among school children in both England and Scotland could have been considered comparatively. Is there something that teachers and school administrators on both sides of the border are doing wrong? What is it that teachers and school administrators in England seem to be doing even worse than their counterparts in Scotland, given the even steeper decline in standards on the English than the Scottish side of the border? In the case of Anne Owers’ critical report on prison conditions in England and Wales, it would have been open to ask whether prison conditions in Scotland and Northern Ireland were any

better and, if so, why. At the very least, Jack Straw, a minister in the UK government, whatever his own departmental responsibilities, could have been pressed to reveal how much he knew, or did not know, about prisons in other parts of the country.

(UK ministers sometimes give the impression of not wanting to have attention drawn to the fact that their particular policy domain is confined to England or England and Wales. Perhaps they feel that their stature would be somehow diminished if this embarrassing fact were revealed. It is certainly true that UK ministers with England-only responsibilities seldom volunteer the fact.)

Further instances of missed opportunities for comparisons across the four nations – and of making citizens in each aware of what is going on in the others – can easily be cited. One example is trivial in itself but illustrates a general point. At the end of February 2008 Marks & Spencer announced that it would shortly be charging customers throughout the United Kingdom 5p for plastic carrier bags, an innovation that was widely reported on the BBC network: on the Today programme in the morning, on both News 24 and Radio 5 Live and on BBC1's Six O'Clock News and Ten O'Clock News in the evening. But M & S, as members of the BBC's Northern Ireland Audience Council pointed out to us, had in fact charged its customers in Northern Ireland – that is, in part of the UK – 5p for plastic carrier bags for several months during 2007. The fact that M & S had piloted the scheme was reported on several of the bulletins, though not on all; but attention was not always drawn to the fact that it had been piloted in Northern Ireland (and also, as it happens, in the south west of England), and little, if anything, was said about the effect that charging 5p had had on the consumption of plastic carrier bags in Northern Ireland. Making more of the fact that the scheme had been piloted in Northern Ireland would have been interesting in itself and would also have signalled to viewers and listeners in Northern Ireland that the BBC in London was, so to speak, 'there for them'. An Englishman who had moved to Northern Ireland said to us when we were in Belfast:

I think Radio 4 is not attempting at all to reflect Northern Ireland. I haven't heard myself reflected back. It's as though when I moved to Northern Ireland I had left the country. Radio 4 makes me feel as though I live in a foreign country.

Another example, which followed only a few days later, is less trivial. On 3 March 2008 Breakfast on BBC1 featured two stories that were reported from an almost exclusively Anglocentric point of view. One was Breakfast's main story, which was covered twice an hour every hour between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. along with a series of special reports. This story concerned what one of the Breakfast presenters referred to as National School Offers Day. The 'nation' in question was, of course, England. Every

hour on the hour one of the presenters stated, accurately, that details of schools places were going out to more than half a million secondary pupils 'in England'; but otherwise references to England were made only sporadically and in passing. One senior official was repeatedly introduced as the 'Schools Adjudicator' or, alternatively, as 'the man in charge of school admissions', but neither in voice nor on the Aston was it ever made clear that he was responsible for school admissions only in England. In particular, no effort was made at any stage in the programme to compare policies on school admissions in England with policies in other parts of the UK. How do they do it in Scotland? Or in Wales? Or in Northern Ireland? Are the arrangements in one or more of those countries more satisfactory or less satisfactory than those in England? Such questions were never asked, and viewers could easily have gained the impression that it had never occurred to anyone associated with the programme that they should be asked. The same holds for a story, also run throughout the same edition of Breakfast, although not featured so prominently, concerning many English hospitals' failure to enforce smoking bans.

A similar example also relates to education. In mid February 2008 a number of bulletins on radio and television reported that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was likely to accept the recommendation of a review of foreign-language teaching to the effect that at GCSE level oral examinations of language competence should be scrapped. Oral examinations were thought to be 'too stressful'. By no means did all the bulletins – nor did the BBC's online report – make it clear that oral examinations, if they were scrapped at all, would be scrapped only in England; but, in addition, although our check has not been exhaustive, we could not identify any instance of the BBC's network asking whether any of the devolved nations were entertaining similar proposals to abolish oral tests in foreign languages. The authors of the review in England were concerned that oral examinations, because they were too stressful, were deterring some pupils from studying foreign languages. It would have been interesting, at least to some people in England, to know whether pupils in one or more of the other nations were being similarly deterred – and, if not, why not. None of the BBC's network outlets seems to have taken the trouble to find out and tell them.

More generally, both the Cardiff research covering the whole of 2007 and our own research covering the first four months of 2008 suggest that none of the network's main current-affairs programmes (Panorama, Analysis and File on Four) appears to have tackled either the imperatives lying behind, or the cumulative consequences of, the radically different lines of policy being pursued by the governments of the four nations in connection with what most people still call the National Health Service. A wide range of the reforms introduced in England by UK governments – increased

prescription charges, trust hospitals, greatly increased involvement of private-sector firms in the NHS, the introduction of polyclinics and so forth – have either not been introduced by the health service managements in the other three nations or else, as in the case of prescription charges, been thrown into reverse. What have been the costs and benefits, not least to patients, of the diverse approaches that have been adopted? What have the trade-offs been? In this respect, as in others, the UK has indeed become a veritable policy laboratory. It would greatly enhance the BBC network's coverage of the UK if audiences were allowed into the lab. The example of prescription charges is especially compelling. As the BMRB research commissioned for this Review showed, although people are unclear about the detail, a majority are at least vaguely aware that different policies under this heading are being pursued in different parts of the country. But with what consequences? No one anywhere seems sure.

Missed opportunities such as these relate to the emerging policy differences among the four nations, but BBC journalism is also enjoined to 'build greater understanding of the political institutions governing the UK' in line with its Charter obligation of 'sustaining citizenship'. Throughout our Review, we have been struck by the network's apparent reluctance to explore or even take note of the UK's emerging institutional variety, even when that variety is of UK-wide political significance and may ultimately impact upon the future of the UK itself.

The newly elected SNP administration in Scotland introduced its first budget on 14 November 2007. The date was known well in advance. Because the SNP does not command a majority at Holyrood, it was clear from the beginning that this budget, unlike most of those that UK governments introduce at Westminster, would have to win the support of one or more of the other Scottish parliamentary parties. The SNP government would have to build a coalition in support, if not of the SNP government itself, then of these specific budget proposals. It would probably take many weeks, as in the event it did, for the budget to win majority parliamentary backing.

On the day that John Swinney, the Scottish finance secretary, introduced the budget, the BBC's network coverage was either, in most cases, full and detailed or, in one conspicuous case, non-existent. It was covered fully on the PM programme on Radio 4 that afternoon and soon afterwards on the Six O'Clock News on television. It was also covered fully on the 6 o'clock radio news and on Newsnight later that evening. It was not, however, covered at all on BBC1's Ten O'Clock News, and any viewer anywhere in the UK, including one in Scotland, who relied for his or her news on that particular bulletin would have had no inkling that that day was budget day at Holyrood. On the Ten O'Clock News, news of a particularly gruesome murder (one that, as it

happens, involved a Scotsman) was one of the stories that displaced news of the Scottish budget. In the substantial volume of BBC coverage that did exist, much was made both of the details of the budget and of the fact that the SNP administration, because of its minority status, would find it difficult or impossible to implement all of it.

After an extended period of hard bargaining between the SNP and other parties at Holyrood, not least the Conservatives, an amended version of the November budget proposals was finally passed on 6 February 2008 by a margin of 64 to 1 (sic). Although our check has not been comprehensive, the network as a whole appears to have paid little attention to the bargaining that took place between November and February. The budget's passage was, however, covered in considerable detail on the late-afternoon radio bulletins and on the BBC1 Six O'Clock News. Unlike in November, the Ten O'Clock News did report the story, though only very briefly and in the form of a 45-word out-of-vision piece by the presenter. Only two of the network bulletins, those at 6 o'clock on television and radio, in any way drew attention to the long-term significance of what had happened: the fact that the SNP had managed to come to a deal with the Scottish Conservatives, the fact that the Labour Party had (as many thought) feebly abstained in the final vote on the budget and the fact that, by passing its budget by such an overwhelming margin, the SNP had enormously enhanced both its prestige and its position in Scottish political life. It was, to use the cliché, a seminal moment. However, with the exception of the two 6 p.m. bulletins, most of the network presented the passage of the budget almost as though it were a purely local event, without wider significance. Few in Scotland saw it that way, as attested to by the next day's Herald and Scotsman and most of the Scottish editions of the London-based newspapers.

Northern Ireland throws up similar examples of significant political developments that were, it could be argued, significantly under-appreciated by the network. The formation of the DUP-Sinn Fein coalition government in the spring of 2007 was, of course, one of the most extraordinary developments in the history of both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and it received suitably prominent coverage on the BBC. However, at that point the network seemed largely to lose interest in how the coalition government was performing and in how Northern Ireland was faring under the new regime. On 20 October 2007 the Northern Ireland administration's Programme for Government was not reported on any of the main television news bulletins, and a report from one of the network's correspondents in Belfast made it only onto the midnight news on Radio 4. We did, however, find two reports online. On a more human level, even the emergence of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness as the 'Chuckle Bros.' largely failed to attract the network's attention, apart from a couple of radio items and several online stories. At the same time, journalists and some members of the BBC

Audience Council in Northern Ireland expressed concern that the BBC's apparent belief that good news is no news fails to reflect the fact that, even though the Troubles are over, real tensions remain between the unionist and republican communities and even within the new Northern Ireland Assembly (with, for example, some unionists refusing to shake hands or even acknowledge the existence of republican fellow MLAs). The BBC network, it was claimed, gives the impression that everything in Northern Ireland is now settled and normal when that is almost true – but not quite.

One difficulty with episodes like these will be recognised instantly by anyone who has ever been involved in either broadcast or print journalism. It is the approach that almost always allows the urgent to trump the important, the immediate to trump the significant: 'Yes, that is a good idea, but we have stronger stories running tonight. Let's think about doing it next week.' That approach is perfectly understandable: the pressures of journalism, especially daily journalism, are intense; but there are almost certainly occasions when those pressures should be resisted in the interests of reflecting developments in the UK across the UK and, as the BBC's Charter says, of 'sustaining citizenship'. It is often protested that stories, even good and potentially important stories, need pegs. Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't. But, even if they do, adequate pegs can almost always be found – or, if not found, then hammered into the wall.

In this chapter we have offered examples of what we believe to have been missed opportunities. In Chapter 7 we set out to show, on the basis of opportunities that the network actually did seize, that imaginative UK-wide journalism can also be good and even entertaining journalism. But in the next chapter we pause to consider some of the larger issues of coverage and balance that emerge when one looks at the network's coverage of the UK as a whole, including the regions of England.

6 Problems of coverage and balance

So far we have discussed news items whose content was either inaccurate or needlessly vague and also missed opportunities: news items that were reported but without having been enriched by being placed in a wider UK context. We now turn to events and developments that were relevant to the whole UK but were scarcely reported or else were reported inadequately or late.

The charge has long been made by the network's critics that the BBC, even though it is largely paid for by licence-fee payers across the whole UK, is not really the British Broadcasting Corporation but the EBC, the English Broadcasting Corporation, or even BBC SW1, a network over-impressed and over-occupied by the toings and froings of the essentially court politics of Westminster and Downing Street. In its extreme form, this charge is obviously baseless, but there is just enough truth in it for it to be worrying from the BBC's point of view, especially as it is often levelled by people who, taking everything else into account, are great admirers of the BBC. We heard it made frequently, and often with supporting evidence, by members of the BBC's own Audience Councils. Their concern, we should add straightaway, relates overwhelmingly to coverage on the main radio and television news bulletins and to current-affairs programmes. It relates less to the former News 24, Radio 5 Live and BBC Online, which have far more time and space at their disposal and are more inclined to encompass the whole UK in their output.

A pertinent example relates to the way in which the network covered the events following the elections of May 2007 in Wales. The Labour Party fared badly in those elections, remaining the largest single party but needing the support of other parties to remain in government. There followed a protracted period of negotiations among the four Welsh parties and of discussion and often heated debate within each of them. Labour began by attempting to broker a deal with one or more of the opposition parties. When that attempt failed, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru discussed the possibility of forming a 'rainbow coalition', including all of them but excluding Labour. When that attempt in turn failed, those three parties stood aside and allowed Labour to form a minority government. However, Labour's leaders in Wales, like Labour's leaders in Scotland on two previous occasions, decided they did not want to soldier on on their own and in early July, some nine weeks after the May elections, formed a coalition government with Plaid Cymru. Shortly before the formal culmination of that protracted four-phase process, leader of the Welsh Labour Party and Wales's First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, fell ill and underwent heart surgery.

The events in Wales were important. They were obviously important for the people of Wales; the Welsh National Assembly has a wide range of devolved powers and controls a budget of £14 billion. But they were also of wider UK significance. Labour's poor performance in the Welsh elections, especially as it coincided with Labour's poor performance in the Scottish elections, might turn out to presage a decline in support for the Labour Party in two parts of the UK where it had been dominant for decades. In the case of Wales, as in the case of Scotland, relations between the devolved administration and the UK government in London were liable to become more difficult. As we remarked earlier, the inclusion of Plaid Cymru in the new Welsh coalition meant that separatist parties were now in power in all three of the devolved nations. The Welsh elections and their aftermath afforded, in addition, a classic illustration of multi-party and coalition politics, a type of politics now the norm in all of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and one that could conceivably become the norm in the whole UK.

However, the BBC's UK-wide network, as distinct from BBC Wales, had little to say about any of these developments. The election results themselves were widely reported on the main television and radio news bulletins, with commentary from the network's correspondent in Wales; but, apart from one brief mention, there were only three further reports on either the Six O'Clock News or the Ten O'Clock during the last three weeks of May and only one on either of those bulletins during the whole of June. Only the formation of the Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition in early July excited a modicum of interest in the network; but, even then, it was reported at any length on the main television bulletins only once. With regard to the illness of Rhodri Morgan, the main news bulletins on Radio 4 and Radio 5 Live all reported it, but not a single mention of it was made on the main television bulletins either on the day he entered hospital or the day after. In other words, anyone who relied on the BBC's network bulletins for news of what was happening in Welsh politics between May and July 2007 would have been alerted quite fully to the beginning of the story and also, though far more briefly, to the end of the story but would have been provided with virtually no information about anything that happened in between. BBC management's own submission to this Review acknowledged that 'the main television news bulletins should have worked harder to cover the aftermath of the Welsh Assembly elections, despite the difficulties in reflecting the complexities of a lengthy coalition process.'

Network news did, however, take considerable interest in another story emanating from Wales during the same May-July period. It concerned Shambo, a six-year-old Friesian bull. Shambo was sacred to the Hindu monastic community of Skanda Vale in rural Carmarthenshire. The community's faith required that neither Shambo nor

any other living creature be killed. Shambo, however, tested positive for bovine tuberculosis, and the Welsh government decreed that it should be slaughtered. The disease it was carrying threatened the lives of other cattle and would in due course cause Shambo himself considerable suffering. A High Court judge decided that the Welsh government had not given due consideration to the Hindus' religious beliefs. The Court of Appeal decided that the government was behaving lawfully and proportionately. After an eleven-hour confrontation between Hindu worshippers on the one hand and police officers and government vets on the other, Shambo was finally led away and destroyed in late July. Between 9 May and 27 July the fate of Shambo received substantial coverage, including live reporting, on the Six O'Clock News and the Ten O'Clock. We have not attempted to measure precisely the total extent of the coverage, but a rough estimate suggests that the fate of Shambo between May and July received more coverage than the fate of the Welsh government, certainly at least as much. Any UK-wide significance that the story may have possessed – for example, the issue of the extent to which a body like the Welsh government should have regard to a minority community's religious beliefs – appears never to have been explored.

More generally, the Cardiff research team commissioned by this Review, while they acknowledged that many of the BBC's stories emanating from England were in fact of UK-wide interest and significance, found nevertheless that what they regarded as a disproportionate number of the stories reported from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland concerned crime, disasters and sport rather than, for example, politics and matters of social policy. They noted that during the four weeks they covered during October and November 2007 the one policy-related story originating in Wales and falling within the remit of the Welsh Assembly government concerned the possible banning of electric dog collars (see p.20 above). Certainly it was the impression gained by members of the BBC's Audience Councils that, outside election periods and compared with stories emanating from London, stories originating in non-metropolitan England and the devolved nations were far more likely to be covered if they were of the human-interest variety than if they were not. In their eyes, the BBC seemed to regard London and Westminster as being serious, as being where it was all at, but the rest of the country as being where funny things occasionally happened. Out there, the quirky was more likely to be reported than the significant.

The claim that the BBC's news and current-affairs coverage can be skewed towards London and Westminster and away from other parts of the country is given added weight by the network's coverage – or, more realistically, its non-coverage – of the decline and fall of Ian Paisley as Northern Ireland's First Minister. On visits to Northern Ireland during the winter of 2007-2008, the politicians and BBC journalists we

spoke to frequently drew attention to the precariousness of Dr Paisley's position. His age was against him, and his son, Ian Paisley Jr., a junior minister in the Northern Ireland government, was in considerable personal difficulties, serious allegations of conflict of interest having been levelled against him (allegations that Mr Paisley dismissed as 'unfounded'). Not least, Ian Paisley Sr.'s close public relationship with Martin McGuinness – the relationship that caused them to be dubbed the 'Chuckle Bros.' – was alienating Dr Paisley from large sections of his own party. People we met in Belfast wondered aloud how long the First Minister could last. If he did not jump, they said, he was in imminent danger of being pushed.

Ian Paisley's position was obviously of potential UK-wide significance, possibly of great significance. He was joint architect of the DUP-Sinn Fein agreement that restored devolved government to Northern Ireland, and his personal relationship with the leaders of Northern Ireland republicanism had become, at the very least, stable and serviceable. No one could know for sure to what extent the peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland depended on Dr Paisley's personal presence and whether the settlement would survive under his successor. In the view of many in Northern Ireland, the peace settlement was considerably more fragile than it appeared to outsiders. They felt compelled to contemplate the possibility that, in the absence of Dr Paisley, violence might flare up again.

As in the case of the inter-party negotiations in Wales, the BBC network had little to say about any of these developments: not nothing, but very little. The resignation from the Northern Ireland government of Ian Paisley Jr. on 18 February 2008 prompted speculation in Northern Ireland about the political position of his father but, out of the main television and radio bulletins that day, only the 6 p.m. and midnight news bulletins on Radio 4 reported the event in any detail. The younger Paisley's resignation rated only brief mentions on BBC1's Six O'Clock News and on Newsnight. It failed to find its way onto the Ten O'Clock News. Apart from a discussion of the resignation's significance on the Today programme two days later, something approaching total silence then ensued, with the result that viewers and listeners, unless they read one of the broadsheet newspapers, may well have been surprised when the news broke on 4 March that Ian Paisley Sr. was also standing down. The network at this point did come to life, and Dr Paisley's departure was covered on both of that evening's main television news bulletins, on Newsnight later in the evening and on the Today programme the next morning. During one of the television bulletins, the BBC's Ireland correspondent commented in passing that 'it [Dr Paisley's resignation] is one of those things we all predicted.' The BBC network, however, did not predict it. Many of those we spoke to in Northern Ireland wondered why the affairs of Derek Conway's family at Westminster

were receiving so much coverage when the potentially more momentous issues surrounding Dr Paisley and his family at Stormont were receiving so little.

It is worth at least asking whether the network's relative neglect of significant political developments in two of the UK's three devolved nations can be justified, especially in view of the massive coverage that the network was giving during the same ten-month period to, for example, the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in Portugal and the early stages of the 2008 presidential election in the United States.

Three additional points which raise issues of Anglocentricity and London-centricity are worth making in this context.

One concerns sports reporting. In our experience, nothing got people, especially men, in the devolved nations, especially in Scotland and Wales, hotter under the collar than the way in which network news bulletins covered sporting events involving other than English teams. Frequently, of course, what they had in mind was live coverage on the day rather than after-the-event coverage in mainstream news bulletins, and live sports coverage and factual programmes specifically about sports lie well outside our remit. Nevertheless, sports reports, however brief, figure in large numbers of news bulletins, and there is reason to think that events and teams involving non-English nations are sometimes given short shrift – insultingly short shrift, as it seems to people in those nations. In the first place, developments of interest to them are often relegated well down the sports running order; they look and sound a little like afterthoughts. Secondly, we heard complaints that commentators frequently say 'we' and 'us' when they are clearly thinking of England and only England. Network producers and scriptwriters obviously have a problem: there are far more viewers and listeners in England than in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and most people in England, though not all, are probably not desperately interested in the results of, say, football matches in Scotland; network news cannot possibly satisfy all its diverse audiences. Even so, network producers and writers might think they should go out of their way more often to celebrate UK but non-English sporting achievements and should be a little more sensitive to the other nations' sensibilities, not least as regards running orders (which often send out louder signals than perhaps those who determine them realise).

A second concern relates to 'parachuting'. We ourselves have no direct evidence bearing on the point, but we should report that members of the BBC's Audience Councils across the UK, especially in England, were conscious of, and clearly resented, what they saw as the tendency on the part of network news, when responding to a major news story located outside London, to parachute in someone

from London to report the story rather than relying on local or regional BBC personnel. Many of those we spoke to reckoned that local and regional BBC people were just as competent as people 'sent down from London', and the fact that the BBC's bosses in London on such occasions parachuted in people from London gave the impression that the BBC's London-based bosses were somewhat contemptuous of well-known and often well-respected local, regional and national broadcasters. They thereby also gave the impression of being somewhat contemptuous of the admirers of those same local, regional and national broadcasters. Many of those who made this particular point added that the reporters who had been parachuted in often displayed – including on air – considerable ignorance of local circumstances and personalities. To repeat: we ourselves have collected no evidence in this connection, but the point made is one that undoubtedly bears thinking about.

Finally, there may also be an issue, not about the kinds of stories that are reported from different parts of the UK but about the locations from which stories of the same kind are reported. Members of the Audience Councils told us, and it is also our impression (though only an impression) that similar stories, which could in principle be reported from any part of the UK appear to stand a considerably better chance of being reported from locations in or near London than from locations elsewhere in the country. For example, we heard critical references to the live coverage given to a spectacular but not desperately important warehouse fire near the Olympic park in east London and the extensive coverage given to a collapsed building in central London. Going back further in time, there were complaints about the extensive coverage given to the damage caused by a freak tornado in a single street in north London compared with the limited coverage that the BBC is alleged to have given to the far more extensive damage caused several years ago by a tornado that struck an entire neighbourhood in Birmingham. This phenomenon, if it is a phenomenon, or even if it is merely perceived to be a phenomenon, may help to explain why the BBC's own research indicates that support for the BBC tends to fall away as one proceeds outwards towards the nations and north from London and the Home Counties. The BBC may appear remote to those audiences partly because a disproportionate amount of its reporting is remote. To adapt a familiar cliché, the BBC not only needs to be a UK-wide and an England-wide institution but to do its level best to be seen to be one.

7 It can be done – and sometimes is

When the case is made for fuller and more comprehensive coverage of the three devolved nations and the regions of England, one or other of two responses – one positive, one negative – is usually forthcoming from within the BBC. The positive response is that the new UK does, indeed, offer the BBC new opportunities as well as challenges and that these opportunities could be seized, should be seized and will be. The negative response, heard just a little too often for comfort, is that it really is all too difficult, that there is simply not enough time and space for fuller coverage, especially on the main news bulletins which already have so many subjects to cover. The only trouble with this negative response is that it is contradicted by what the network itself sometimes does. If it cannot be done, why does the BBC nevertheless manage sometimes to do it? The last three chapters have drawn attention to a great deal that is less than satisfactory about the BBC's coverage of the nations and regions. This chapter celebrates examples of BBC successes. It evidently can be done. Given that it can be done, both the BBC's Charter and the Trust's expectations of BBC journalism suggest that it should be done less spasmodically, more consistently and in prominent parts of the BBC's output.

Sometimes a story that has been reported inaccurately or vaguely by one outlet will be reported accurately and creatively by another. In Chapter 5 we quoted – as an example of vagueness bordering on inaccuracy – a report on BBC1's Ten O'Clock News suggesting that we could soon 'see the strange domes of nuclear reactors springing up at half a dozen sites across the country', the reporter using the phrase 'across the country' despite the fact that the SNP administration in Scotland adamantly opposes the building of new nuclear plants. Reporting the same story, as it happens, nine hours earlier on the same day, The World at One on Radio 4 was considerably – and commendably – richer in its coverage. The presenter stated clearly that:

The government's announcement applied only to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The SNP-led Scottish government has made clear its opposition to the UK government's proposals on new nuclear power. And, although control over energy policy is with Westminster, planning consent would need to be given by Holyrood.

She then interviewed an SNP member of the Westminster Parliament who was adamant: 'We will not allow the construction of new nuclear power stations in Scotland.' In other words, for the foreseeable future 'the strange domes of nuclear reactors' are most unlikely to spring up 'across the country'.

NHS prescription charges are a case where, after what was apparently a hesitant start, an effort has clearly been made to move the network beyond narrow coverage focused solely on England. When reporting changes in prescription charges, most bulletins now draw attention to the differing regimes in different parts of the country, and occasionally, though only occasionally, they explore the implications of increases or decreases in charges. For example, the charge for prescriptions rose by 20p in England on 1 April 2007, the same day on which they were finally abolished in Wales (having been gradually reduced since 2002). Both main BBC1 television bulletins that day not only reported these discrepant developments but illustrated how they affected individuals living on one or other side of the border between England and Wales. The two bulletins also drew attention to the possibly adverse consequences of the abolition of prescription charges in Wales on other NHS services provided in Wales. However, in October 2007 the network's bulletins made little of Alex Salmond's announcement that prescription charges would also be abolished in Scotland, and the position in Northern Ireland (where the charge is currently frozen) usually goes unmentioned.

Another point about the NHS that is seldom made, but that has on at least one occasion been made to considerable effect, is that, as a genuinely UK-wide organisation, the so-called National Health Service no longer exists. As we noted in Chapter 1, each of the four nations now has its own health service. On 2 January 2008, one of the network programmes to draw attention to this development was Radio 4's Today programme. Introducing an interview with Dr Gill Morgan, the NHS Confederation's chief executive, the presenter stated unequivocally: 'The NHS was created exactly 60 years ago to provide universal care across the UK. But now as a result of devolution there are four different health systems in the different regions (sic) of the UK.' Dr Morgan – who was reported extensively by the network that day and also online – commented that devolution had resulted in 'a complete split in philosophy' between England on the one hand and the three devolved nations on the other and predicted that in the coming years the differences among the systems would become even greater. She said it was too early to say which of the four systems would eventually prove the most successful.

Still in connection with the delivery of health care, on 3 March 2008 the network established a new, higher and more exacting standard for itself in the rich and detailed coverage that most of it provided in connection with the Welsh health minister's announcement that car parking charges were to be abolished at Welsh hospitals by 2011. With the notable exception of BBC1's Ten O'Clock News, all of the main television and radio bulletins, as well as News 24 and Radio 5 Live, reported the

announcement itself and compared the position newly envisaged in Wales with those currently in place in England, Scotland and (sometimes) Northern Ireland. Most of them went further and used interviews with patients, health professionals, politicians and BBC reporters to explore the substantive merits of the issues involved: for example, the real savings to patients and their relatives, who were often not at all well off, versus the deleterious effect that the corresponding losses of revenue to hospitals would have on their ability to provide other services. The four nations may not have spoken peace unto one another, but they certainly spoke to one another about car parking charges. In particular, the PM programme on Radio 4 and the One O'Clock News and the Six O'Clock News on BBC1 were, given the constraints of broadcast journalism, models of comparative reporting, analysis and discussion. It was only a pity that for some reason – quite possibly a very good reason – the item did not appear on the Ten O'Clock News even though by that time it had acquired an added political dimension with a Labour health minister in London differing openly with the health minister for Wales who was also a member of the Labour Party.

On another occasion, however, the Ten O'Clock News performed well. In the autumn of 2007, the Ten O'Clock reported that the Scottish Parliament was being asked to investigate claims that elderly residents of care homes were being sedated with drugs hidden in their food and drink. Unusually, the report began in Scotland but did not confine itself to Scotland. The BBC's reporter took the story beyond the Scottish border, interviewing a representative of the UK-wide Alzheimer's Society and noting that 'a survey of care homes in England has estimated that 40 per cent of residents with dementia were being sedated'. She also drew attention to the fact that the relevant authorities in both Scotland and England were clear that covert medication should be used only in exceptional circumstances and with the agreement of doctors.

The network's performance was patchier but nevertheless commendable in connection with the spate of teenage suicides that beset the south Wales town of Bridgend in 2007-2008. Following the seventeenth such suicide on 18 February 2008, the 6 o'clock news on Radio 4 the next day focused on the existence of a national suicide strategy in Scotland called 'Choose Life' and on the Welsh government's intention to use it as a model for its own strategy. The bulletin reported that, partly as a result of the Scottish strategy, the suicide rate there had fallen by 13 per cent over the previous five years. It also drew attention to the fact that in recent years suicide clusters like that in south Wales had been reported in Belfast, Staffordshire and east Glasgow. The Six O'Clock News broadcast at the same hour on BBC1 also referred, though only in passing, to the Welsh government's intention to introduce a suicide strategy and to

the fact that fewer resources were devoted in Wales to helping vulnerable young people than in either Scotland or England.

In addition to individual instances like these, the network sometimes takes note of significant landmark developments in the politics of the three devolved nations. The network made much of the SNP's success in the May 2007 Scottish Parliament elections as well as of the considerable confusion caused by the complicated format of the ballot that had confronted voters in Scotland. It also made a good deal of the formation of the DUP-Sinn Fein power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. Later that year, in September, it went out of its way to mark the 10th anniversary of Wales's vote in favour of establishing its own devolved assembly and administration. The SNP's first budget in Scotland also received substantial coverage.

None of these examples seems to have placed an inordinate strain on the BBC's resources, nor did any of them seem out of place in the news bulletins in which they appeared. They enriched the BBC's UK-wide coverage, and they demonstrated beyond doubt that the BBC could, if it chose to, add a UK-wide dimension to its day-to-day news coverage and certainly its current-affairs coverage. However, in compiling this chapter, we were struck by how few such examples there were. They were exceptions. We had to seek them out. Moreover, far from being exceptions that proved the rule, they were exceptions that suggested to us that no rule existed.

8 'They just don't get it!'

At the end of Chapter 1 we noted that the BBC Trust had asked us, in essence, a single question: in recent years, has the BBC's UK-wide network news, current-affairs and factual programming kept pace with – and responded adequately and appropriately to – the United Kingdom's changing political, social, economic and cultural architecture? Having talked to dozens of people in all parts of the UK as well as to the BBC's four national Audience Councils, having watched and listened to hundreds of hours of network programming, having read the transcripts of innumerable television and radio programmes and having explored relevant sections of the output of BBC Online, we believe we are now in a position to answer that question. Our answer is 'No'. The network has not kept up, and it has not responded adequately and appropriately.

Although our answer is blunt and categorical, we are struck by the fact that we have met almost no one who has given, or even seemed inclined to give, a different answer. The most that people, including people inside the BBC, have been prepared to say is either that the situation has improved in recent years or, alternatively, that – partly for technological reasons – it is likely to improve in future years. No one claims to be satisfied with the status quo. The only question is whether those responsible for the BBC's output are sufficiently dissatisfied with it to do anything about it.

We have noted at several points in this report what is expected of the BBC and what it expects of itself. The BBC's Charter sets out as one of the Corporation's six public purposes 'representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities', and the BBC Trust subsequently laid down that BBC journalism should 'meet the needs of the nations, regions and communities' and should 'reflect them in the rest of the UK'. Specifically, BBC journalism was to 'build greater understanding of the political institutions governing the UK'. We ourselves were asked to assess the BBC network's journalism in terms of its impartiality, accuracy and balance and also its sensitivity to context. Our terms of reference take note of the BBC's commitment 'to informing citizens'. In a public lecture Sir Michael Lyons, the Chairman of the BBC Trust, laid particular emphasis on this last point:

Information and understanding about the institutions wielding power in the UK must be freely available to every citizen and every community. No one, from whatever background, should feel shut out, disempowered by the lack of the right information or lack of the right understanding of the mechanisms of power in a democracy.

This is one reason – and an important one – why the Trust continues to stress the importance of the reach of the BBC: informed democracy requires an informed electorate, not just an informed elite.

Standards such as these are clearly high ones – far higher, for example, than those expected of the print media – but they are the standards by which the BBC, as a public-service broadcasting organisation largely funded by its licence-fee payers, must expect to be judged.

As BBC journalism in general is of excellent quality and is held in the highest regard not only in this country but worldwide, we need to emphasise that what we have to say here relates only to that segment of the BBC’s journalism that relates, or fails to relate, to what we are calling the new UK: the UK of devolved nations, diverse political and electoral systems and a palpable revival of civic and cultural life beyond the boundaries of the M25. In this connection, our findings are, to say the least of it, disturbing.

At the risk of repetition, we note again that a considerable proportion of the network’s reporting with regard to one or more of the UK’s four nations lacks clarity, that opportunities to ‘compare and contrast’ politics, policy and society in the four nations and the non-metropolitan regions of England are seldom seized, that important political developments in the three devolved nations, including developments that affect or may in the future affect the UK as a whole, sometimes go largely unreported, that substantial minorities of the BBC’s audiences, especially in the north of England, Scotland and Wales, believe the BBC often makes straightforward factual mistakes in reporting the UK and that large sections of those same audiences appear to an extent alienated from a BBC that they perceive to be remote and metropolitan. In earlier chapters, we cited examples of where we believe the BBC’s coverage was less than adequate; but here we should make it clear that those were just that: examples. We could have cited many more. As we conducted our Review, instances of inadequate reporting – far too many to count – leapt off the screen and out of our radios.

Here are some of the things that people we met said to us:

‘I don’t think the BBC has a clue about how much the UK has changed. I’m surprised they don’t think there’s still an Empire.’

‘There seems to be an in-built forgetfulness that much is actually happening outside the Home Counties.’

‘A school is failing? They show us one in London. It’s sales time? They show us Harrods.’

'The BBC doesn't understand the difference between Britain and England. How can you not understand the history and geography of your own country?'

'There's a blanket ignoring of devolution – as though it were a nasty inconvenience getting in the way of slick reporting.'

'The issue isn't one of impartiality. It relates to White City's too often ignoring or being unaware of devolution.'

'The BBC obviously can't lead constitutional change, but there's no reason for it to lag so far behind it.'

'The BBC owes it to us to be the British Broadcasting Corporation, covering the whole UK.'

'After devolution they "got religion" for a while and the coverage of our part of the world improved. But then you could tell that they'd lost interest.'

'The BBC has lost the ability to reflect the lives of everyone who lives in the UK. We don't have any UK debate about what's happening in the UK, and people don't understand what's happening in their own place. I've lost a lot of confidence in the BBC.'

'There's no pressure on them every day to get things right, so they just don't care.'

'The UK is changing out of all recognition – but [said with great emphasis] they just don't get it!'

At this point, readers in the BBC could easily be forgiven for thinking to themselves, 'There will always be complaints. There will always be whinging. We can never hope to satisfy everybody.' That is certainly true, but the point about complaints is not whether they are made or not, or about the tone of voice in which they are made, but whether they are justified or not. We have come to the conclusions that we have not because people – for example, members of the BBC's Audience Councils – have made complaints to us but as a result of our own researches and because, when we have investigated specific complaints and criticisms, we have often, though by no means always, found them to be supported by good evidence.

Another point about complaints needs to be made. It concerns non-complaints. From time to time it is suggested that BBC management receives remarkably few complaints about the matters we are dealing with in this report and that, if anything, the number of such complaints has decreased in recent years. It may well have done, but one possibility – which we believe to be a real one – is that, if there is a small number of complaints, it is because the kinds of people who complain about matters like these

have simply given up: they despair of being listened to. Moreover, even if no one ever complained, and even if no one ever felt like complaining, one would still be entitled to ask whether, in connection with its coverage of the UK, the BBC has got it right. A listener or viewer in England, for example, may simply fail to take on board the fact that whatever he or she is being told relates only to England or to recognise the significance of that fact even if it happens to be an important one. Similarly, few listeners and viewers in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland will have complained about the network's limited coverage of political developments in Wales between May and July of last year because most listeners and viewers in those three nations will not have been aware that any significant developments in Wales were in fact taking place. No one had told them.

The same consideration applies to questions of audience size and satisfaction. It is easy and tempting to infer from the fact that a given programme has a large audience, and from the fact that that audience appears to be appreciative, that that audience is also being well served. The satisfaction may arise partly out of ignorance. Members of the audience may not realise that they are not being provided with information that, if they knew about the subject matter at all, they would like to have in their possession. To take a simple example, when we have remarked to people (as we remarked in an earlier chapter of this report) that the summer of 2007 witnessed for the first time the coming to power – or at least to a share of power – of separatist parties in all three of the devolved nations of the UK, the majority of those we have spoken to have clearly been intrigued but also surprised. They had not noticed. No one had drawn their attention to the big picture.

From inside the BBC, it is also possible to lose sight of an asymmetry that inevitably exists between the experience of those who manage the BBC and the experience of viewers, listeners and those who use BBC Online, who in the vast majority of cases consume only a tiny fraction of the BBC's enormous output of news and current affairs. On the one hand, BBC executives are obliged to be aware, at least to some extent, of what is being transmitted all day (and possibly all night) on all channels; the BBC's television and radio networks broadcast dozens of news and news-related bulletins every day, quite apart from what is available on BBC Online. On the other hand, most consumers of the BBC's output – unless they are journalists themselves, taxi drivers or bored office workers – are unlikely on any one day to spend much time absorbing news online or watching or listening to more than two or three news programmes. Thus, it will often happen that a BBC executive can say of a news item, truthfully, that 'We reported it' when even a reasonably attentive viewer, listener or online consumer will have remained wholly unaware of it. We mention this point only

because, for example, stories concerning devolution and the English regions that appear on BBC1's Six O'Clock News sometimes fail to reappear on the Ten O'Clock News. That is perfectly understandable given the different remits of the two bulletins and the greater pressure on the Ten to cover European and other foreign stories, but there must be a worry that stories of substantial UK-wide significance may from time to time fall between the cracks when they ought not to be allowed to.

As must be clear by now, we take the view that the problem of the network's substantial failure to keep up with developments in the changing UK is serious. The BBC is failing to keep the citizens of the UK fully and properly informed about developments across the UK, it is failing to meet the expectations that the BBC itself has of its own journalism, and it irritates and even alienates very large numbers of viewers and listeners, who happen also to be licence-fee payers. What are the sources of the problem? Why does it exist?

One person, a member of one of the national Audience Councils, put it to us that it was a matter of deliberate policy, that BBC executives had taken a conscious decision to meet the needs of the BBC's majority audience, the English, and either to ignore the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland minorities altogether or else to ghettoise them by restricting coverage of their affairs to their national networks (BBC Scotland and so forth). The same person also seemed inclined to think that it was BBC policy largely to ignore England outside London and the Home Counties, on the grounds that the BBC ultimately depended on the support of London-based politicians and that, at least in its news and current-affairs coverage, it had no option but to cater to their interests and their needs.

We report this view merely to reject it. On the contrary, we are clear that the BBC collectively, and also individual BBC executives, mean what they say when they insist, as they often do privately as well as publicly, that they are committed to providing a comprehensive UK-wide service. As they see it, doing so is their duty, a core part of their job description. In any case, they are well aware that viewers and listeners in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and north of the Watford Gap in England are numerous and pay the same licence fee as everyone else. The fact that most BBC senior executives are wholly committed but that, even so, the network's output fails to reflect their commitment merely makes the existence of the problem the more puzzling.

We have also had expressed to us the view that, quite simply, 'they don't want to know': that is, that those responsible for the network's output know little or nothing about life beyond the perimeter of the M25 and have no desire to learn. We also reject that view, stated in that form; most of those responsible for the network's output clearly

do want to know and are acutely conscious of leading somewhat isolated working lives within the confines of the Westminster village and its neighbouring villages. The question is not whether they want to learn, but how badly they want to learn and what steps they are prepared to take in order to learn. After all, most of us would like to know Chinese, but very few of us are willing to go to the trouble of learning it. The issue, in our view, is not lack of desire but the lack of any sufficiently strong desire.

We believe that the underlying problem of the BBC's failure to keep pace with the changing UK has three sources. Each feeds into the others. All three are obvious. None is remotely difficult to identify.

The first is a matter of 'culture' or 'mind-set'. Most people concerned with news and current affairs at the BBC are used to a UK with London at its centre and a London with Westminster at its centre. They are used to a state in which power is both highly centralized and highly concentrated. They are accustomed to a nation in which almost everything that really matters – politically, culturally, socially, financially – happens in or near London. They are, in that sense, very traditional, not to say old-fashioned, in their outlook. The fact that London is now a 'world city', with people in-migrating from practically the whole planet, only serves to conceal from them the extent to which the UK beyond the M25 has changed, is changing and will continue to change. If London comprises its own universe, why explore? Needless to say, the BBC's staff is diverse, with many of its people, including its senior people, coming from outside London and in many cases from outside the UK. But a large majority of them, probably most of them, go native, imbibing the metropolitan culture while boasting of their provincial authenticity. To be fair, there are millions of people in the UK, most of them in England, who have also failed to grasp, or even to notice, the scale of the changes that have taken place. To judge by what they say on television and radio, some of them sit on the green benches at Westminster, including the front benches. There is, as a result, a discontinuity, a disconnection between the mental worlds of those who edit and produce much of the BBC's output and the mental worlds of many of those they need to address.

The second source is inertia. Like most large organisations, the BBC goes on doing what it has always been doing, a tendency that affects particularly those parts of the BBC that deal with news and current affairs. A large proportion of everything that the UK government does still relates to the whole of the UK, and a large proportion of everything else that it does still relates to the majority of the UK's population, namely to those people who live in England. So, once again, why explore? Why change? There is also, as can easily be observed, a certain symbiosis between BBC journalists and

Westminster politicians. They live professionally in close proximity. They have a shared professional interest in convincing themselves – thereby perhaps unwittingly convincing others – that nothing has changed, that God is still in his heaven and that power, real power, is still located uniquely in the Palace of Westminster. Changes have occurred and are in the offing, of course; the BBC now has a dedicated Europe Editor, and the whole of the Radio 5 Live operation will soon move north to Salford. But the heart of the BBC's news and current-affairs operations is still located in or near central London. And its mind still seems to be located there too.

The third source is the lack of positive incentives for change. Why adapt when there is no real pressure to adapt? Who is rewarded for noticing that new nuclear reactors are most unlikely to be built in Scotland? It would seem no one. Who is punished for not keeping track of, and reporting on, significant political developments in Wales and Northern Ireland? Again, it would seem no one. Are there any ructions when news bulletins, day in and day out, week in and week out, fail to make it clear that this or that UK government announcement relates only to England or, having made it clear in a purely nominal sort of way, then neglect to set the announcement in some appropriate UK context? It would seem there are none. In all of our conversations with people at the BBC, we have not encountered anyone who has been praised or blamed, or heard second-hand of anyone who has been praised or blamed, for doing a particularly good or a particularly bad job of reporting parts of the UK to the rest of the UK. Misdescribe the situation in Israel or on the West Bank and all hell breaks loose. Misdescribe or misrepresent the role of the Home Secretary in relation to Scottish prisons or the 'schools minister' in relation to schools in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland and, so far as we can tell, nothing much, if anything, happens.

These are our concerns. In the next chapter, we consider what might be done to address them. We are in no doubt that, given the will, they can be addressed. The BBC may sometimes be slow-moving, but no one has ever accused it of being sclerotic.

9 Ideas and suggestions

The reader is invited to note the title of this chapter. We are not in the business of making formal ‘recommendations’, which can often sound, and can often be, pompous and overbearing. And we are certainly not in the business of telling those who run the BBC how they ought to run it. They have the experience. They carry the responsibilities. What we have done is to identify a problem, a serious problem. It is for others to decide how to solve it. All we seek to do here, as the title of the chapter indicates, is to offer some useful, we hope, ideas and suggestions.

But we begin with a pair of negatives, things that we are emphatically not recommending, suggesting or even hinting at. We are opposed to political correctness, if by that is meant covering stories just for the sake of covering them and of being able to say afterwards that one has covered them. We are similarly opposed to the dotting of all ‘i’s and the crossing of all ‘t’s just for form’s sake. That way dullness lies. We are also opposed to political correctness if it means being deferential and excessively polite to Scots, Welsh people, Geordies, Cockneys or whomever. Robustness, straightforwardness and a willingness to show disrespect are among BBC journalism’s great strengths and should on no account be sacrificed. One notoriously robust BBC interviewer is occasionally accused in Scotland of being anti-Scottish; but the Scots he interviews are perfectly capable of giving as good as they get and quite often give the impression of enjoying the knockabout.

By the same token, we are opposed to box-ticking and the setting of arithmetic targets. Nothing would kill good broadcast journalism faster than an insistence by management that this or that programme must include k mentions of Wales or Northern Ireland each week and/or cover x or y out-of-London stories irrespective of their intrinsic merits. It would be agony for all concerned if, every time the BBC reported a UK government initiative relating only to England, every news bulletin had to state plonkingly, in so many words, that the initiative did not relate to Scotland or to Wales or to Northern Ireland. It would be even more agonising if, on every last occasion, bulletins had to engage in a laborious compare-and-contrast exercise. Newsworthiness must remain a core criterion for the inclusion and analysis of any news item in any bulletin or current-affairs programme. As one senior executive put it, ‘We must always go with the grain of the story.’ Our only concern is with how the concept of newsworthiness is now being construed. We think that, as regards the new UK, it could be construed more broadly and creatively.

More positively . . .

Priorities

We believe, as we have already indicated, that coverage of the whole UK – nation speaking unto nation – should be given higher priority by the network and that, to an extent that is not now the case, the union’s variety, the state of the union and the future of the union should be threads running throughout the network’s output. Consciousness should be raised, interest and enthusiasm aroused. It is not for us to say how that should be done, but we believe it can and should be done. There is a precedent in the way in which the BBC in recent years has extended and enriched its coverage of business.

Outputs

Pressed to make changes, the instinct of any organisation is to change personnel and procedures, to establish new committees and to arrange new meetings. It may be appropriate for the organisation to do any or all of those things, but there is always a danger that management will become process- and input-focused rather than output-focused. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, not the recipe. We were struck by the fact that, in responding to our enquiries, some of those we corresponded with at the BBC told us about the various new mechanisms that the network had put in place, was putting in place or might put in place at some time in the future but did not give any clear indications of how the new mechanisms would address the problems we were discussing or how they or anyone else would know whether they had actually done so or not.

Monitoring

To be opposed, as we are, to box-ticking and arithmetic target-setting is not to be opposed to monitoring: that is, to keeping track of how well the organisation is performing in meeting its new challenges. On the contrary, we are worried that the BBC has no way of knowing how well it is performing with respect to covering the new UK. We were frequently told that, even if the Corporation’s performance in this respect is not perfect at the moment, it is far better than it was a few years ago or a generation ago. That may well be true; but no one has produced hard evidence to support that contention and the evidence we were offered was purely anecdotal and impressionistic. Again, it is no business of ours to tell management what sort of monitoring system it should put in place, but there clearly does need to be put in place a system of some sort. The BBC needs to be able to say – to itself as well as to others – ‘We have identified the problem and tackled it successfully, and here is the evidence.’

Incentives

We alluded to the matter of incentives in the previous chapter. It is clear to us that some means needs to be found, not merely of alerting editors and producers to the fact that the new UK should be more widely and creatively covered but to the fact that their own performance will be assessed – and rewarded or not, as the case may be – partly in terms of how well they respond to management’s signals in this connection. Several senior BBC executives even suggested to us that the size of senior executives’ annual bonuses should partly hinge on how successful the network proves in adapting to the UK’s new environment and architecture. The idea is at least worth considering (though it is, of course, easy for us to say that).

‘Ownership’

It is obvious – or should be – that how successful the network proves is dependent on the commitment and skill of those who do the work on the ground. Policy in the end is not what top management says: it is what people working well below the level of top management actually do. The people who make the network’s programmes are the key. If management accepts that there is a problem, then the more it can share ‘ownership’ of the problem and the various possible solutions to it with the day-to-day and week-to-week programme makers, the better. In the end, it is programme editors rather than top-floor executives who are crucial.

Cooperation

There has never been a time in the BBC’s history when there have not been tensions between the BBC in London on the one hand and the regions and nations on the other. The Director-General recently drew attention to an internal memo dated July 1932, which read in part:

For some time all has not been well in the matter of programme activities at Head Office and in the Regions. Neither has been sufficiently informed as to the other. There has not been enough collaboration, and misunderstandings have in consequence arisen. This is bad for programme work. Both Metropolitan and Regional prejudices and bias must be eliminated, and ignorance on both sides lessened.

In more recent times, a state of something like war has sometimes existed between the BBC in London and some of its operational centres elsewhere in the country. Old soldiers who fought in those wars have tales to tell.

Fortunately, our observations suggest that in 2008 there is, on both sides, a far greater willingness than there has sometimes been in the past to cooperate, to see each other's point of view and to acknowledge each other's difficulties. There is goodwill on both sides, personal relations are good, and all manner of mechanisms exist to promote cooperation and joint working. Even so, with the best will in the world some degree of tension is inherent in the situation. The notion that metropolitan and regional prejudices and biases can be eliminated altogether is a chimera. The aim of the exercise should not be to eliminate 'prejudices and bias', which will always exist, but to recognise them, manage them and try to minimise their effects.

On the face of it, the BBC should be taking full advantage of the fact that it is a huge news-gathering and news-disseminating organisation, with editors, producers and correspondents in all parts of the UK. The whole should be at least as great as the sum of its parts. From London's point of view, that means acknowledging that talent and imagination are not confined to SW1 and W12 and can be found in all parts of the country. It also means acknowledging the possibility that the view from London is not the only view and may not necessarily be the best view. A certain haughtiness can manifest itself in Londoners' dealings with the world outside London, a haughtiness that can be the more irksome for being casual, unintended and wholly unselfconscious. London-based editors and journalists need to work hard to project themselves into the minds of their out-of-London (the word used to be 'provincial') colleagues.

However, the same is also true the other way round. We were struck by the large number of BBC people we spoke to outside London who were prepared to admit privately that they and their colleagues were not sufficiently sensitive to the needs of London-based editors and producers with a remit to cover the whole UK. Several of them also acknowledged that they did not go far enough out of their way to provide London with stories and ideas for stories that made sense from the UK-wide network's point of view. 'We do need', one of them said, 'to raise our game.' One way in which national and regional correspondents could raise their game is, wherever possible, to relate the national and regional story they are telling to the wider UK scene.

At bottom, there remains the inherent tension between the primary responsibility that most national and regional editors and producers feel towards their national and regional outlets and the lesser responsibility that most of them feel towards the network. They work nationally, regionally or locally all the time; they work for the network only as and when (and sometimes not even then). Those responsible for UK-wide journalism face the challenge, and always will face the challenge, of reminding BBC journalists everywhere that they do indeed work for, and are paid their salaries by,

a single organisation: the BBC. Several of our suggestions below are intended in part to serve this particular purpose.

Training and career management

A very large proportion of the BBC's journalists have completed a basic course on devolution and the devolved nations, devised by the BBC's College of Journalism. We have seen the course and, given its elementary level, are in no way disposed to fault it; but on its own it has clearly not even begun to do the trick. It may have caused a reduction in the number of crude inaccuracies in the network's coverage – the Cardiff University research team uncovered remarkably few of those – but it has not had the effect of causing editors, producers and journalists to recognise that they need to be alert to whatever devolution dimension may (or may not) be present in any aspect of their domestic reporting and analysis. Being factually accurate is obviously a necessary condition of successfully covering the new UK; but it is certainly not a sufficient condition, and we are clear that formal training, while undoubtedly necessary, can achieve only a limited amount on its own.

Far more important, in our view, is the management of people's careers so that, as individuals, they acquire personal experience of the regions of England and the three devolved nations – not just any experience they may have acquired years ago of the regions and nations as they then were, but experience of the regions and nations as they now are. Once again, it is up to management to decide how UK-oriented career management can best be achieved, but it is worth pointing out that many organisations – the armed forces, large parts of the civil service, large businesses – routinely require their employees, as they ascend the career ladder or seek to ascend the career ladder, to accept postings and indeed posts in different parts of the country. In many cases, it is made a condition of promotion to a senior position that an individual must have acquired experience of the organisation's business at a considerable distance from – or at several considerable distances from – corporate headquarters. We believe that the pursuit of a London-only career in BBC network journalism should no longer be an available option. We also believe that 'months in the country', let alone weeks in the country, are not adequate to the purpose. The experience should be real experience, which means extended experience, not merely token experience. Fortunately, there is no shortage of able people who want to work for the BBC.

In connection with this Review, someone put the question to us: 'What level of knowledge do you expect of someone who outputs BBC programmes?' Our answer would be that quite a high level of knowledge of the whole new UK is now required, a higher level than in the past.

Moving out of London

The BBC is clearly – and heavily – committed to being a far less London-centred organisation than it used to be. The Pacific Quay headquarters of BBC Scotland has already been built and is open. Construction of the new facility at Salford is under way. In due course, Television Centre in London (no less) will be sold. The only question our Review raises is whether the movement out of London ought not to be on an even larger scale than has already been announced, with individual programmes and even whole networks that are now London-based being moved to the north of England or one of the devolved nations. It seems odd on the face of it that *The One Show*, with its explicit remit to reflect the whole of the UK, began life based in Birmingham but was moved to London and has remained there ever since. There would appear to be a case for moving one of the BBC's main television channels out of London. Even more adventurously, it is not immediately obvious that the network's UK news centre needs to be based in London. The gathering and reporting of news relating specifically to the UK government and the UK political parties needs to be London-based, but it is not obvious that the gathering and reporting of other domestic news needs to be. If the new technology is as fast and flexible as it is said to be (and it is), then the case for centralisation in general, and centralisation on London in particular, is far weaker than it once was.

There is also a case for moving out of London in another sense. Obviously it is a matter of editorial decision which out-of-London stories merit network coverage and which do not. It is also a matter of editorial decision whether, if an out-of-London story is to be covered, it should be covered by a reporter despatched from London to the relevant location or by somebody who is already near or on the spot. These are inherently difficult issues, and we fully recognise the difficulties. We would only say that perhaps the balance should be tilted a little more in the direction of out-of-London stories and out-of-London reporters. Perhaps editors and producers should ask themselves as a routine matter: 'Would I be covering this story if it were breaking in Birmingham, Newcastle or Glasgow instead of in London or the south east?' Perhaps they should also ask routinely: 'Do I really need to send one of my own people down there? Aren't the people who are already there pretty good?' The final decisions will obviously be determined by the answers to those questions, but the questions do deserve to be asked.

Driver(s)

We remarked a moment ago that the focus should be on outputs rather than inputs, on products rather than processes. That said, the BBC's management will probably want

to consider whether some individual or group of individuals should be given responsibility for making sure that in future the network responds more readily than it has done so far to the changes in the UK. Decrees from on high can be issued. The question is how they are translated, if at all, into action on the ground. Post hoc monitoring is not ideal, but there is something to be said for it. A senior and well-respected producer could be given a licence to warn, goad, chide, monitor and offer suggestions. We are attracted by the idea, which is at least worth considering, of appointing a senior and well-respected broadcast journalist to the post of UK Editor, with a remit to keep an eye on the changing UK as a whole and to report the kinds of stories that have UK-wide significance but that seem at the moment to be in danger of falling between the cracks. Part of the remit of the holder of the post of UK Editor might be to self-destruct, to be so successful in inculcating into the network a culture of attentiveness to the whole UK, that the post itself – though not necessarily its holder – could be made redundant.

Signals

One virtue of creating the post of UK Editor is that it would signal to the nations and regions, in a highly visible way, that the BBC meant business in seeking to broaden and enrich its coverage of the whole country. On the face of it, it seems odd that the BBC has a North America Editor, a Middle East Editor and a Europe Editor, as well as a Home Editor, an Economics Editor, a Business Editor, a Sports Editor and others, but for some reason does not have a UK Editor. Be that as it may – and there are certainly arguments on the other side – the creation of such a post, with that title, would certainly create a favourable impression beyond the metropolis. Symbols are important, as people in the communications business undoubtedly know but sometimes seem to forget.

Another signal that should be sent, in our view, is the restoration to the BBC's Executive Board of the holder of the post of Director, Nations and Regions, at least until such time as the network is clearly seized of the need to address more fully the needs of the nations and regions. We realise that, as luck would have it, the BBC's Director-General and Deputy Director-General are at the moment both former Directors, Nations and Regions, and they and their colleagues may take the view that there is no need to have on the main board yet another individual with that background and experience. Against that, we would argue that the experience of both the Director-General and the Deputy Director-General now lies some way in the past and also that re-instating the holder of the post of Director, Nations and Regions to the main board would send a

powerful signal, one that would be heard, to BBC executives outside London and to the Audience Councils and attentive members of the general public.

'Daffodils'

In an earlier chapter, we mentioned that one difficulty the network seemed to be having in covering developments in the new UK was in dealing with stories that are complicated, slow-moving, possibly somewhat obscure and lacking in obvious pegs. Classic instances would be the network's failure to cover properly the slow and complicated emergence of the Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition in Wales and to draw attention to the almost simultaneous ascent into power of separatist parties in all three of the devolved nations.

A clue to the sort of journalism that is needed was provided by the editor of the Ten O'Clock News, Craig Oliver, in his blog on the occasion of Evan Davis's move from being the BBC's Economics Editor to being one of the presenters of the Today programme. Mr Oliver wrote:

Evan took the road less travelled. Some journalists can be showy and hyperbolic – in trying to get people interested in what they have to say, they can oversell their stories. Evan has always been clear that economics is rarely an area of blacks and whites, but varying shades of grey – a world where things tend to happen in increments over a long cycle, not easily matching the hourly demands of modern broadcast news.

I once told him a literary anecdote about Samuel Taylor Coleridge not being impressed by William Wordsworth's poem Daffodils – Coleridge's point was that if you are going to get excited about some daffodils, what are you going to say when it really matters? Evan agreed that he would have been very much on Coleridge's side.

What the network needs in its coverage of the slowly evolving new UK would seem to be journalists who recognise that 'things tend to happen in increments over a long cycle'. Certainly any UK Editor would need to be just such a journalist.

Programmes

Members of the Audience Councils made suggestions, and provoked ideas in our own minds, about the kinds of programming that might better respond to the UK's changing agenda. Someone suggested that the old Nationwide programme on BBC1 could

usefully be resurrected as Nationswide. Radio 4 might want to consider introducing a domestic equivalent of From Our Own Correspondent. The television series Coast was cited as a model of the sort of programme that could be reflective of the whole UK without making a meal of it. It was put to us that The One Show, even while still based in London, could do even more than it already does to represent the UK as a whole. It was also put to us – we have not attempted to check with what degree of fairness – that Breakfast on BBC1 in the morning, with more than three hours of broadcast time at its disposal, could do with fewer celebrities sat on couches in London studios and more interviews and reporting from the rest of the country. BBC Online might be encouraged to report the devolved UK more systematically, with frequently up-dated comparisons among the different nations' domestic policies. Innovations and adaptations along these lines would also signal to the outside world that the BBC is changing and wants the outside world to notice that it is.

Networking within the BBC

As we noted in Chapter 6, the network has not been at all active in what might be called the 'compare-and-contrast mode'. It typically reports a policy development in one nation – almost invariably England – without reporting what goes on in the same connection in one or more of the other nations. Even when such a report could be conveyed in the form of one or two sentences, it seldom is.

Although we cannot be sure, we surmise that one of the reasons for the dearth of compare-and-contrast reporting – or even take-notice reporting – on the network is that specialist correspondents spend very little time, if any, networking with each other. So far as we can tell, most of the BBC's correspondents who deal with such matters as health, education, the police, prisons and so forth do not as a matter of routine talk on the phone, circulate e-mails and visit each other's patches. They do not as a matter of routine keep each other informed about current and impending developments. We have the impression that, indeed, not all of them know each other's names. Instead of forming little specialist clubs or teams, they seem to work largely in isolation from one another. The network would, we suspect, benefit from any moves that encouraged more networking among this group – or, rather, non-group – of BBC journalists.

Editorial Guidelines

The BBC publishes Editorial Guidelines and periodically promulgates up-dated versions of them. We have seen a spiral-bound printed set of Guidelines dated June 2005 and a more recent online version dated November 2007. The key paragraph in both comes in an introductory section and reads:

In the UK there are different national and regional sensitivities which we should respect and reflect. There are differences in the powers of Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and the assemblies of Wales and Northern Ireland. There are also big differences in the legal systems in the nations, as well as in the provision of education, health and social services. We must be both accurate and consistent in our coverage and avoid stereotypes or clichés.

And, apart from a more procedural paragraph in the same section about the roles of content producers and controllers, that is about it. In contrast, whole sections of the Guidelines are devoted to Harm and Offence (thirteen pages in the printed version), Children (five pages) and Religion. The sections on Harm and Offence and Children go into considerable detail.

In our view, and given what we have found in the course of our Review, we think it would be useful if there were a separate section in the Guidelines relating to the nations and regions and if it went into a little detail, especially relating to the need to ensure accuracy and clarity in reporting – and flagging up – matters relating to devolution and the various nations’ devolved powers. A new version of the Guidelines might, for example, require producers to ensure that presenters and interviewers state explicitly, both in any introduction and in the course of any interview, to which part or parts of the UK a given political issue or policy relates.

The College of Journalism course that we referred to above already goes further than the Guidelines in stating that, while audiences to the UK-wide services ‘don’t expect the BBC to give them a tailored local service, they do expect the BBC to be accurate and to show some understanding of how their part of the world fits into the UK.’ The College also states in terms that, while ‘it’s not usually necessary to make these distinctions [about where stories do and do not apply] in the headlines, it probably isn’t enough just to mention them in the link or cue: it should be in the voice piece or package as well’.

Numbers

We have referred at several points to the desirability of comparing and contrasting the four nations’ policies, including with a view to finding out which of them are both effective and cost-effective. However, there is a difficulty, one that is in no way of the BBC’s making. As things now stand, statistics in many policy fields are collected on different bases and on different timescales in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As a result, a wide range of expenditure and performance data, which can be compared across the counties of England, cannot be compared across the nations of

the UK. There are no common UK-wide measurement schemes and therefore no common UK-wide schemes for the reporting of such measurements. None of this makes comparing and contrasting impossible; but it certainly makes it difficult.

It occurs to us that the BBC might be interested in becoming part of a consortium of news-gathering organisations, governmental organisations and perhaps even charities with a view to organising the collection and dissemination of such data. The job needs to be done. It were well it were done quickly. In the absence of outward signs of any initiatives emanating from Whitehall, the BBC might wish to take the lead.

Practical details

Perhaps a few minor modifications of custom and practice at the newsroom level would help increase awareness of, and knowledge of, the new UK. In our travels, we noticed, for example, that not all of the newsrooms we visited had maps of the UK on their walls. We heard tales of producers who were clearly hopelessly vague about the geography of the UK, imagining that a reporter from town A could be despatched to cover a story in town B when the two towns were in fact hundreds of miles apart. It might help, too, if the BBC provided journalists at all levels with up-to-date details of what has been devolved to the three nations and what has not. A useful innovation might also be a dedicated person, possibly working within the UK section of News Online, whose job it would be to answer questions from BBC staff across the country about the various nations' devolved and non-devolved powers and policies. Such a one-stop shop, so to speak, would, among other things, encourage journalists to go out of their way to ask pertinent questions. At the very least, this 'duty specialist', even if he or she could not immediately answer any particular question, could point the enquiring journalist in the direction of someone who could.

Furthermore, News Online might consider having a page indicating what people are asking questions about and publishing the answers as soon as they have them. The same page might also become the site where corrections and elaborations of earlier stories could be found. Specialists within the BBC and members of the BBC's audiences could also be encouraged to provide additional information and context. This site could become a continually updated resource, one available not merely to BBC journalists but to journalists outside the BBC, thereby encouraging full and accurate reporting of the UK.

In the same connection, journalists in and out of the BBC probably need to have available to them a guide to the formal titles and remits – some of them UK-wide, some of them not – of holders of public offices whose names and offices are often in the

news. Anne Owers is the 'Chief Inspector of Prisons', but where she is Chief Inspector of Prisons for? It ought to be easy for journalists to find out and, therefore, for viewers and listeners to be told. The same would apply, for example, to the various nations' Chief Inspectors of Schools and Children's Commissioners. Astons could also be used more informatively. If the 'schools minister' is the schools minister only for England (as he or she will almost invariably be), then that fact ought to be stated as well as reported by the relevant newsreader or correspondent. In some cases, the Aston might run to two lines, with a brief indication of the individual's remit supplementing his or her formal title.

A more mundane possibility relates to newspapers. Most of the London-based papers, as we remarked in Chapter 2, are no longer genuinely national papers in the sense of being UK-wide in their interests and coverage. That being so, it behoves BBC newsrooms across the UK to acquaint themselves with what newspapers throughout the UK are saying and to take note of what newspapers based elsewhere than in London – including the Scottish editions of London papers – believe to be important and newsworthy. Despite what people sometimes say, we have the impression that not much of that kind of enquiry goes on, at least in the BBC in London. Certainly the press summaries broadcast on network radio and television pay little or no heed to the out-of-London press.

Fun

At this point we probably need to reiterate another point that we made in Chapter 2: namely, that none of this need be a drag or a grind: that it could be, and should be, enormous fun. The UK as a whole is a much more vibrant, variegated, complex and interesting place than it used to be. One no longer, if one ever did, has to travel abroad to discover new worlds.

In this chapter, we have largely addressed issues of concern to the BBC as it now is and have addressed them within the media environment and, in particular, the television environment as they now are. In the next chapter, we look ahead and raise a number of questions about the BBC's role and activities in the rapidly approaching future.

10 Issues for the future

If the BBC wishes to address the issues raised in this report, it will obviously need to address them sooner rather than later. Quite apart from anything else, a UK general election is due to be held not later than the spring of 2010 – and may well come in 2009 – and there will be a new round of elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2011. The complexity of the new electoral politics in the three devolved nations, together with the fact that the electoral politics of all three nations is now diverging increasingly from that of England, means that determining how to achieve proper balance and impartiality in the BBC's coverage of, in particular, the next UK election will require even more forethought than usual.

But in addition, of course, the broadcasting environment itself has been changing radically and will continue to do so. Two of the most important changes bear on the topics covered by this Review.

The first is the coming end of the analogue era in television broadcasting in the UK. The switch from analogue to digital will be completed in large parts of England by the end of 2009, in Wales and most of Scotland by the end of 2010 and in Northern Ireland and in all of England (including London, which is late in switching) by the end of 2012. Throughout the country the effect will be enormously to increase the number of television channels and television programmes available to every household, institution and business. Competition for viewers will accordingly become even more intense than it is now.

In connection with news, current affairs and factual programming, there is one choice that is obvious and inescapable. It has to be made one way or the other. At the moment, BBC television's main news bulletins are meant to serve the whole UK and are transmitted throughout the UK, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as in England. The three devolved nations and the English regions have their own opt-out news programmes between 6.30 and 7 o'clock in the evening. Such programmes as Newsnight, Panorama and The Politics Show are also broadcast throughout the UK, though with some opt-outs and variations in the three devolved nations.

However, the position on radio is significantly different. Listeners to BBC radio in the devolved nations are not dependent on opt-outs in the way that BBC television viewers are. In particular, if they wish to listen to a news-magazine programme in the morning, they can listen to the UK-wide Today programme on Radio 4 or, depending on where they live, to Good Morning Scotland, Good Morning Wales or Good Morning Ulster. In all three devolved nations, including Scotland, more people at the end of last

year were listening to their national programme than to the Today programme. In the case of Northern Ireland, the ratio of Good Morning Ulster listeners to Today listeners was, and probably still is, more than six to one.

Within a few years, it will be possible, exploiting digital technology, for the BBC to provide television viewers throughout the UK, including in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the same range of choice that is now available to BBC radio listeners. It will be possible to continue to transmit all of the BBC's UK-wide television news bulletins and current-affairs programmes as now, but in parallel with one or more national programmes, drawing on material available to the whole of the BBC but compiled and edited to meet the tastes and needs of the three devolved nations' diverse audiences. Needless to say, it will also be technically possible to offer audiences in England similar choices of programmes.

The choice of whether to maintain some version of the status quo or to provide greater choice for viewers and listeners in the four nations is one for the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive Board. Cost considerations will obviously arise and will in some cases be determinative. But the difficult questions are more strategic. On the one hand, a UK-wide organisation, one funded by licence-payers throughout the UK, could, at the extreme, find itself functioning almost as a franchise operation, providing raw material for and, with luck, setting the standards for, three or four largely autonomous broadcasting organisations located in Glasgow, Cardiff, Belfast and London (or some other English town). The BBC, already quite decentralised, could become highly fragmented, with a weakened centre and greatly strengthened national and possibly regional units. There would, in effect, be BBCs (plural) rather than the BBC.

On the other hand, the relevant technology will soon be in place and, once it is, it will seem strange, even perverse, not to provide television viewers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with the choices that radio listeners in those three nations have already enjoyed for years. Parallel programming of this kind would obviate any need for UK-wide programmes to devote undue attention to developments of direct interest to viewers in one of the four nations but of no interest at all to most viewers in any of the other three. Parallel programming would also reduce the risk – inherent in the present system of national opt-outs – either of viewers not being told an important story at all or of their being told it twice, once in the UK-wide bulletin and then in the post-bulletin opt-out. It is also relevant that the BBC Trust has already agreed to the creation in Scotland of a Gaelic-language service which will be part funded by licence-fee payers. If a Scottish Gaelic-language service, why not, it will be asked, a Scottish English-language service?

A decision on which road to go down will have to be taken by the BBC within the next few years, but in the meantime several aspects of the BBC's ultimate decision fall within the immediate remit of this Review.

One has to do with whether or not the BBC's coverage remains genuinely UK-wide, by which we mean, first, that important developments affecting the whole UK, even if they take place within only one of the UK's four nations, are nevertheless reported to the whole UK and, second, that developments affecting the future of the UK itself, as a political entity, are reported to the citizens of the whole UK. As we have already made clear earlier in this report, we are concerned that, even as things now stand, much of the BBC's network is not responding adequately to these twin challenges (as well as to others). If the BBC became even more decentralised and fragmented than it already is, its ability to respond to these challenges could become seriously degraded. The BBC, as an organisation, might even lose interest and cease to care.

That possibility raises another issue, which concerns the ability of the BBC as a UK-wide organisation to oversee and influence the output of the BBC's outposts in Glasgow, Cardiff and elsewhere. Provincial governors are apt to become provincial satraps, and provincial satraps are apt to become local princelings, paying nominal and formal obedience to their masters, and even paying tribute to them, but otherwise largely ignoring them. A particular concern must be that, if the BBC goes down the parallel-programming road, its Executive Board may well find itself able in formal pronouncements to insist, but in practice largely unable to insist, that the one, two or three devolved national networks cleave to the Executive Board's conception of a UK-wide news and current-affairs agenda. To be sure, there will be pressure from viewers and listeners on the controllers of any more fully devolved national networks to be kept informed about what is going on in the rest of the UK; but at the same time there will be pressure – there already is – from local political elites, local journalists and the local chattering classes for the national network to focus on their nation, meaning, in practice, on them. We are reminded of the late Ottoman Empire, where by the end the Sultan's theoretical reach had come hugely to exceed his practical grasp.

In the same connection, there must be concerns about the standards in future of BBC journalism: standards both in the sense of impartiality (as between, for example, the UK's continued existence and separation) and also in the sense of professional competence. The BBC stands for, and expects to be judged by, both its impartiality and its competence, and there is obviously a clear and present danger that central management could in practice find, under both of those headings, that it had effectively

lost influence in all three of its national outposts and possibly also in its outposts in the English regions. The potential for loss of influence is increased by the tension, already well known to exist within the BBC and referred to in the previous chapter, between BBC journalists in the nations' commitment to the BBC as a whole and their commitment to the national and regional programme-makers whose demands they have to respond to every day and every week. How an appropriate but at the same time not stifling and bureaucratic measure of UK-wide control could and should be exercised in the context of any new parallel-programming regime is obviously an important topic for discussion within the BBC.

The other important change in the broadcasting environment – one that not only impends but is already manifesting itself on a large scale – is more and more people's increased use of easily accessed online content, very often free at the point of delivery. People do not need to listen to the radio or watch television; they can switch on their computer, their mobile telephone, PDA or other electronic device and surf the net or, better still, switch on and seek out information that they believe exists on the net and that they happen to be looking for.

In connection with news and current affairs, one model for the BBC in the early 21st century envisages the organisation as becoming something of a supermarket, with a wide range of goods on its shelves – on television, on radio and online – and with viewers, listeners and enquirers able to browse the shelves and shop around even more than they can now. BBC executives are seeking to develop MyLocal, an online service that would enable licence-fee payers anywhere in the UK to access continuously up-dated information about their own locality or, indeed, about any other locality anywhere in the country. If the Trust and other authorities sanction this initiative, licence-fee payers will be able, even more than they are already, to tailor what they view and listen to – and also when they view and listen to it – to their personal timetables and requirements. As regards the news, they will be able, in effect, to determine their own programme contents and to construct their own running orders.

The attractions of developments along these lines are obvious, not least because they would free consumers from the constraints of the BBC's printed schedules and also from the BBC's existing pattern of nations and regions, with their often scattered populations and arbitrary boundaries and, within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the problem of addressing the considerable regional variations that exist within those three nations. Also, if they go ahead, MyLocal and similar developments will free both the BBC and the consumers of its output from the constraints currently imposed by the physical location of the BBC's transmitters.

Our concern, as throughout this report, is with the impact that increased consumption of news online need not have, but could easily be allowed to have, on the BBC's commitment to providing UK-wide news and current-affairs programming, including a commitment to reporting the whole of the new UK to itself. Quite simply, the model just referred to could become a cop-out, with the BBC abrogating or, more probably, simply and subtly and perhaps not deliberately downgrading its UK-wide responsibilities in the interests of the new localism. In the short term, we already sense – perhaps wrongly, we hope wrongly – a disposition on the part of some in the BBC to say that there is no need to become too exercised about the BBC's coverage of the nations and regions – that is, its coverage of the new UK – because almost all of such problems as exist at present will soon be solved by the switch to digital and the expected large-scale increase in the number of people, especially young people, acquiring their news, if they acquire it at all, online.

This approach, which could become an additional mind-set, seems to us unsatisfactory on at least three grounds. In the first place, the available evidence suggests that for a considerable number of years to come millions of people, probably a majority, will continue to rely for their main intake of BBC news and current affairs on such programmes as the Today programme, Breakfast, the evening news bulletins and Panorama. The proportion of those who, so to speak, shop around for news online will undoubtedly continue to increase; but even many of those online shoppers will continue to turn from time to time, perhaps quite frequently, to traditional media, even if they choose to access them in a variety of new ways. It will also continue to be the case that people will look for specific pieces of information online only if they already know enough to have some idea of what they are looking for.

Secondly, even in the digital age and even with a large proportion of licence-fee payers viewing, listening and reading online, the BBC will remain primarily a public-service broadcasting organisation with duties to sustain citizenship and to represent the UK and its nations and regions. It follows that, however news, current-affairs and factual programming are delivered, the BBC will continue to have responsibilities, as we have said repeatedly, for informing the whole UK about the whole UK. Those responsible for providing broadcast and online material in the future will therefore need to be at least as sensitive to UK-wide developments as those who edit and produce television and radio material today. In our view, editors and producers at the moment are not sufficiently sensitive to these issues. Left to their own devices, they and their successors could in future become even less sensitive.

Thirdly, there will always be practical issues of access. Broadband, although available in most places, is not available everywhere, including in parts of Wales and Scotland. In addition, there will always be some people, almost all of them licence-fee payers, who, because of poverty or disability, or because they are (how shall we say?) technologically challenged or simply because they are exceedingly busy, will not have the ability or time to take advantage of the new media in the energetic, proactive way that some in the BBC seem to have in mind. At the very least, there is an issue of 'discoverability'. The BBC needs to ensure that its content, however delivered, is accessible, not merely in the physical sense, but in the sense that users and would-be users can find what they are looking for easily and conveniently. As we noted earlier, comparative material relating to all four of the UK's nations is not always easy to find online.

In general, the danger must be that the BBC produces more and more pieces of the jigsaw puzzle without ever assembling the whole puzzle. In this as well as in other connections, 'Balkanisation' and 'fragmentation' are the sorts of words that come to mind.

We conclude this chapter with three general thoughts. We are told that there are signs that ITV may shortly resile from some at least, perhaps most, of its current public-service commitments to reporting the UK's nations and regions on air. If that happens, the BBC will find it has become, more or less by accident and certainly through no fault of its own, virtually a public-service monopolist in this field: it will find that it bears almost sole responsibility for providing broadcast news and current-affairs coverage for very large parts of the UK. How well it meets that responsibility will be a straightforward test of its ability to fulfil its core public-service commitments. In the long term, it is also likely to have a bearing on the continued willingness of viewers and listeners in the devolved nations and the English regions to continue to pay the licence fee.

Our second general thought is one that we have alluded to before and that raises serious issues. It has been put to us, and will be put to us again, that we are 'asking for more': for more resources and, of course, for more air time. It has been put to us that, like the authors of previous BBC Board of Governors reviews, we are trying to persuade the BBC to devote more time and attention to the particular subject that we happen to be interested in. To that suggestion, our responses are (i) that the UK and its future are important topics for the BBC (of all organisations) to take seriously, (ii) that much of what needs to be done can be done without taking up significantly more time (in many cases, the addition of no more than four or five words), (iii) that, while some programmes, such as the main television news bulletins are certainly hard-pressed for

time, many outlets – BBC Online, current-affairs programmes, Breakfast, Today, Newsnight, Radio 5 Live and what used to be called BBC News 24 – clearly are not, (iv) that there are innumerable opportunities for creative broadcasting around the nations and regions and (v) that more will, indeed, sometimes mean more of one thing and therefore less of another. There will, indeed, be occasions when the BBC will need to decide whether it is content to follow a news and current-affairs agenda that is much the same as everyone else’s or whether it wishes to rediscover its own distinctive and more public-service-oriented news and current-affairs agenda. Some of the examples cited in earlier chapters at least raise the question of whether the organisation has got its priorities right.

Our third general thought is that the BBC Trust may wish to consider establishing a sustained, rolling programmes of reviews such as this one, not because we think we have done an especially marvellous job, but because we have the impression that BBC executives, editors and producers are almost invariably so hard-pressed that they have little time and energy – and, for that matter, almost no incentive – to stand back and consider what their sins of commission and omission may be. It may be that this Review should have taken place several years ago.

11 Next steps

Although we believe that the BBC's UK-wide network has not on the whole kept pace with the changes taking place in the new UK, we believe there are grounds for optimism. The BBC has adapted to change in the past. It can do so in the future. It is certainly the case that on previous occasions the BBC's response to reviews like this one has been positive and encouraging. The fact that the current problem is, in our view, very serious certainly does not mean that it cannot be solved provided the will is there to solve it.

The need both to tackle it and to solve it is pressing. On one level, the BBC is largely funded by licence-fee payers across the United Kingdom. Their willingness to go on paying the licence fee will depend in part on whether they feel the UK-wide BBC is delivering an output that adequately reflects the diverse UK of the 21st century. There are already signs of dissatisfaction, if not yet of active disaffection. On another level, arguably a more important one, the BBC clearly has a duty to inform the whole UK about the whole UK. Partly but not only because it is funded by licence-fee payers, the bar for the BBC is set considerably higher than for other broadcasting organisations, let alone for the print media. Our research suggests that, compared with other broadcasters, the BBC already performs well. Our only question is whether, compared with the standards that are set for it by others and that it sets for itself, it performs well enough. In future, we are in no doubt that it can.

In this connection, two roles are crucial: that of the BBC Trust and that of the BBC's Executive Board. The BBC Trust's commitment to taking the nations and regions seriously is evidenced by the commissioning of this Review. It need not have done so. It could have chosen some other subject. It is up to the Trust, if it accepts the broad thrust of our report, to decide how best to use its own authority and influence to further its objectives. The Trust is not an executive body; it cannot – and should not try to – dictate to BBC management precisely how it should respond to our concerns. But the Trust, on behalf of the BBC's audiences and licence-fee payers, is the BBC's sovereign body, with ultimate responsibility in the end for ensuring that the BBC 'has clear priorities' and provides 'distinctive services of the highest quality to all the people and all the communities across the United Kingdom'. The Trust recently highlighted as a top priority for the BBC 'serving audiences in the devolved nations and those in areas [of England] further away from the South-East'. The Trust has available to it a variety of mechanisms for influencing the direction of the BBC's output, the details of which do not concern us here.

There are seven broad areas in which we believe the Trust should, in cooperation with management, exercise its authority. All of them were touched on in Chapter 9.

(1) Priorities

In our view, it should be not merely a nominal priority but an operational priority for the network to direct its attention to the new UK, to ensure that it is accurately reported and to enrich its coverage of it. The precise form that that enrichment takes is a matter for management, but enrichment there should be. It is more than a matter of avoiding mistakes and striving towards greater clarity, though there is that: it is a matter of approaching the coverage of the whole UK in a less metropolitan, less Westminster-centred way. There is ample room for manoeuvre in terms of the BBC's current-affairs and factual output. There is also ample room for manoeuvre on the former News 24 (now BBC News) and online. There is a good deal of room for manoeuvre in extended news bulletins and programmes such as Breakfast, The World at One, PM, The World Tonight and Newsnight. The main television and radio news bulletins are obviously subject to much tighter constraints; but, even there, output editors have to make – and are hired to make – constant decisions about what to include and what to leave out (the 'news agenda' only partially dictates itself), and they might well be encouraged to place news items of UK-wide significance higher on their list of priorities. As must be evident, our concern is with quality, not quantity. A story that is not worth reporting should not be reported just for the sake of fulfilling some quota or being politically correct.

(2) Monitoring

In our view, the Trust should insist that BBC management should monitor its own performance in connection with serving the nations and regions. If change and enrichment are agreed upon as desirable objectives, then there should be some means of determining whether those objectives have or have not been achieved. At the moment, all is surmise, conjecture and anecdote. People within BBC management differ over whether the situation has improved latterly or whether it has actually deteriorated since the brief period when the network 'got religion' in the aftermath of devolution during the late 1990s.

How the monitoring is best carried out is a matter for discussion. Some of the monitoring can be before-the-event and proactive, with editors and producers taking it for granted that they should keep an eye out for emerging UK-wide themes and

significant forthcoming events. But much of it, perhaps most of it, is bound to be after the event. Whenever it takes place, it should probably not be numeric; box-ticking – and, even worse, a box-ticking mentality – are to be avoided at all costs. Some retrospective monitoring could be on an on-going, week-to-week basis. Some could be quarterly or even annually. There would be a lot to be said for involving the national and regional Audience Councils, inviting them to report – possibly in a quite systematic way – on what they perceive to be the network’s successes as well as its failures. And of course the BBC’s own audience research could, and to a limited extent already does, constitute a useful monitoring resource. The BBC’s network output should, we believe, ‘feel’ different in a very few years from the way it does now. It should not be difficult to identify ways of deciding whether any changes in its feel are based on objective reality.

(3) Cooperation and networking

As we said in Chapter 9, our strong impression is that the BBC’s centre in London and the BBC’s outposts in the nations and regions do not cooperate as actively and continuously as they should. It is also our strong impression that BBC journalists in different parts of the country, including specialist journalists, do not engage with each other to the extent that they should. Observing these twin phenomena is, of course, one thing: figuring out what to do about them is quite another. In one form or another, the problem goes back a long way, and it is probably not a question of finding some final and definitive ‘solution’ to the problem but of devising means whereby, despite the rivalries and tensions that will inevitably exist, high levels of cooperation and networking can be constantly promoted. The Trust may wish to invite management for its ideas about how a more interlocked and interconnected BBC could be worked towards. Management is, of course, cognisant of the problem. It was the Director-General himself who quoted the 1932 memorandum relating to the same issue.

(4) Career management

We are quite clear that the problem of the BBC network’s metropolitan mind-set must be addressed. So must the institutional inertia that allows the mind-set to remain set even though the mentality in question and the reality of the increasingly diverse United Kingdom are so much at odds with one another. There is no quick fix, and we do not imagine that new ways of managing the career progression of BBC employees would constitute any such fix. But we find it hard to believe that the London-centred culture that undoubtedly exists at the moment can be displaced by a more outward-looking and broader UK-wide culture unless those who want to be promoted within the BBC – especially to positions of editorial and managerial responsibility – are routinely

expected to acquire experience of life and work outside London, in the extra-metropolitan nations and regions that account for the great majority, roughly 88 per cent, of the UK's population. The BBC's management is already thinking in these terms; there is talk of aspirant BBC staff being required, before they move higher up the ladder, to show a 'passport' demonstrating that they have acquired relevant experience.

We believe the Trust should invite management to devise a more comprehensive career-management programme along these lines. London-based people who are invited to work for a time in, say, Birmingham or Glasgow should no longer regard it, as some do now, as a punishment or demotion; people based outside London who are invited to work for a time in London should no longer regard it, as many do now, as being a promotion or reward. Both types of people should regard it as a natural and desirable – and necessary – part of their career progression. It goes without saying that successful careers in the BBC need neither begin nor end in the Great Wen (as William Cobbett famously called it). As we noted in passing in an earlier chapter, it is the BBC's good fortune to be able to attract to its services an extraordinarily large number of able and talented people. There is no reason to think it would begin to suffer a shortage of such people if it began to transform itself into a less metropolitan and London-focused institution.

(5) Incentives

In our view, people should be positively rewarded for showing a willingness and an ability to add a UK-wide dimension to whatever aspect of the BBC's output they are responsible for. Equally, they should be, if not exactly punished, then at least chided or admonished for making mistakes and failing to take advantage of the available opportunities. These rewards and admonishments can take all kinds of forms – oral, written, monetary, related to people's annual assessments, related to their promotion or non-promotion or whatever – but they should exist and be known to exist. They should be built into people's performance expectations. How that can best be done is clearly a matter for BBC management, but the Trust should encourage the Executive Board to indicate how it can best be done and how it is actually being done.

(6) Driver(s)

We are concerned with outputs rather than inputs, but, if the Trust accepts the broad thrust of this report, it is entitled to ask the Executive Board to indicate which individual

or group of individuals is to have executive responsibility for translating words into action and for starting to bring about the needed changes in the prevailing culture and mind-set. The driver(s) could take a variety of forms, and we indicated some of the possible forms in Chapter 9. It is obviously for management to decide which, in their judgement, the most efficacious form or forms would be. They may have ideas and proposals beyond the ones we have mentioned. But the Trust, if it broadly accepts what we have to say, should clearly take an interest in this aspect of the way forward.

(7) Signals and programmes

It would help if the BBC not only changed but if the changes were audible and visible to listeners and viewers – and also to those who work for the BBC. People should be made aware that change is happening: people in the BBC, people in the English regions, people in the devolved nations, even people in London and the Westminster village. They should sense, even if only semi-consciously and subliminally, that the BBC is wearing a new face, that its UK-related programming is fresher and more innovative. Much will turn on the signals the BBC sends out, to both its staff and its audiences, and on relevant changes in programming and online output. Once again, it is for management to decide what initiatives are the most appropriate in this connection; but, once again, the Trust has a duty to take an interest.

As we made plain at the beginning of this chapter, we are confident that the BBC can adapt to its new environment. The process will inevitably be slow and, to some within the organisation, painful; in the short term, quality is bound to suffer from time to time as traditional work patterns are disrupted. But a process of adaptation, successfully completed, has the potential to enhance the BBC's standing in almost every part of the country. People who feel at the moment that they cannot identify with the BBC will in the future be more likely to feel that they can identify with it. More of them will feel it is their BBC. We would only caution the Trust to avoid any impulse towards micro-management, for the obvious reason that management in detail by an outside and largely lay body is almost certain to be ill-informed and stultifying (ask anyone employed in the public sector). Among its many other advantages, the BBC has the advantage of being a hierarchical organisation, one in which top executive management can exert its influence in a focused and operational way. Fortunately, from the point of view of the present Review, the present Director-General shows every sign of wishing to exert his authority in this way.

Our concern, as we have said repeatedly, is with substance not process, with outputs not inputs. Our hope is that at the end of the day the BBC will be, and be seen to be, an organisation more oriented than it is now to the whole of the new UK. When is

'the end of the day'? We would like to think that progress will be visible and audible – and readable online – in roughly two years' time, that is, by the end of 2010.

List of Appendices

The following appendices are available as separate PDFs at bbc.co.uk/bbctrust

- Appendix A: Cardiff University research
- Appendix B: BMRB research
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