

# New news, old news

An ITC and BSC Research Publication

Ian Hargreaves

James Thomas



*Independent Television Commission*

PUTTING VIEWERS FIRST

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Ian Hargreaves and James Thomas  
Cardiff, October 2002

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## INTRODUCTION

News is to freedom as breath is to life. It is, in Ian Hargreaves' words, "the hard-wiring of our democracy". But access to trustworthy, informative news can no more be taken for granted than clean air. It requires conscious acts of public policy to guarantee it.

This research identifies television as 'the supreme news medium', used and respected by almost everyone; one of the few shared experiences across the whole of British society. Yet news is expensive and audiences, with access to more channels and entertainment, have declined. There is increasing evidence that many, especially the young, are not engaged in the news agendas offered. Broadcasters are tempted to push news to the margins or reduce it to headlines.

"Broadcasters," says Ian Hargreaves, "need to find improved ways of drawing audiences into a broader mix of news and a deeper understanding of it."

This research charts the changing patterns of news provision and consumption and makes recommendations across new as well as old media, for improving access, quality and public engagement. But at the heart of the analysis is the value of broadcast news to our society and political culture and the importance, through the Communications Bill, of supporting investment, easy access and diverse ownership of broadcast news.

Patricia Hodgson  
Chief Executive  
Independent Television Commission

# 1 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was undertaken against a background of great concern about declining levels of voting and, apparently, diminishing levels of attention paid to news. Many have argued that news, including broadcast news, has dumbed down and is failing to provide the information needed by today's citizens.

The findings of the study confirm that there has been a significant decline in audiences for television and radio news and current affairs, along with a well-logged decline in the use of newspapers. Television news is less effective than it used to be at reaching young people and has severe difficulties among some sections of Britain's ethnic minority communities. In the last three years, television news has also weakened its hold on viewers from social groups C2DE.

On the other hand, this research also shows that television is now the supreme news medium, in the sense that it is used and respected by almost everyone. It is the only news medium presently capable of reaching across the whole of British society.

Most people (91%) say they find television a useful source of news, compared with 73% for newspapers, 59% for radio, 15% for the internet and 13% for magazines. The research shows that people are increasingly grazing very large numbers of news sources, rather than regularly relying upon the same source.

It also emerges from the research that 'new' forms of news, such as 24-hour television news, news on the internet and even news by word of mouth, may be playing a larger role as more traditional news genres decline. A study of news usage in homes with multichannel television finds that people are making greater use of continuous news channels than previously thought. Some of those most alienated from mainstream news offerings, such as young Asians, are also exceptionally enthusiastic users of the internet. Among young Asians, 8% regard the internet as their main source of news.

Our news infrastructure, however, risks being undermined by a growing assumption that news is something available free of charge and even free of effort. These circumstances are characterised as the age of 'ambient news'.

This has led to an important shift of attitudes among younger viewers who are more likely than their elders to say that news is something to which attention is paid only when they already know something interesting is going on. This generation of spotlight chasers accepts that it wishes to follow significant news events, but does not believe that it needs to do so by making regular appointments to view television news, or to purchase newspapers. This view is most characteristic among the young and among non-voters.

There is also a sense that broadcasting, for all the choice offered today, does not represent society adequately. Only a minority, 43%, think television news represents all sections of society fairly.

Overall, levels of satisfaction with broadcast news are very high: 95% say they are very or fairly satisfied with the level of choice, which is perhaps not surprising given the eightfold expansion in UK television news alone in the last eight years. Most people (56%), however, do not think that mainstream

commercial broadcasters, such as ITV, should be allowed to cut back on news services, though there is a significant dissenting minority on this point.

There is strong support for existing, or even extended, impartiality and accuracy rules on UK news broadcasters, though members of Britain's ethnic minority communities are more sceptical on this matter. Overall, 97% of people say they are 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with existing impartiality rules. Levels of trust in individual broadcasters vary considerably.

When asked about the content of television news, most people thought there was too much attention given to celebrities and to politicians. Invited to choose a running order from a range of topical stories, however, there was agreement in the importance of 'serious' news stories, about Kashmir and the Post Office, ahead of items on entertainment and sport.

A number of problem areas are identified:

- There is much diminished interest in and knowledge of political news. This contrasts with high levels of interest in and confidence about knowledge of the UK generally and knowledge of the world. Most of these problems, however, are blamed on politics rather than on the media.
- People feel least well-informed about their localities. This may point to an emerging crisis of local news infrastructures and could help explain why so many people find so much politics meaningless or difficult to engage with, because they are not able to judge its effects in their own communities.
- Audiences for television current affairs have sharply declined. Today, only a small minority (16%) regard themselves as regular current affairs viewers. Current affairs seems to have lost its place as regular, appointment to view television. On the other hand, some niche current affairs programmes continue to perform well.

This analysis presents a major challenge to providers of television news. They occupy the commanding heights of the UK news system, which gives them a unique opportunity, but at a time when a growing number of people appear content to skim the surface of headline news, which is all around them. They are interested in issues and things which affect their lives, but not deeply engaged with the formal news agenda as offered.

Broadcasters need to find improved ways of drawing audiences into a broader mix of news and a deeper understanding of it. They should experiment with new methods of analysis, illustration and relevant examples and encourage people to dig deeper through online and interactive television options. National broadcasters need to work, where they can, with regional and local news providers, to think through the total news experience as it presents itself to viewers, listeners and readers. This, for broadcasters, is the challenge of the New News age. Nor is it a challenge which can be left solely to the BBC, both because the BBC needs competition in this public service mission and because the BBC is felt by some sections of the audience to be too close to an 'establishment' view of what the news should be. Recent trends in television news viewing indicate the danger that sections of the audience – especially those in social groups C2DE – can easily be discouraged from following the news by frequent disruptions to schedules, as has been the case on ITV in the late evening since 1999.

Ten specific recommendations are offered, in the context of Parliament's consideration of the Communications Bill. These are:

**Recommendation one:** the Communications Bill's emphasis upon defending the publicly regulated broadcast news sphere, in terms of investment, scheduling and diverse ownership, is correct and should be supported as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

**Recommendation two:** recognising the emerging difficulties in local and regional news markets, OFCOM (the Office of Communications) might be encouraged to undertake an early study of these issues, with a view to making recommendations upon the rules applying to local newspaper mergers, cross-media ownership in local and regional markets, the role of access radio in news, a strategy for local television and a possible regime for public service internet news operations at the local level.

**Recommendation three:** OFCOM will no doubt wish to uphold and take further the ITC's Charter for the Nations and Regions and to establish itself within the nations and regions in a way which ensures that it possesses the knowledge and ability to act effectively at the regional and local level. For example, its proposed regular assessments of the public service landscape might include assessments by region, as well as nationally.

**Recommendation four:** the clause in the Communications Bill awarding to local authorities the power to hold broadcast licences should be removed.

**Recommendation five:** in the interests of achieving greater diversity of television news, to serve a wider range of audience interests, OFCOM could use its freedom to interpret the principle of 'due impartiality' and might be given the power to recommend to the Secretary of State the terms on which particular television and radio services might be authorised to depart from standard rules and codes on issues such as impartiality. Any channel granted such exemption would still be required to conform to any general requirement of British law, such as statutes forbidding incitement to racial hatred, or to secure the protection of children.

**Recommendation six:** the Communications Bill might evolve in a way which makes it possible for OFCOM to be charged with a responsibility to respond to established public demand for a regulated, public service dimension to internet-based services. This might include kite-marked sites, search engines and filtering systems. OFCOM might also be alert to the possibility of other emerging public service opportunities on the internet and other emerging digital communications platforms. Meanwhile, public service broadcasters with internet operations should be required to meet the same standards of impartiality, accuracy and freedom from commercial vested interest online as they do in their broadcast activities.

**Recommendation seven:** the news media should redouble their efforts to engage with Britain's ethnic minorities. This is in their own business and institutional self-interest, but it is not currently happening at a convincing pace. This will require new initiatives in digital radio and television from public service broadcasters and a sustained effort in terms of training and staff development. OFCOM could be asked to take responsibility for producing a regular assessment of cultural and ethnic diversity in UK news media.

**Recommendation eight:** broadcasters should note the negative national and regional effects of news rescheduling on ITV in the last three years. OFCOM, like the ITC, will no doubt use its powers to ensure that a range of high quality news programmes continue to be broadcast in peak-time. Stability and visibility of scheduling is an important condition of success.

**Recommendation nine:** Parliament and the political parties should urgently reconsider those respects in which their media behaviour discourages public interest in politics. These include some modern techniques of political communication, the arcane structure of parliamentary affairs, reflected in an equally arcane parliamentary web presence (though parts of the governmental web presence are of high quality). Rules designed to ensure fairness to different political parties may be damagingly tight, especially around elections, and should be reconsidered by Parliament in close collaboration with the broadcasters, the BBC Governors and OFCOM. Any revised arrangements might be agreed by OFCOM and supervised by it.

**Recommendation ten:** there is also a clear public demand for more occasions in which the public is free to interrogate politicians directly. This is a challenge for the broadcasters, but an example of greater openness should be set from the top, politically, by ensuring that the 2001 election is the last not to feature a proper series of live party leader debates or, better still, debates followed by an opportunity for members of the public to interrogate party leaders. Politicians should beware of thinking that they know better than the broadcasters what will interest people; broadcasters should recognise the importance of their role in ensuring the effective functioning of Britain's democratic procedures and be responsive to the Parliamentary view.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

There is a perceived crisis in journalism, especially political journalism, which is blamed for the decline in levels of political engagement and voter participation in advanced democracies. News providers are accused of ‘dumbing down’ their services and undermining the information and knowledge base needed by healthy democracies.

In the 2001 General Election in Britain, turnout was 59.4%, the lowest since 1918 and the worst since women got the vote; turnout peaked in 1954 at 84%.<sup>1</sup> Among 18-25-year-olds, turnout was even lower (39%) and British Social Attitudes data suggests that by 1999, only one in 10 among this age group considered itself ‘quite’ or ‘very interested’ in politics, compared with one in five in 1986.<sup>2</sup> Among Britain’s ethnic minority communities, turnout among voters of African and Caribbean background was lower than for the population as a whole; among Asians, it was higher, with the Indian community showing particularly high levels of political engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Previous ITC research suggests that this political disengagement is paralleled by a loss of interest in political broadcasting. In its study of the 2001 election, the ITC found that 70% had ‘little or no interest in coverage’ and that 40% admitted switching channels to avoid it. A week before the election, over half of those surveyed (52%) said they had seen ‘hardly any’ election coverage. The apathy continued to the finishing line: on election night, only 4.9m watched the BBC election results programme, down from 11.8m in 1992. For ITV the fall was from 7.73m to 2.7m.<sup>4</sup> Some are in no doubt about the underlying cause of this disengagement. “This is not apathy. This is lack of information,” Jenny Talbot, Chief Executive of the Institute for Citizenship, said in 1998.<sup>5</sup>

In response to these developments, the BBC announced a major review of its political programmes, headed by Sian Kevill, the former editor of *Newsnight*. This project, which is ongoing, set out to test the hypothesis that ‘neither politicians nor the media are truly in step with the political mood of the nation’. Kevill said the BBC feared that “people see politics and political coverage as being mainly about white, middle class, middle-aged men being badgered by other white, middle class, middle-aged men in a secret shared language. It’s a symbol of (an apparent) new political divide: it’s no longer ‘left’ and ‘right,’ it’s now ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and there is a perception that the BBC is part of ‘them’, along with politicians and the rest of the establishment”.<sup>6</sup>

It should be added that none of these anxieties is altogether novel. Asa Briggs noted BBC audience research in the 1950s which found that the 16-19-year-old group “tended to see and hear less news than their elders. And when they saw or heard, they were more ‘desultory’, being prepared to switch attention, if not to switch off, after the headlines”.<sup>7</sup> In this same period, critics like Richard Hoggart

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<sup>1</sup> Electoral Commission, *Voter Engagement and Young People*, July 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Electoral Commission, *Voter Engagement Among Black and Minority Ethnic Communities*, July 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Sancho, J, *Election 2001: Viewers Response to the Television Coverage*, ITC, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Institute for Citizenship/Natwest State of Citizenship in Britain Survey’, MORI 1998, <http://www.mori.com/polls/1998/citizens.shtml>, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Kevill, S, *Beyond the Soundbite: BBC Research into public disillusion with politics*. BBC, February 2002, p.1, foreword.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, A, *A History of Broadcasting*, vol.5, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.72.

were also alert to the challenge provided to the BBC by ITV in terms of appealing to working class viewers.

It should also be pointed out that Kevill's research suggests that today's audiences are disillusioned with mainstream politics and disconnected from it rather than actually disinterested in politics or truly depoliticised. According to Kevill, young people are active signers of petitions and engagers in single issue politics. But they find that a vote for representatives in a legislative assembly every four or five years is an anachronism in a world of fast-moving consumer choices, and when reality television offers voting opportunities in abundance, with rapid and decisive outcomes. Politics, by contrast, appears to be stuck in a pre-consumer age, where you had to place an order and wait months for delivery. This problem is compounded by the growth in news and information flows which people, especially young adults, find difficult and even stressful to manage. "Currently news and political broadcasting lacks a tier of entry points to engage or re-engage people," the research says.<sup>8</sup>

These aspects of Kevill's research are reinforced by similar findings among focus-groups conducted by the Hansard Society, which also found people demanding 'more relevant, local and issue-based information' – between elections as well as during them. Voters often felt that they did not have enough knowledge to make an informed choice, while the media was criticised for reducing politics to the level of soundbites, further encouraging the perception that politics is 'distant' and 'out of touch'.<sup>9</sup>

By way of partial contrast, MORI analysis of the 2001 election suggested that the electorate were as interested in politics as in previous elections, with a stable level of 60% saying they were 'very' or 'fairly' interested in politics since the 1970s. The interest of the young, while less (for instance 49% of the 25-34s were very/fairly interested, compared with 68% of the over 55s) has, according to these figures, also remained stable. MORI also found that the public did not want more information – 50% of people said there was too much coverage on television, while 36% said there was too much in the newspapers. But they did want more information about their local candidates – 55% said there was too little, and about policies, with 44% saying there was too little.<sup>10</sup>

How much are the media to blame for this situation? Of those surveyed by the ITC, 60% declared themselves satisfied with news coverage (up from 53% in 1997), although a still substantial 40% were dissatisfied, with the demand for more local coverage and more about policies again frequently mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence about a structural decline in public interest in news, is also mixed. Total national newspaper circulations have fallen by about 25% in the last 40 years, many local and regional newspapers have closed, others have reduced the scale of their operations. Newspapers also appear to be grappling with a crisis of trust: according to one survey, British newspapers are less trusted than anywhere

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<sup>8</sup> Kevill, S, *Beyond the Soundbite*, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Hansard Society, *None of the Above: Non-voters and the 2001 Election*, 2001, pp.9, 3.

<sup>9a</sup> Worcester, R and Mortimer, R, *Explaining Labour's record landslide*, London, Politico, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Sancho, J, *Election 2001*, pp.24-28.

else in Europe: 49% of people in the EU as a whole saying they trust newspapers, compared with 24% in Britain.<sup>11</sup>

On television, total audiences for the evening news bulletins are down by more than 10% since 1994 and the decline is sharpest among younger people. As BBC Director of News, Richard Sambrook, put it in a speech to the Royal Television Society in December 2001, it used to be the under-25s who did not watch news, then it was the under-35s. "Now news viewing across all channels is down 25% for the under-45s." There was, he said, a 'political divide' between disaffected viewers on the one hand, and the politicians, the establishment and broadcasting on the other. "If we don't do something, in 10 years' time it will be the under-55s and then the under-65s who don't watch the news."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, 'regular, in-depth current affairs series in peak-time have all but disappeared' on British television.<sup>13</sup>

There are similar pressures in the United States and in continental Europe. Audiences to network television peak-time news bulletins in the United States have plummeted, from 90% of the television audience in the 1960s, to 60% in 1993 and 30% by 2000. Satisfaction with network news has also fallen, with the numbers declaring themselves very satisfied declining from 43% in 1994 to 32% in 2000. On a wider front, fewer than half of Americans (45%) said they enjoyed keeping up with the news a lot in 2000, compared with 54% five years earlier.<sup>14</sup>

In the US, regular newspaper readership is also down from 58% in 1993 to 46% in 2000; a trend especially notable among the young, with only 25% of those under 30 claiming to have read the previous day's newspaper in 2002.<sup>15</sup> Americans say they trust journalism less than they used to, regarding it as increasingly superficial or even crooked. Even the source regularly cited as most believable, CNN, persuades only four in 10 Americans that they can believe most or all of what they see on it.<sup>16</sup> The fact that some of these attitudes shifted in a more favourable direction after the calamity of September 11, 2001, is scarcely a comfort to the news media, since at the same time, the American public clearly backed government censorship and direction of the news media, if the authorities judge that to be necessary.<sup>17</sup> The most recent data suggests that public distrust of the media has returned to pre-September 11 levels, with 59% of Americans considering the news media to be politically biased, up 12 points; its rating for professionalism collapsing from 73% the previous November to 49% in August 2002. Meanwhile, CNN's believability rating had dropped five points to 37%.<sup>18</sup>

Precisely comparable data for Europe does not exist, though European studies speak of a newspaper industry with declining sales in general and a 'vanishing

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<sup>11</sup> Eurobarometer poll, March-April 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, M, 'Youth channel beefs up its news output', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Rossiter, H and Candice, P, 'TTC Information Paper 41 (02)', April 2002. Barnett, S and Seymour, E, 'A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South...' *Changing Trends in British Television*, London, Campaign for Quality Journalism, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Centre, 'Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience', June 2000, Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, <http://people-press.org/reports>

<sup>15</sup> Pew Centre, 'Public Habits Little Changed Since September 11', June 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Pew Centre, 'Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audiences', June 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Pew Centre, 'Terror Coverage Boosts News Media Image: But Military Censorship Backed', November 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Pew Centre, 'News Media's Improved Image Proves Short-Lived', August 2002, Pew Centre, 'Tough Job of Communicating with Voters', February 2000.

young reader' in particular.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, voter turnout across established democracies in Europe and beyond saw a sharp fall of an average of about 7% in the 1990s, after a period of relative stability since the 1950s. Countries that registered decline in turnout included France, Germany the Netherlands and Japan. Meanwhile, voting levels in European elections have fallen over the last 20 years from two-thirds to just under half of all European citizens in 1999.<sup>20</sup>

The recent rise of anti-party and extremist parties across Europe has also provided graphic illustration of the level of popular disengagement with existing political systems. The worrying phenomenon of the 'vanishing voter' has again been particularly noticeable among the young, with younger Europeans, like their British and American counterparts, being consistently less likely to vote. One comparative study of 22 countries found that in every nation except one (Australia, which has compulsory voting), levels of political participation declined with age, with an average of just 55% of the under-25s voting, compared with 88% of the late middle-aged. A recent report comparing youth turnout across 15 western European countries found that, despite variations, electoral participation was lowest among the under-30s, countries with notable generation gaps in participation included France, Finland and Ireland.<sup>21</sup>

This perceived European and even worldwide crisis of democracy has been accompanied by profound changes in the European media landscape over the last 20 years. Deregulation, commercialisation and growing adherence to free market ideas have created conditions in which public service broadcasters have seen their audience shares fall, even collapse in some areas like southern Europe (in Greece, for instance, the audience share for public channels dropped from 62% to 8% in five years from 1989-1996).<sup>22</sup> The imminent demise of European public broadcasting – 'a corpse on leave' according to one study of its 'decline and fall'<sup>23</sup> – has been frequently predicted.

So too has 'the end of the mass audience'<sup>24</sup> for television news with the growth of niche channels, pressures to reschedule news in favour of increasing numbers of entertainment programmes, and the impact of commercialisation on the quality and quantity of political and international news coverage.<sup>25</sup> The evidence for this is far from conclusive. But, taken alongside the emergence of 'a chronic state of partial civil war'<sup>26</sup> between broadcasters and politicians, some fear the existence of, and connection between, two democratic crises – the growth of electoral disengagement and the declining standards and popular appeal of western news media.

It is against this background that the UK Government is committed to a radical overhaul of the legislation governing the communications sector. The 2002 Communications Bill is an ambitious piece of legislation which aims to maximise competitive pressures on communications companies (for example, by lifting foreign ownership restrictions on UK broadcasting), while ensuring that citizens'

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<sup>19</sup> Lauf, E, 'The Vanishing Young Reader: SocioDeterminants of Newspaper Use as a Source of Political Information in Europe 1980-98', *European Journal of Communication*, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Norris, P, *Democratic Phoenix: Political Activism Worldwide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; S. Pharr and R. Putnam, *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Norris, P, *ibid*, chapter 5; International IDEA, *Youth Voter Participation*, Stockholm, International IDEA, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, K, 'Demise or Renewal? The dilemma of public service broadcasting in western Europe', in M. Bromley (ed.), *No News is Bad News: Radio Television and the Public*, London, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Tracey, M, *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, Oxford, OUP, 1998, p.33.

<sup>24</sup> Neuman, R, *The Future of the Mass Audience*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Norris, P, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Blumler, J and Gurevitch, M, *The Crisis of Public Communication*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.215.

interests in public service broadcasting and other valued services are fully protected or enhanced. The Government says that it is “essential to retain sufficient safeguards to secure a plurality of voice and a diversity of services across our media,”<sup>27</sup> and that “public service broadcasting has as secure a place in the broadcasting ecology of the future as it has had in the past.”<sup>28</sup> The Bill proposes the creation of a single regulatory body, OFCOM, to subsume the activities of five existing regulators, including the bodies responsible for regulating commercial television (the Independent Television Commission) and commercial radio (the Radio Authority).

Specifically with regard to news, the Bill proposes steps designed to ensure that ‘high quality, impartial news is available to all (television) viewers.’ Obligations to provide ‘high quality domestic and international news at intervals throughout the day and in peak-viewing hours... with due accuracy and impartiality’<sup>29</sup> are applied to the BBC, Channel 3, Channel 4, and Channel 5. In order to buttress this requirement, and to protect it against undesired effects of potential ownership changes, the nominated news provider system which ensures that ITV contracts for its news services only with a provider acceptable to OFCOM can be extended to Channel 5, if the latter ‘has gained a significant share of the free-to-air audience’. It is also proposed to retain tight ownership restrictions on the nominated news provider (currently ITN), which have the effect of preventing the ITV companies owning their news provider outright. OFCOM will also have powers to ensure that levels of investment in news are sufficient to meet these quality objectives.

The aim of this policy is to ensure that at least three UK television news providers, the BBC, ITN and Sky, continue to compete with each other and that these broadcasters invest to the degree necessary to provide high-quality services. There are also requirements designed to ensure that broadcasters, especially ITV, continue to reflect the character of the UK’s nations and regions in their news and current affairs programmes.

Regulatory requirements on commercial radio news are less stringent, but will be tightened up if wording in the draft bill becomes law. Radio news is already bound by the requirement to be accurate and impartial. The Bill also proposes a new duty on OFCOM to ‘promote and protect the local content and character of local radio’. It gives the Secretary of State the power to introduce by order, a new tier of ‘very local’ radio, to be known as ‘access radio’,<sup>30</sup> as well as providing similar powers to authorise the creation of local television services. In a further move aimed at encouraging investment in local information services, the Bill removes the current restrictions on local authorities holding broadcasting licences, provided these are used ‘to provide information services to the communities they represent’.<sup>31</sup>

It was with these points in mind that that the ITC, in February 2002, established the current research initiative on news and current affairs and appointed

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<sup>27</sup> Draft Communications Bill – the policy, p.3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p.46.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p.50.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid p.56.

Professor Ian Hargreaves, director of the Centre for Journalism Studies at Cardiff University, as its Research Fellow. Professor Hargreaves is a former director of News and Current Affairs at the BBC, former editor of the *Independent* and Deputy Editor of the *Financial Times*. As this project was nearing completion, it was announced that Professor Hargreaves will be joining the board of OFCOM. He has worked on the project with Dr James Thomas, a research associate also based at Cardiff. Richard Ayre, a former deputy chief executive of BBC News, has also been involved in an advisory capacity. Significant assistance in the shaping and execution of the research has been provided by the ITC and by the Broadcasting Standards Commission. The aims of the research project are to:

- Assess the current health of UK television news services, in the context of services provided in radio, new media, newspapers and magazines.
- Describe and analyse current patterns of news consumption.
- Analyse the views of different sections of the news audience, paying particular attention to the views and needs of younger people, ethnic minorities and those who did not vote in the last general election.
- Consider the regulatory issues relevant to news raised in the Bill, such as the requirement for broadcast news to be impartial, accurate and relevant nationally, locally and regionally.
- Make recommendations relevant to the Bill and the future activities of OFCOM, as the Bill comes before Parliament for consideration.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied in this study has four elements:

- a. **A desk review of existing research.** As well as viewing published research from recent years, approaches were made to the main UK broadcast news organisations with the request that they share in-house research with the current project. We are very grateful that, in different ways, almost all of those to whom this request was made obliged. Some of this material included market research data of proprietary value to the organisation which had commissioned it and cannot be directly referred to here. All of it, however, added to our understanding of the strategies being pursued by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky and we are grateful for their help.
- b. **A quantitative survey of UK adults** conducted by Ipsos RSL, based upon the Quest Panel, which has been extensively used in previous broadcast research. The panel delivers a nationally representative sample of 4,000 adults over the age of 16. These adults were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which was completed by respondents in their home in early July 2002. In order to achieve statistically valid conclusions about the views of ethnic minority groups, the sample was boosted through additional recruitment in areas of high ethnic minority population. Those recruited in this way similarly filled out the questionnaire in their homes over the same period. Using the existing panel and this *ad hoc* boost generated a total of 5,600 responses, of which 5,014 were white, 244 from the Asian subcontinent, 100 black and 242 other ethnic minorities.
- c. **A qualitative focus-group study conducted by Broadcast Consultancy.** This involved 16 focus-groups, of which eight were composed of members representative of the population as a whole and eight comprised members of ethnic minority groups (four Afro-Caribbean, four Asian). The total number of individuals involved was about 115. The groups were conducted in July 2002 in London, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Bristol, Cardiff, Manchester and Leicester. Some were single-gender, some mixed. All involved grouping by age and by socio-economic classification. Those involved were also asked to keep a news viewing diary over a period of at least a week, in order to record the sources of news used, the types of stories encountered and an assessment of the quality and usefulness of the news received.
- d. **Content analysis.** Dr Thomas gathered and sampled a wide range of UK television news output for a 10-week period from late May to early July 2002, with the primary aim of testing the claim that television news is now adopting a more ‘tabloid’ or ‘downmarket’ agenda and neglecting traditional areas of interest, such as politics and international affairs.
- e. **Analysis of Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB) audience data** to explore key changes in news and current affairs consumption since 1994.

## 4 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### a. Academic

Although complicated and with many different, and sometimes mutually incompatible strands, the debate about journalism, democracy and political communication in Britain, Europe and America is framed by a relatively simple divide: between pessimists and optimists.

Pessimists argue that we are living through a ‘crisis’ of political journalism, in the words of Blumler and Gurevitch, in which the ‘death of news’ is in danger of toppling the democratic edifice. By contrast, the optimists suggest we are living in a media environment in which we, as informed citizens, have ‘never had it so good’.<sup>32</sup> Running across all ‘pessimistic’ approaches is the belief that the media is responsible to some degree for growing public disenchantment with the democratic system, ignorance, and mistrust of government. This crisis is held to exist specifically in Britain,<sup>33</sup> extending more generally to Europe,<sup>34</sup> but it is a problem most vividly associated with the United States.<sup>35</sup> As such, those expressing concern join others anxious about ‘dumbing down’, tabloidisation, Americanisation, the rise of infotainment and the decline of public service broadcasting in general and serious political reporting in particular.

Quite what tabloidisation actually means is debatable. Sparks describes a ‘tabloid’ news outlet as one that devotes ‘relatively little attention to politics, economics and society and relatively much to diversions like sports, scandal and entertainment’.<sup>36</sup> Hence Franklin refers to the growth of ‘newszak’ in which tabloids, broadsheets and television have all shifted downmarket, to produce a situation in which: “Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities to soap stars, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by newszak values; ‘infotainment’ is rampant.”<sup>37</sup>

More specifically in relation to British politics (and a lot of these discussions are focused largely on politics) Barnett and Gaber detect a series of pressures “leading inexorably towards a more conformist, less critical reporting environment,” and “the diminution of an informed, coherent and critical approach to reporting politics”. Despite conceding that there is “still a fairly

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<sup>32</sup> Blumler, J and Gurevitch, M, *The Crisis of Public Communication*, Pavlik, J, ‘New media and news: implications for the future of journalism’, *Media and Society*, 1, 1, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Franklin, B, *Packaging Politics*, London, Arnold, 1994, and *Newszak and News Media*, London, Arnold 1997; Barnett, S and Gaber, I, *Westminster Tales: the Twenty-First Century Crisis in British Political Journalism*, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Blumler, J and Gurevitch, M, *The Crisis of Public Communication*, 1995; Katz, E, ‘And deliver us from segmentation’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1996, 546; Bourdieu, P, *On Television and Journalism*, London, Pluto, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> see, among many, Fallows, J, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*, New York, Pantheon News, 1996. Davtrich, K and Hartley, T, *How the News Media Fail American Voters: Causes Consequences, Remedies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999; Rosenblum, M, *Who Stole the News*, New York, Wiley, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> Sparks C and Tulloch J, *Tabloid Tales*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p.10.

<sup>37</sup> Franklin, B, *Newszak and News Media*, 1997, 4.

healthy fourth estate”, their view that “its health is in decline and we can see no respite... the crisis in 21st century political journalism has already begun”.<sup>38</sup>

Views vary as to the causes of this malaise. Economic pressures and changing consumer preoccupations may be driving a move down market; deregulation may be sanctioning such a move. Globalisation may be replacing civic values with business values. Political journalism may have become too self-enclosed, too adversarial, too manipulated by spin. Barnett and Gaber identify structural pressures of greater power of government sources, changes in media ownership, increased competition and the growth of media outlets, and changes in reporting culture, all of them creating pressures for a more conformist media.

Swimming against this tide of pessimism have been a number of important studies. McNair<sup>39</sup> offers the most concerted alternative approach, dismissing accusations of dumbing down, and the crisis of communication as “as old as democracy itself,” and instead suggesting that, while far from perfect, at the turn of the century: “the political public sphere was both bigger (in quantitative terms) and better (qualitatively) than at any previous period in capitalism’s cultural history. Whether measured by the decline of journalistic deference towards political elites, the quantity of political information in circulation; or the ease of access to that information which proliferating media channels provided for the population as a whole (regardless of whether or not they chose to access it), turn of the millennium capitalism was a very different beast from the disenfranchised mass ignorance of just a hundred years ago.”<sup>40</sup>

For Pippa Norris, far from the contemporary European media causing a ‘media malaise’ of misinformed citizenry, there is a positive link between civic engagement and news consumption – ie those who watch more television news, read more papers and surf the net were consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory, creating a ‘virtuous circle’ of informed, active citizens.<sup>41</sup>

The proof of the pudding of this debate, as Kes Brants writes, is in the empirical evidence and here the picture seems, on balance, to favour the ‘optimists’. Looking at the European position, there are numerous studies which suggest that public service broadcasting (including effectively regulated commercial broadcasters) remains a dominant force in western Europe. For example, information accounted for 32% of mean programme output on Nordic television channels between 1988 and 1995. While the picture varies from country to country, and indeed from study to study, Brants suggests that the celebrity staple diet of tabloid television news visible in American local news remains ‘practically absent in Europe, including most private channels, despite a trend towards the popularisation of news.’<sup>42</sup> Although there are certainly distinctively lowbrow forms of television in, say, Italy and France, there is also still in both these countries a continuing array of public service broadcasting institutions, as well as some evidence of effective innovation in the delivery of news to diverse audiences: France’s M6 is an example often cited.

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<sup>38</sup> Barnett, S and Gaber, I, *Westminster Tales*, pp.2, 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> McNair, B, *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Sphere*, London, Routledge, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> McNair, B, ‘Journalism and Democracy in Contemporary Britain’ in Kuhn, M and Neveu, E, *Political Journalism: New Challenges, New Practices*, London, Routledge, 2002, p.195.

<sup>41</sup> Norris, P, *A Virtuous Circle*.

<sup>42</sup> Brants, K, ‘Who’s Afraid of Infotainment’, *Journal of Communication*, 13, 3, 1998, 323; Pfetsch, B, ‘Convergence through Privatisation? Changing Media Environments and Televised Politics in Germany’, *European Journal of Communication*, 8, 425-50, 1996.

Meanwhile, European television has not succumbed to the predicted diet of American imports. The prophetic 1980s vision of ‘wall-to-wall *Dallas*’ is based on both a caricature of a highly diverse American television system that embraces everything from 24-hour news to *The Simpsons*, and exaggerates the extent to which European media have become ‘Americanised’. Leading television channels in Europe import less than a third of their programmes; foreign, even American content cannot compete with the popularity of home-made products, and domestic products are supported by European governments and their regulators. All this suggests, according to James Curran, that “the exclusion of news and political comment from peak-time television – and consequent disenfranchisement of the public – is still primarily an American network rather than European phenomenon”.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, even this negative assessment of US trends has to be qualified by the fact that the decline in viewing of American network news has been accompanied by an increase in viewing to rolling television news channels.<sup>44</sup>

While debates continue about the quality of the news services being offered, what seems in no doubt is the enormous quantitative expansion of news, both on television and more broadly. Norris, for example, found that between 1971 and 1996 the amount of news and current affairs broadcasting on public service television in the 20 OECD countries for which data exists almost tripled, from 1,168 hours per week to 3,042 hours. Fifteen countries showed increases, most notably Italy, Poland and Turkey, while four showed falls (Belgium, France, Spain and Norway). Meanwhile, access to the internet has grown so that by the late 1990s more than a fifth of all Europeans were online. Formats have diversified beyond the standard flagship evening news programmes and, to quote Norris, “it has become easier to bump into the news, almost accidentally, than ever before”.<sup>45</sup>

Although Britain did, in the 1980s, pursue a distinctively liberalising and deregulatory course in the economy as a whole, it stopped well short of breaking from this European pattern of strong preference for domestic broadcasters, led by a BBC which accounts for over 40% of all UK broadcasting. The BBC estimates that the supply of television news in 1997 was about 243 hours a week, compared with about 30 hours in 1986, an eightfold increase. Assessments of the trend in quality are, inevitably, more mixed, but, on balance, it is difficult to deny that British television still supplies a broadly serious news agenda, albeit one that is devoting rather less space to politics and international news (in some studies) and more to crime than in the past.

Brian Winston,<sup>46</sup> for instance, finds that “the television news services reflected the broadsheet news agenda in 1975 and, arguably with the one exception of Channel 5, still did in 2001”. Television, he argued “cannot be successfully charged with tabloidisation”. Winston did, however, find a greater level of crime and human interest stories, and a reduction in the amount of international coverage and space devoted to politics. Similar findings about the decline of

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<sup>43</sup> Curran, J, *Media and Power*, London, Routledge, 2002, p.192.

<sup>44</sup> Pew Centre, ‘Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience’, June 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Norris, P, *Virtuous Circle*, p.15.

<sup>46</sup> Winston, B, ‘Towards Tabloidization? Glasgow Revisited, 1975-2001’, *Journalism Studies*, 1, 2002, pp.18,9.

international and political coverage are evident in other recent studies, such as that by Jackie Harrison.<sup>47</sup> An organisation funded by international development charities and which campaigns for better international factual programming on British television, 3WE, suggests that outside the domain of news, entertainment shows with an international focus, such as holiday programmes, music, clubbing and celebrities, have replaced serious factual programming about developing countries.<sup>48</sup>

Studies focused purely upon news programmes tell a somewhat different story. Barnett *et al*, in their study of changing trends in television news from 1975 to 1999 found, despite fluctuations, a relatively stable level of foreign news on BBC and ITV early evening news of around 20-25%, an increase in foreign news coverage on the BBC 9 o'clock news from 24-42%, and a stable level of around 28% on the late evening ITV news. However, they did find that airtime devoted to politics was down by as much as a half, balanced by an increase in space devoted to social policy, as well as some increase in space devoted to sport and crime. Their overall conclusion is that 'viewers on the mass audience channels still have access to serious coverage of important domestic and foreign issues alongside a reasonable proportion of lighter, more tabloid issues'. They did, however, find some ground for concern in the rise of consumer stories and sports, alongside the decline in political coverage.<sup>49</sup>

Other studies support this picture. One study for 1996/97 found that international coverage accounted for around 25% of Channel 4's coverage, 20% for BBC and 16% for ITV; crime was given 13-15% on the three channels, while policy issues (defined as NHS, education, social security, social services, housing, political issues) were accorded 34% on BBC1, 26.5% on ITV and 38% on Channel 4.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, McNair, in a 1996 study of two weeks' output, found that there were more than 700 items of news devoted to the political news agenda, with over 50% of them reporting policy rather than process. Norris, similarly, found extensive coverage of the European Union from both ITV and BBC, compared with European competitors, although more generally discovered that public service television (which she defines as publicly owned) devoted more space to the subject than commercial television.<sup>51</sup>

## **b. Recent research by broadcasters and official bodies**

There has been much research in the last couple of years from a range of bodies concerned to throw light upon the apparent decline in political engagement and the possible link between that and changes in the news media. Other recent work, for example by the ITC, has assembled data relevant to other questions posed in this research project. The conclusions of these numerous publications which are directly relevant to the current study can be grouped into half a dozen main themes, as follows:

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<sup>47</sup> Harrison, J, 'The diversification of British TV news: a cause for comfort or concern', paper delivered at the "What's News" Symposium, Syracuse, April 2002.

<sup>48</sup> 3WE, 'Back to Reality', Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project, 2002, <http://www.epolitix.com/forum/3WE.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Barnett S, Seymour E. and Gaber I, *From Callaghan to Kosovo: Changing Trends in British Television News 1975-1999*, ITC 2000.

<sup>50</sup> McLachlan, S, 'Who's Afraid of the News Bunny?: The Changing Face of the Television Evening News Broadcast', Loughborough University Working paper No.3, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> McNair, B, *Journalism and Democracy*; Norris, P, *Virtuous Circle*.

- **Politics is in crisis and establishments are under pressure.** A declining level of voter participation is not the only symptom of public disengagement. Research suggests that only 16% of people today are strongly attached to a party<sup>52</sup> and that only 29% thought the 2001 election involved “issues relevant to me”. In research after that election, some advocated a special election news channel, in order to keep election news off the main channels. “What viewers want is more involvement of ordinary people in the political arena, a focus on policies and straight answers to questions from the politicians,” says one ITC report.

There is also evidence of damaging levels of voter ignorance. One-fifth of voters say they didn’t vote in the 2001 election because of “lack of knowledge”<sup>53</sup> and only 61% could identify the fact that Gordon Brown is Chancellor of the Exchequer. Recent research has also suggested ‘strikingly’ large information deficits among white working class groups in understanding the post-September 11 international crisis and a media that failed to satisfy the need for background or basic information.<sup>54</sup> Politics is also perceived to be short of recognisable notable figures, whether as role models, heroes or merely celebrities (only Mo Mowlam and Bob Geldof break through this particular perception barrier in the Kevill research) at a time when television seems keener than ever on celebrities. Some research, however, suggests a public backlash against television’s obsession with celebrity; one survey claims that more people resent the amount of American material on television than resent the amount of politics.<sup>55</sup>

- **Television: the problem or the solution?** Research for the ITC, the National Consumer Council and others, confirms that television is the supreme source of political news<sup>56</sup> and that television news is the single television genre viewers most value. Unlike other news media, such as radio and newspapers, television is not a medium in decline in terms of its value as a news source. Current affairs, by contrast, is considered to be a television genre in crisis, with no regular series left in peak-time,<sup>57</sup> resulting in a growing shortage of trained current affairs producers for the strands that do exist. The broadcasters’ decisions to de-emphasise current affairs seems to be at odds with some opinion research which suggests the public values highly documentary, current affairs and factual programming, if not quite so highly as news itself.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, **24-hour news** has established itself, but with a very low audience share (1.2%) and a weekly reach of five to six million in 2001, although this has risen quite significantly over the last year to a current weekly reach of eight million, partly prompted by the September 11 effect.<sup>59</sup> These new channels, however, are “not appealing to a significantly different profile,” according to the ITC<sup>60</sup> and news, overall, is less watched in multichannel homes than in those with only five channels.<sup>61</sup> Multichannel television is now

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<sup>52</sup> Sancho J, *Election 2001*.

<sup>53</sup> BBC, ‘The News Usage and Attitude Study and the News Clusters’, research for news review, 2002.

<sup>54</sup> BSC, *After September 11: TV News and Transnational Audiences*, September 2002.

<sup>55</sup> MORI/Radio Times ‘View of the Nation Television Survey’, August 2001.

<sup>56</sup> BBC, ‘The News Usage and Attitude Study and the News Clusters’; National Consumers Council, *Tuning in to Consumers, Public Service Broadcasting in the Digital Age*, December 1999; ITC, *The Public’s View 2001*, Sancho, J, *Election 2001*.

<sup>57</sup> Sancho, J, *Election 2001*.

<sup>58</sup> MORI/Radio Times ‘View of the Nation Television Survey’, MORI, August 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Sancho J, *Election 2001*; ITC submission to the Lambert Inquiry into BBC News 24, 2002.

<sup>60</sup> ITC submission to the Lambert Inquiry.

<sup>61</sup> ITC, ‘Nations and Regions’ seminar, Cardiff, June 2002.

experienced in more than half of all UK homes. Within digital homes, interactive television use is growing, but teletext and video recorder use are declining.<sup>62</sup>

In recent years, **scheduling decisions** have had a significant impact upon television news audiences. ITV's decision in March 1999 to abandon its 10 o'clock and early evening news slots (decisions later partly reversed) was opposed by only 30% of those asked,<sup>63</sup> but has resulted in a significant weakening of ITV's competitive position in news and a shift in the composition of its news audience in the direction of women and C2DEs. The changes have also resulted in sharp falls for many ITV early evening regional news programmes, which are, as a result, lagging well behind their BBC rivals.<sup>64</sup> ITV's own research, however, suggests that ITV viewers favour a different approach, in which 'culture and entertainment news is as important as politics and business'. The idea is to de-emphasise 'meeting rooms, authority figures and politicians' and to focus upon the 'humanity of events not the history'.<sup>65</sup> ITV and BBC market research both suggest that when it comes to politics, the audience is interested in 'outcomes not processes'. An admired example is *Comic Relief*, which shows action against poverty and then seeks viewer engagement for action.

- **Local missing link.** The turn-off from politics and political news may be associated with a loss of contact with local news in general: a 'missing link' in voter/citizen comprehension.<sup>66</sup> Some 72% know 'little' or 'hardly anything' about their local council, and this is true of 90% of the young.<sup>67</sup> Television appears to be a diminishing influence in local news.<sup>68</sup> Local was defined by people in one ITC survey as anything within a radius of 12.9 miles.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, television viewers value their regional programmes and especially their regional news very highly, according to recent ITC/BSC citizens' juries and survey work. Eighty-nine per cent think that ITV should be obliged to show regional programming in peak-time and news is the most valued genre in regional programming. These sentiments are held with exceptional strength in Scotland and Wales. There was strong support for more and better local radio and for more truly local television services. Alongside this research, the ITC published its Charter for Nations and Regions.<sup>70</sup>

- **The elusive young.** One member of a focus-group in the BBC Kevill project complained that current news provision required the viewer to leap from the children's news programme *Newsround* to *Newsnight* in one go. Identification of this gap in service has prompted the BBC to initiate a search for new programming ideas to engage young adults with political news and discussion. Within the news industry, however, there is some scepticism about the feasibility of skewing any news audience towards the young: only 30% of the *Newsround* audience are under 16. The young, also, are not a homogenous group.

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<sup>62</sup> ITC submission to the Lambert Inquiry; ITC, 'Nations and Regions' seminar, Cardiff, June 2002.

<sup>63</sup> MORI/ITC, 'News at 10 Survey', October 1998.

<sup>64</sup> Atwal, K., 'Overview of Early Evening Regional News Services', ITC internal paper, February 2002.

<sup>65</sup> ITN, 'A New Approach', internal paper, July 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Kevill, S, *Beyond the Soundbite: BBC Research into public disillusion with politics*. BBC, February 2002, p.1, foreword.

<sup>67</sup> 'Institute for Citizenship/Natwest State of Citizenship in Britain Survey', MORI, 1998.

<sup>68</sup> ITC, *The Public's View 2001*.

<sup>69</sup> Atwal, K, 'Regional News Monitor', ITC internal paper, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Sancho, J, *Pride of Place: What Viewers Want from Regional Television*, ITC, July 2002 and *Public Service Broadcasting: What Viewers Want*, ITC, January 2001.

Only 21% of them form part of the most negative group identified in the Kevill studies as the 'rejecters' of political news.<sup>71</sup> The young do, however, favour entertainment and sports news and disfavour news about business and politics more than their elders. The Electoral Commission's work on the 2001 General Election expressed surprise that youth music and style magazines paid almost no attention to electoral politics.<sup>72</sup> One mooted possible response by broadcasters is to find presenters with more youth appeal, like Louis Theroux, or the presenting team of Channel 4's *RI:SE*, who are more irreverent or inclined to focus upon the human aspects of political stories. Perhaps a more solid conclusion is the Electoral Commission report's observation that if political interest is to revive, politics must become 'a mutually dependent partnership, constantly managed over time'.

- **The internet:** is popular with the young and should be good for politics, but the young, contrary to many claims, don't find it easy to use and it's easier to get national and global information than it is to pick up local news. Work for the BSC and the Hansard Society has highlighted the role of search engines, and the extent to which they might be required to guide people to more reliable information through some kind of kite-marking system.<sup>73</sup>

The BBC is trusted more than newspaper-based web sites by users, but Parliament's web site is judged guilty of replicating its consumer-unfriendly culture and structures. On balance, the internet is at present 'an underdeveloped and disorganised information source'. Nor are individual parliamentarians up to speed with the online world: only 39% of MPs have a web site, 33% of MSPs, 18% of members of the NI Assembly and 12% of the Welsh Assembly.<sup>74</sup>

At present, 44% of the population have internet access at home and 24% at work.<sup>75</sup> Geographically, the internet is less well established in Wales, Northern Ireland and northern England than in London and the south-east.<sup>76</sup> Among users of the internet, news ranks sixth as a subject of exploration.<sup>77</sup> The internet is also more widely available to and used by ABC1s than by C2DEs, raising the issue of the so-called 'digital divide'.

- **Trust:** MORI and ITN data shows clearly that journalists as a group are not highly trusted as truthful sources of information, but that television newscasters are. Television brands are, on the whole, also quite or very well trusted.<sup>78</sup> According to one survey, television news is trusted to tell the truth by 85%.<sup>79</sup> An NCC survey puts the figure at 49%, versus 12% for newspapers and radio, and 1% for the internet. In a specialised area like science communication, only 14% trust the news media to tell the truth versus academics (60%) and government scientists (30%). But in this area, the internet is emerging as a force to be reckoned with.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> BBC, 'The News Usage and Attitude Study and the News Clusters', research for news review, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Electoral Commission, *Voter Engagement and Young People*, July 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Coleman, S, Griffiths B, and Simmons, E, *Digital Jury – the final verdict*, BSC/Hansard Society, June 2002.

<sup>74</sup> Hansard Society, *Technology: Enhancing Representative Democracy in the UK*, July 2002.

<sup>75</sup> MORI – 'KPMG Consulting e-government Survey', May 2002.

<sup>76</sup> ITC, *The Public's View 2001*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> MORI, 'Trust in Politicians, Civil Servants etc', March 2002.

<sup>79</sup> MORI/Radio Times, 'View of the Nation Television Survey', August 2001.

<sup>80</sup> Hargreaves, I, Lewis, J and Speers, T, 'Science, the Public and the Media' project, Interim Report, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. ESRC, 2002.

- **Ethnic minorities:** there is very little published research in this area, but there are clear indications that ethnic minorities feel less well served by the broadcast news system than white people and that, as a result, they are among the heaviest users of multichannel television. Unpublished industry research suggests that Asians are the heaviest users of multichannel television (55% versus 38% white and 57% black); Black people use BBC and ITV less, but they like Channel 4 and Channel 5. Black people also like CNN. On radio, Asians like Sunrise; Afro-Caribbeans like Kiss and Capital. Both groups are critical of the BBC for its inadequate diversity on-air but they don't doubt BBC independence any more than any other group.

They do, however, question the fairness of the BBC's foreign reporting. Research commissioned by the BBC in 1995 for its 'People and Programmes' review argued that "a significant part of the disillusion blacks and Asians feel with the BBC stems not merely from our news programmes but also from the perception that the BBC is an integral part of the white establishment which does not have their interests at heart".<sup>81</sup> A number of studies, some commissioned by the broadcasters and by the ITC/BSC, have suggested that ethnic minority representation on mainstream television is still seen by them as consisting mainly of predominantly negative stereotypes or one-dimensional representations, and of failing to reflect the multicultural nature of contemporary Britain.<sup>82</sup>

As Clive Jones, the senior Carlton Communications executive, put it in 1999: "television is still white Anglo-Saxon, Britain is not".<sup>83</sup> Further confirmation of this comes in the still small number of journalists drawn from ethnic minority backgrounds, with 96% of a 2002 survey of the profession being white, 1% black and 1% Asian.<sup>84</sup>

Recent research has also pointed to 'a deep lack of trust' among British Muslims in British, as well as American television news in the aftermath of September 11, with perceptions of sensationalised coverage that lacked diversity and 'perceived anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bias'.<sup>85</sup> Examples cited by British Muslims included the accusation that British television news coverage followed American values too closely, that it involved censorship about civilian casualties in Afghanistan and that the availability of other sources of information, such as the Arabic channel Al Jazeera, had provided a direct and damaging point of comparison for western broadcasters.

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<sup>81</sup> BBC, *People and Programmes*, 1995, p.168.

<sup>82</sup> Srebreny, A, *Include Me In: Rethinking Ethnicity on Television*, BSC, 1999.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Morley, D, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, London, Routledge, 2000, p.121.

<sup>84</sup> Journalism Training Forum, *Journalists at Work*, Publishing Industry National Training Organisation and Skillset, 2002.

<sup>85</sup> BSC, *After September 11: TV News and Transnational Audiences*.

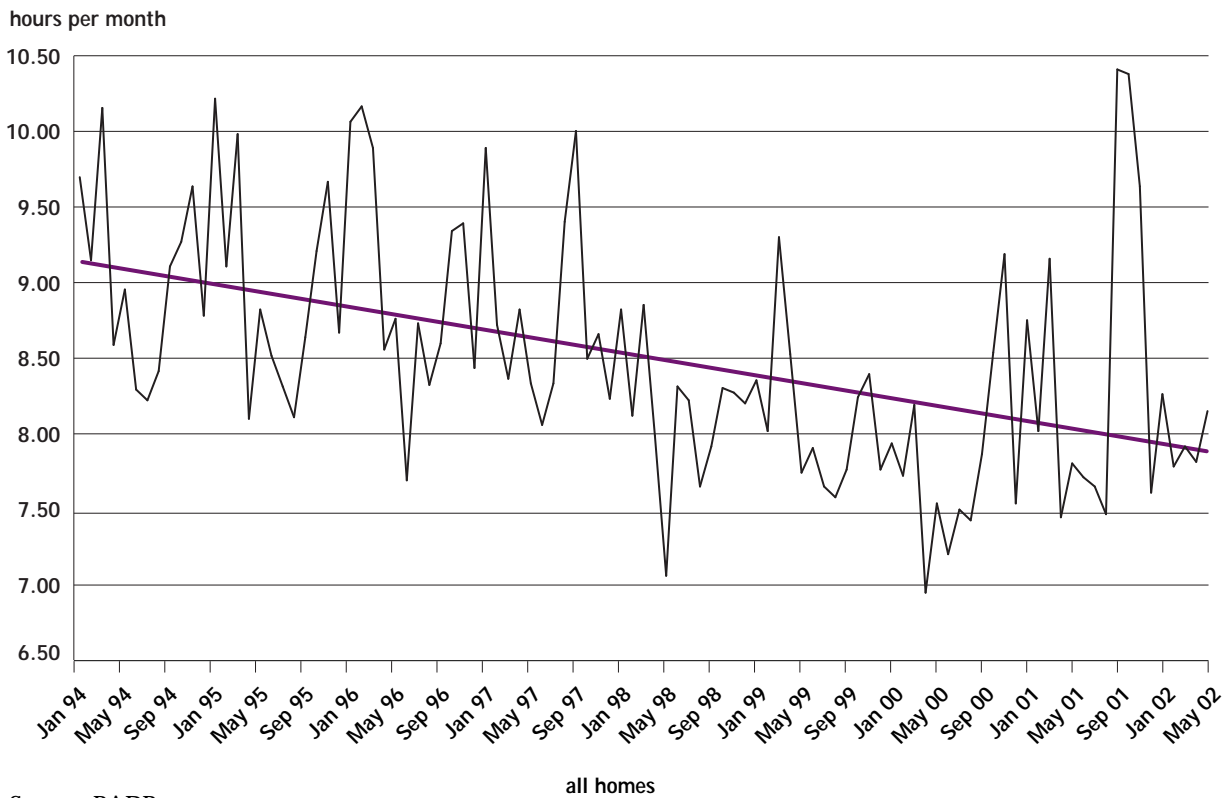
# 5 VIEWING FIGURES

Analysis of BARB data highlights a number of trends which give cause for concern. Figures on news viewing patterns were distorted by the extraordinary events of September 11 2001, which produced a large increase in consumption of all forms of news. There is still room for debate about the extent to which prior trends have now reasserted themselves. The figures presented here are, where relevant, updated up to the early summer of 2002.

## a. National television news consumption is down (hours per month, all homes)

Since 1994, the overall level of television national news consumption has fallen by 5.6% from an average of 9 hours per month in 1994 to 8.5 in 2001 and 8 for January-May 2002.

### NATIONAL NEWS CONSUMPTION



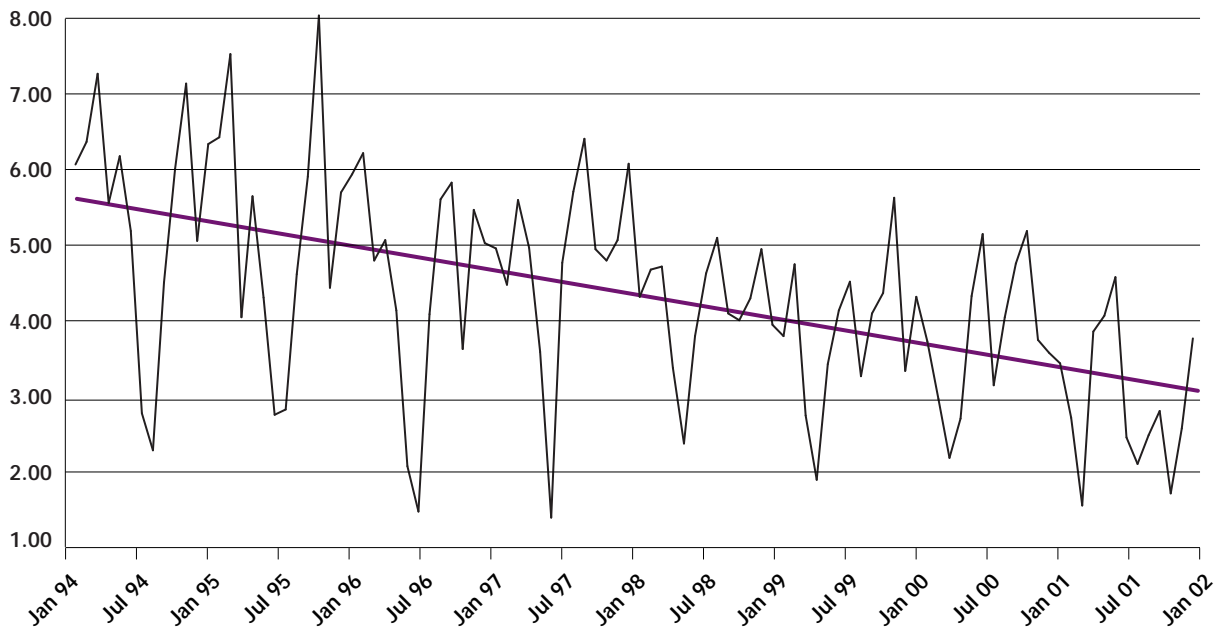
Source: BARB  
Base: terrestrial channels only

**b. Current affairs viewing is down even more sharply (hours per year)**

Between 1994-2001, the current affairs audience fell by 31.7%: down from 64.3 hours per year in 1994 to 43.9 in 2001, and dropped to 15 hours for the first six months of 2002. These latest figures, like others for the first half of 2002, need to be viewed with caution due to the changes and problems in BARB audience measurement. This trend data is for 'all' homes: the picture is somewhat worse in multichannel homes.

**CURRENT AFFAIRS CONSUMPTION**

hours per month/all homes



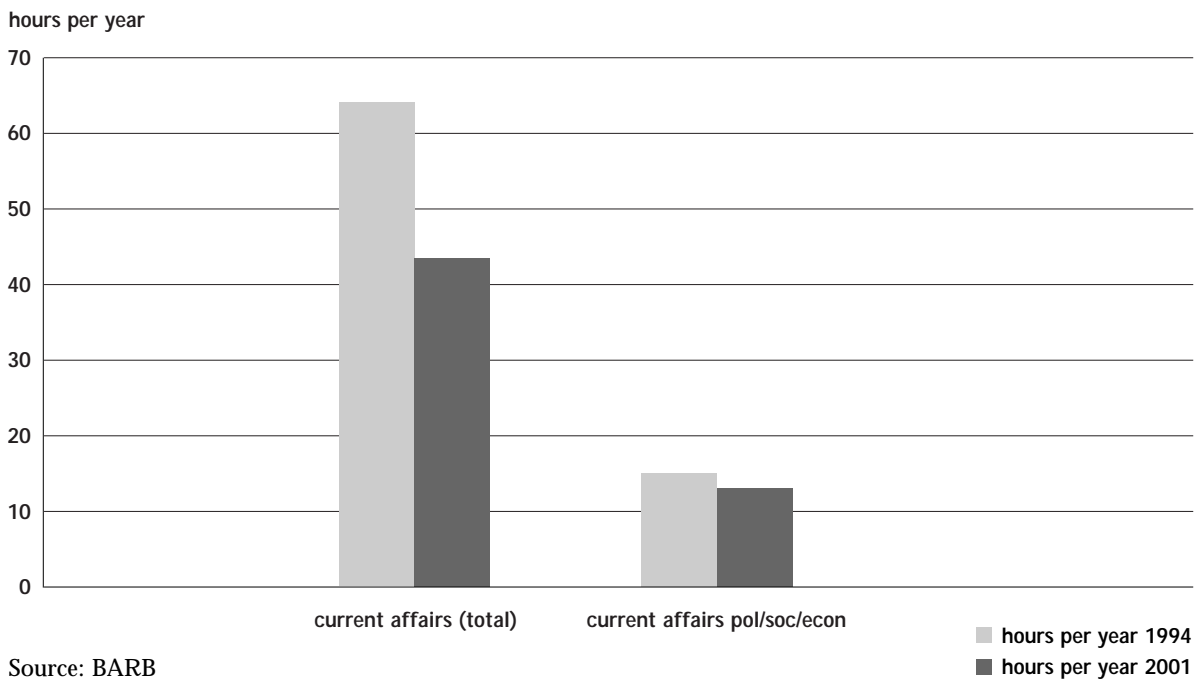
Source: BARB

Base: terrestrial channels only

c. But niche current affairs, including politics, has held its ground better

BARB figures include a category for current affairs programmes which specialise in political, social and economic issues. In the period covered by the previous illustration, viewing to these programmes is down by 17%, which amounts, in absolute terms, to a decline of less than 13 minutes a month between 1994 and 2001. This more stable picture is confirmed in the viewing figures for particular programmes.

The BBC's *On the Record*, ITV's *Jonathan Dimbleby* programme and hybrid news and current affairs offerings like *Newsnight* and *Channel 4 News*, which have benefited from stable scheduling and investment, have maintained or improved their audiences in this period. *Question Time* has held its audience well since the late 1990s. Programmes which have been frequently rescheduled, such as the BBC's *Money Programme*, have performed much less well. *Panorama*'s audience has fallen by a third since 1994. The audience for *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*, averaging 3.6 million in 2001, compares with a figure for *World in Action*, which is no longer broadcast, of 6.7 million in 1994. The consumer affairs programme *Watchdog*'s audience is down by 13% in the same period.

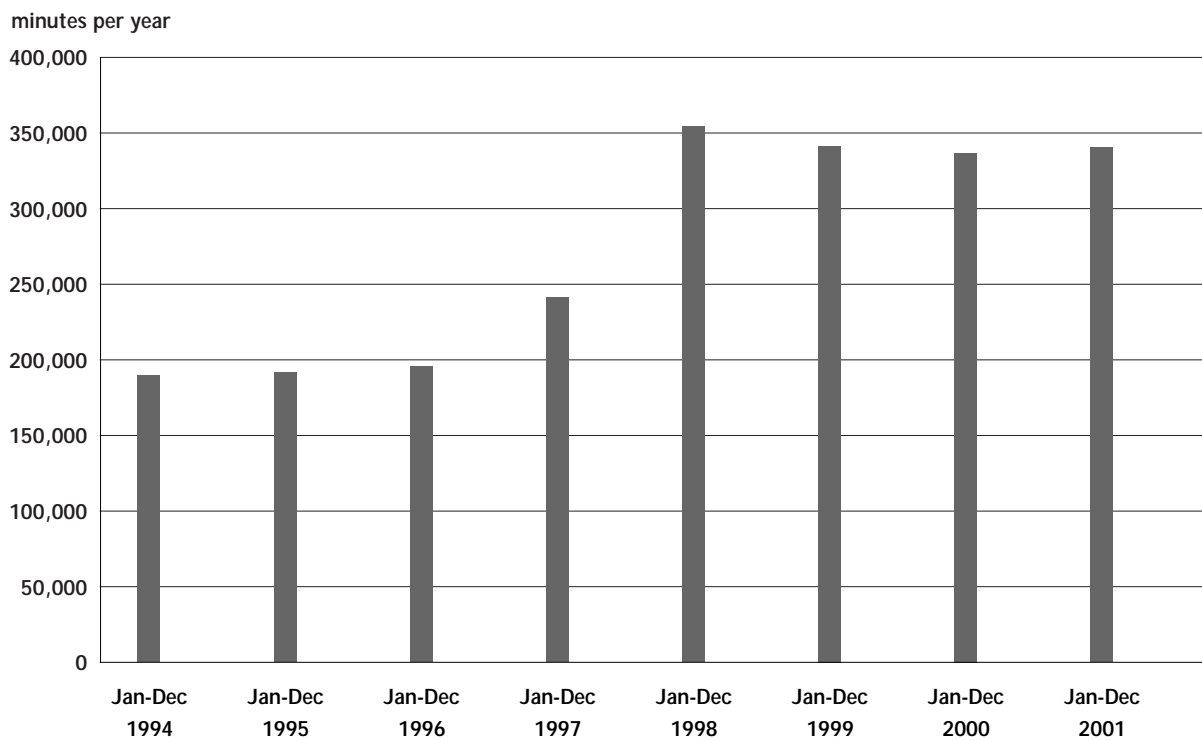


Source: BARB  
Base: terrestrial channels only

#### d. Supply of television news has dramatically increased

On the five main terrestrial channels, BARB figures suggest the supply of national news has increased by over 80% since 1994, with the appearance of Channel 5 and the expansion of Channel 4's services into the weekend. If we take into account continuous television news programmes, the increase has been eightfold, not including the many non-UK news offerings now available in multichannel homes. According to BBC estimates,<sup>86</sup> the average multichannel viewer now has 243 hours of news available per week, compared with 30 in 1986. By contrast, BARB figures suggest a slight fall in regional news supply of 4.3% since 1994. Current affairs output has also declined, by almost 12%, which is a smaller fall than the dip in consumption.

#### NATIONAL NEWS OUTPUT: TERRESTRIAL CHANNELS



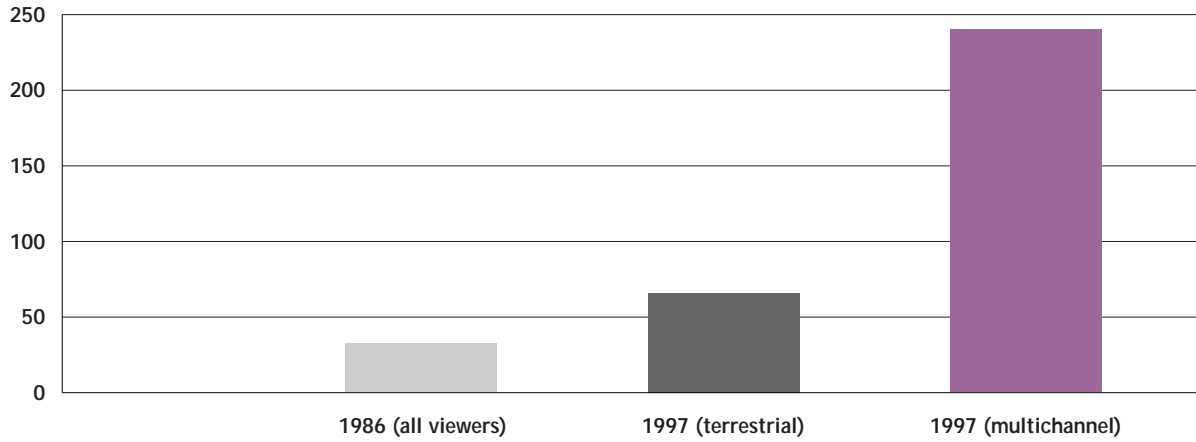
Source: BARB

Base: terrestrial channels only

<sup>86</sup> BBC, 'A Review of BBC News', 2002., [www.bbc.co.uk/info/news/newsfuture/res\\_page4.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/news/newsfuture/res_page4.shtml)

**TOTAL NEWS OUTPUT: TERRESTRIAL AND MULTICHANNEL**

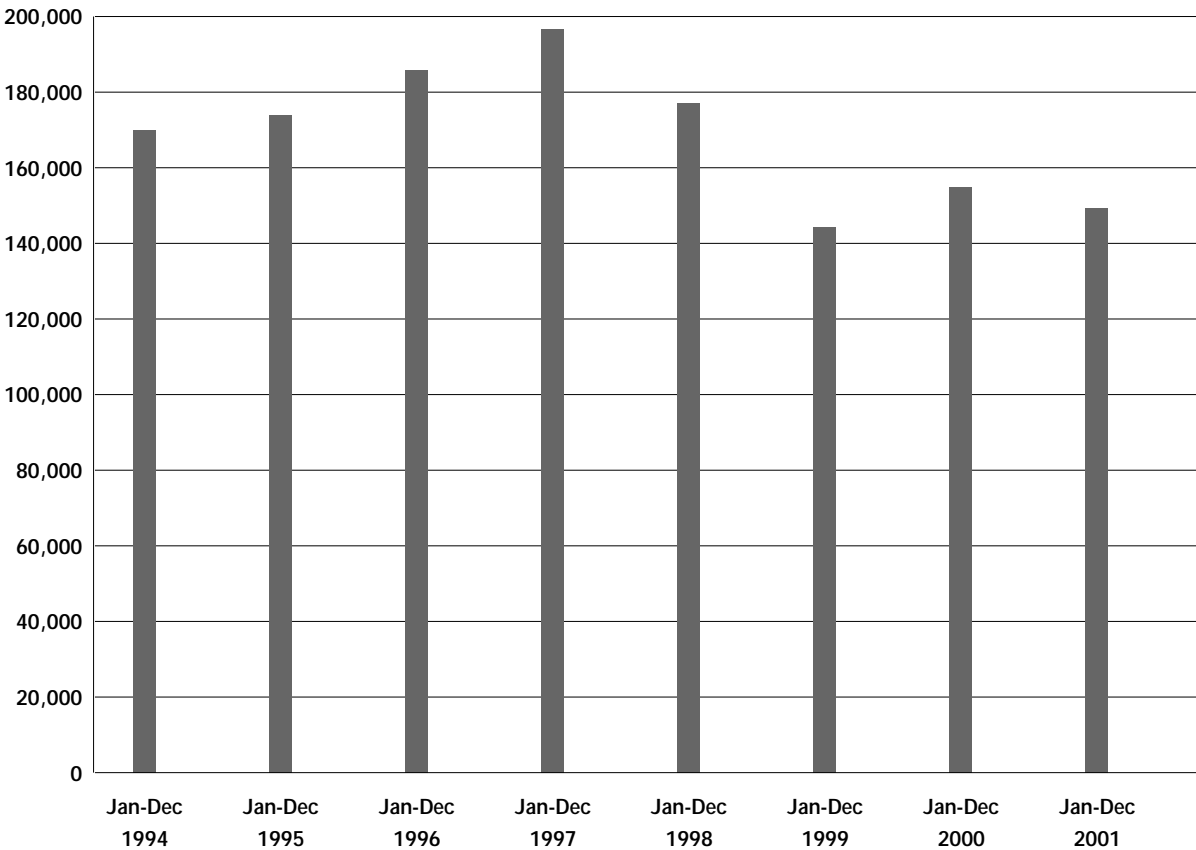
hours per week



Source: BBC

**CURRENT AFFAIRS OUTPUT**

minutes per year



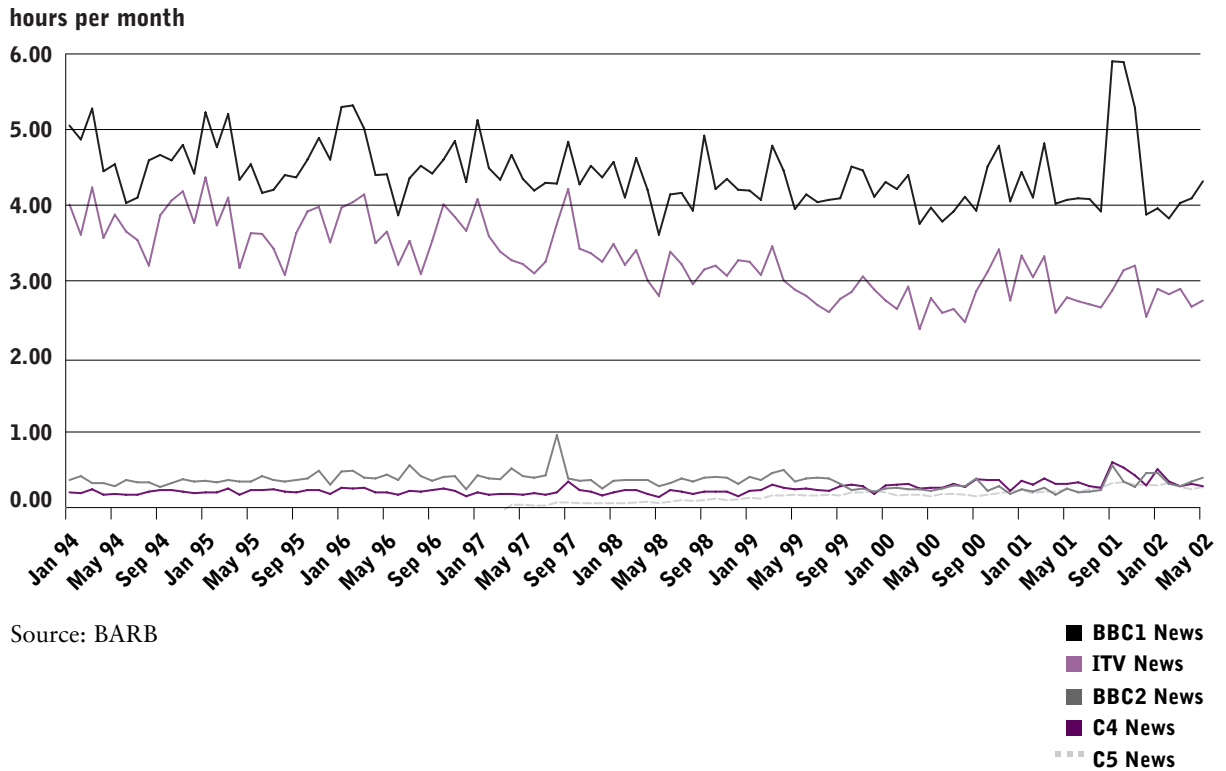
Source: BARB

Base: terrestrial channels only, all current affairs

**e. In national news, ITV's late evening figures account for much of the problem**

The main decline for national news has been found within the ITV network, which has seen a 23% decline in news consumption between 1994 and 2001. BBC1 News has held up rather better, though it has experienced periods of pressure. *Newsnight* on BBC2 and *Channel 4 News* have been very solid. *Channel 5 News* has built a useful audience and held it. Within the ITV figures, the damage has been done in the late evening, which shows a 34% fall. The pace of the fall has been accentuated since 1999, when ITV rescheduled *News at Ten* and then amended its early evening schedule in a way which favoured the national news, but created bigger competitive problems for ITV regional news. ITV's early evening news has been a stable performer, even gaining some viewers relative to BBC1 in certain periods. The September 11 effect is clearly visible in this illustration.

**NATIONAL NEWS CONSUMPTION BY CHANNEL**

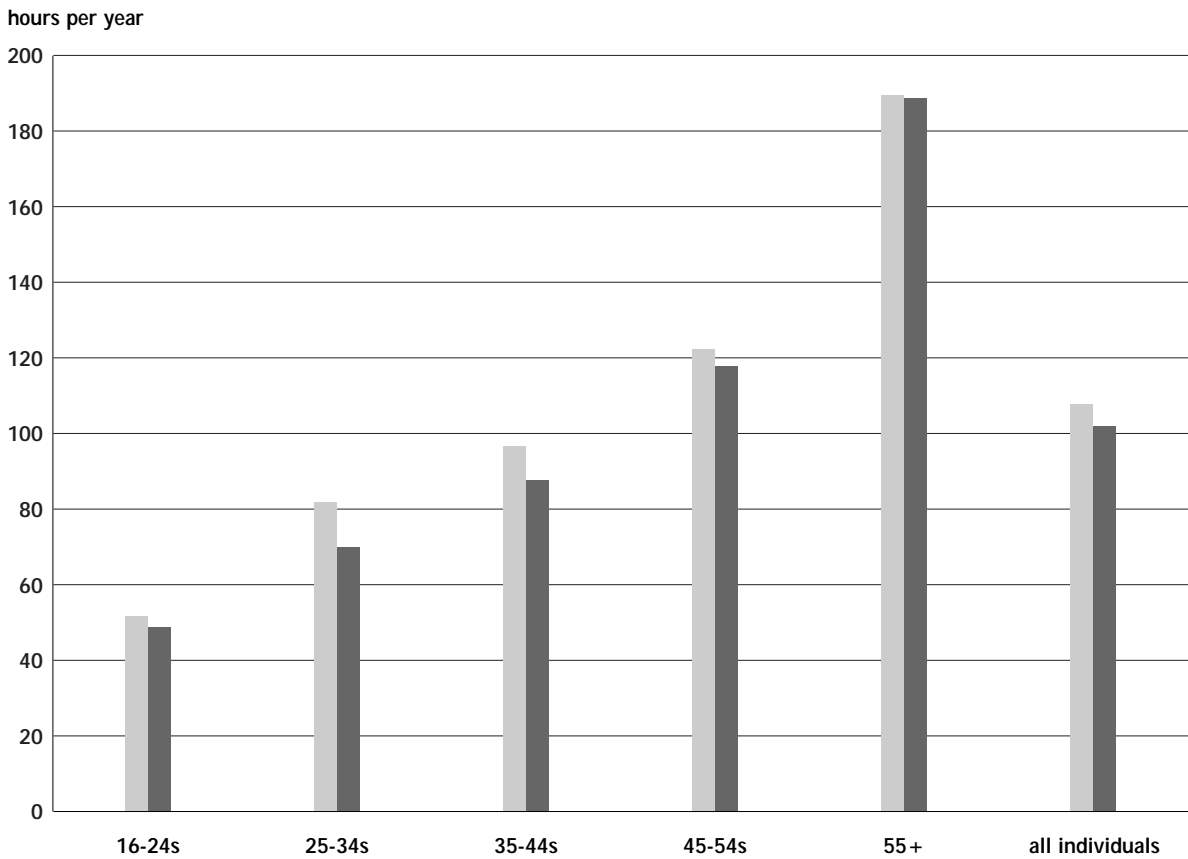


Source: BARB

f. The young aren't switching off, but they are less enthusiastic

The age group 25-34 shows the biggest decline of 14.6%, larger even than the younger age group, but it is important not to exaggerate these shifts. Audiences for news have always been overwhelmingly concentrated among older age groups. In 1994 the over-45s accounted for 64.4% of the total combined news audience for terrestrial evening television news. In 2001 this was up to 66.4%.

**NATIONAL NEWS VIEWING BY AGE**



Source: BARB

Base: terrestrial channels only

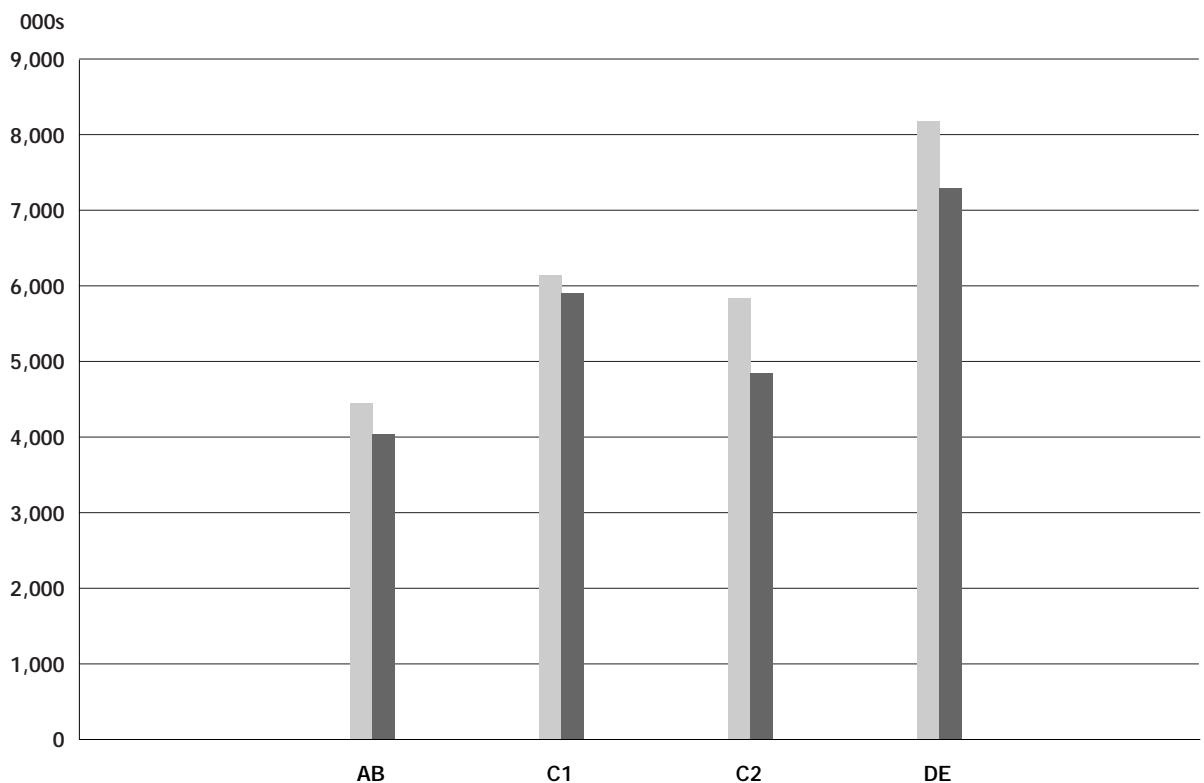
■ Jan-Dec 1994

■ Jan-Dec 2001

**g. Television news is, increasingly, serving the more prosperous classes best**

It follows from the relative under-performance of ITV in news that total viewing has fallen most sharply among those in social groups C2DE: for this group, the total combined evening news figures are down by two million or 14%, compared with a decline of about 7%, or 800,000 among the ABC1s. Because news services on Channel 4 and BBC2 are also more popular with ABC1s, it could be said, on the basis of these trends, that the universalist goals of public service broadcasting are being frustrated, with the system super-serving more prosperous groups and under-serving the rest. Only *Channel 5 News* has offered an area of growth in news consumption by C2DEs.

**AUDIENCES FOR TELEVISION EVENING NEWS, BY SOCIAL CLASS**



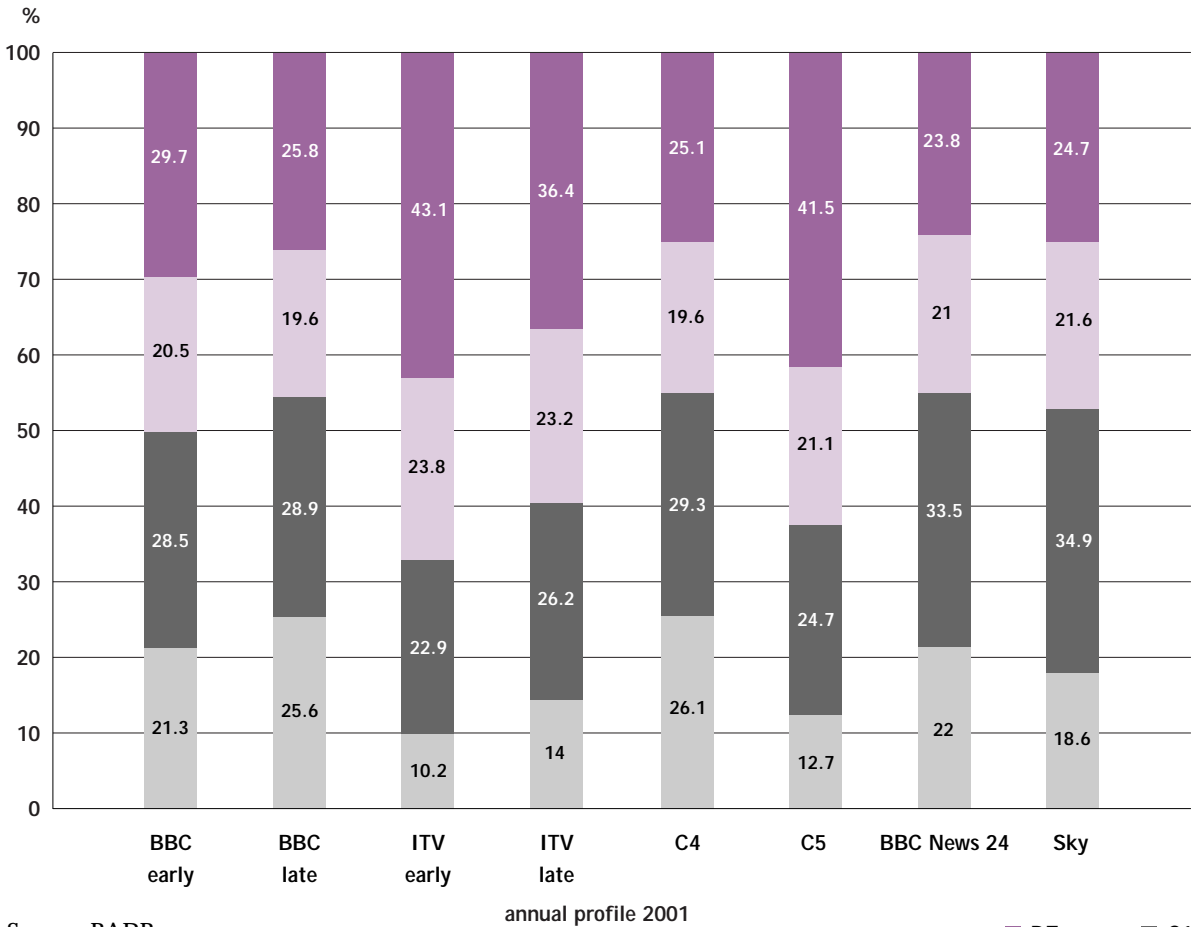
Source: BARB

Base: terrestrial channels only

■ Jan-Dec 1994

■ Jan-Dec 2001

**TV NEWS AUDIENCE SHARES BY SOCIAL CLASS: 2001**



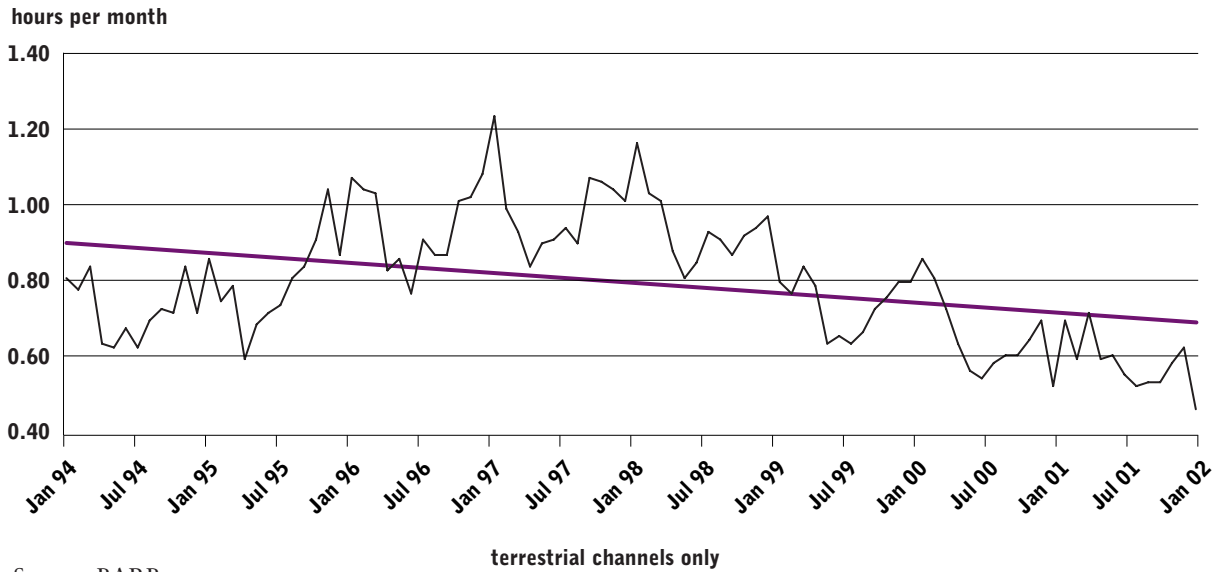
Source: BARB

DE C1  
C2 AB

**h. The regional news problem**

Viewing of regional news in the English regions and devolved nations has fallen dramatically, from a high of 1.27 hours per month at the turn of 1997 to a current low of 0.47 hours per month. As with the ITV national evening news, there appears to be a clear linkage between the effects of scheduling changes and a weakening of audience loyalty. Two factors appear to be at work: ITV early evening regional news is now less favourably scheduled in terms of its inheritance and the competition it faces; it has also disturbed its relationship with viewers, who expect the news to appear in a familiar slot. The pace of decline differs somewhat by region, but the familiar pattern is now for the BBC regional television news programme to have overtaken its ITV equivalent. More recently, ITV has reorganised its late evening regional news around its approximately 10pm national news, but the effects of this have yet fully to feed through.

## VIEWING OF REGIONAL NEWS



Source: BARB

This process can be seen in:

### 1. LONDON: BBC v ITV



Source: BARB

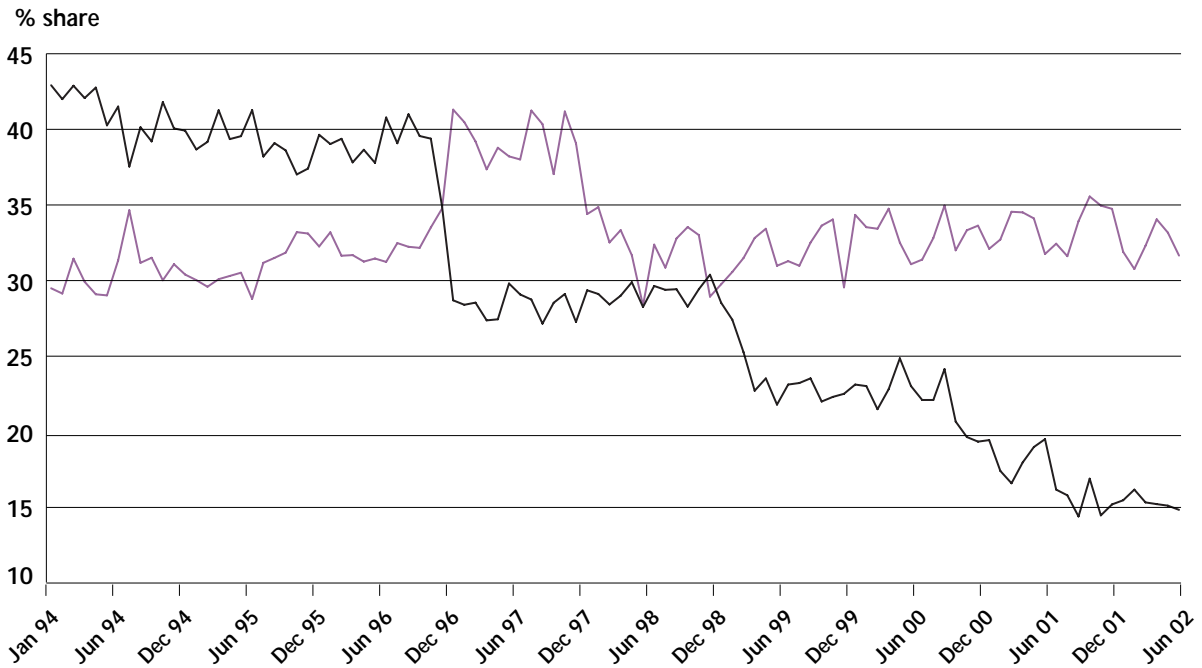
## 2. THE MIDLANDS: BBC v ITV



Source: BARB

■ ITV Central News at Six  
■ BBC1 Midlands Today

## 3. NORTH WEST ENGLAND: BBC v ITV



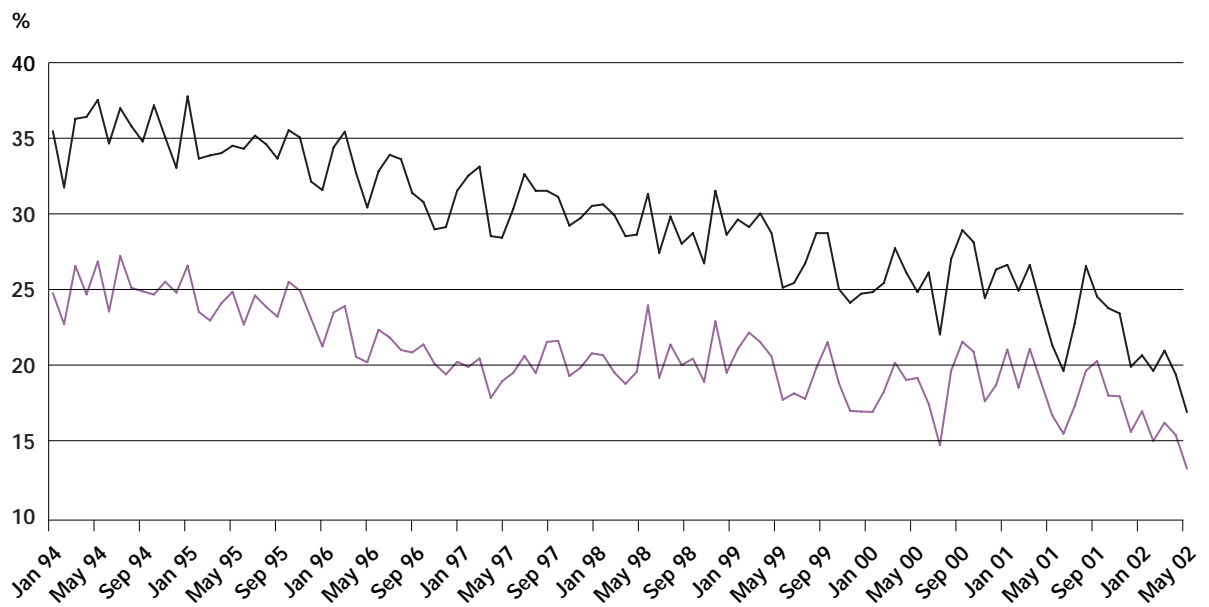
Source: BARB

■ ITV Granada Tonight  
■ BBC1 North West Tonight

**i. The lesson from multichannel homes**

Faced with more televisual choice, viewers watch less news. On multichannel television, news is a major and diverse element, usually supplied as part of basic subscription packages. But there is also a much greater range of sport and other entertainment, resulting in overall lower viewing figures for the main, fixed news bulletins. One very big question is whether, over time, viewing of 24-hour news channels in multichannel homes will compensate for the decline in consumption of fixed news bulletins. At present, BARB's figures do not suggest that this is close to being the case. The next two illustrations show the share of the ITV and BBC late evening news bulletins in multichannel homes compared with all homes. The gap is significant.

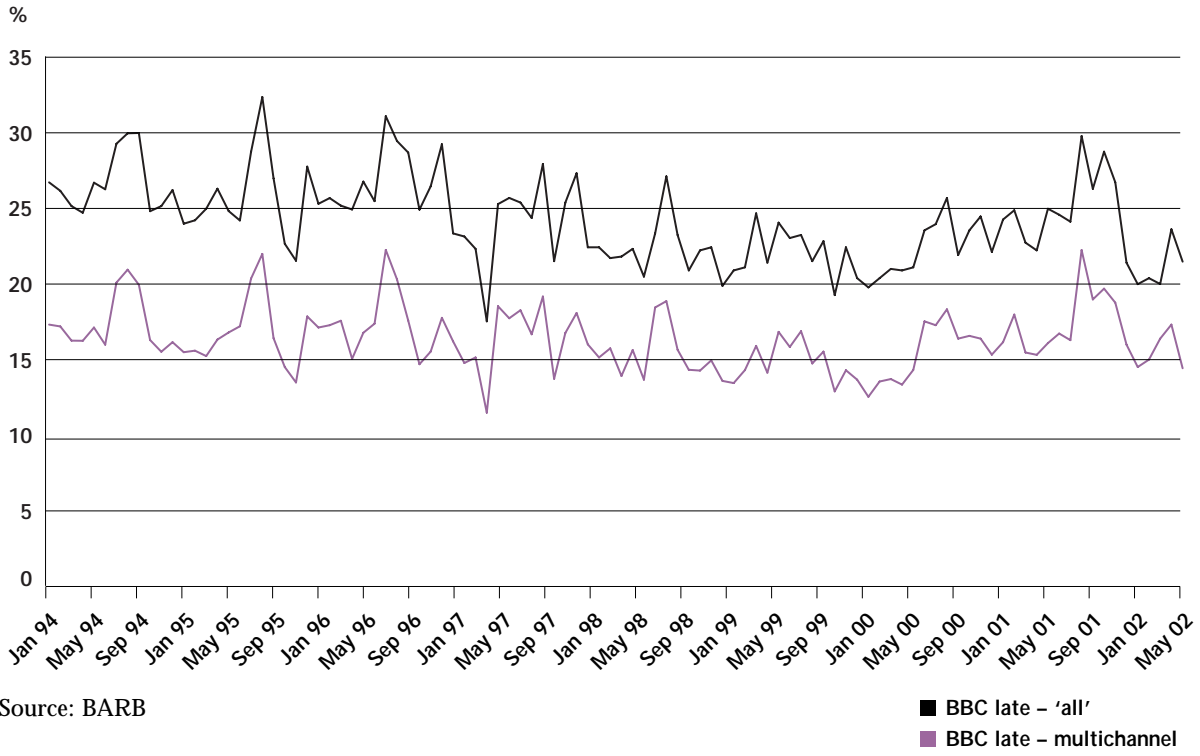
**AUDIENCE SHARE FOR ITV LATE-EVENING NEWS: MULTICHANNEL VERSUS ALL HOMES**



Source: BARB

■ ITV late - 'all'  
 ■ ITV late - multichannel

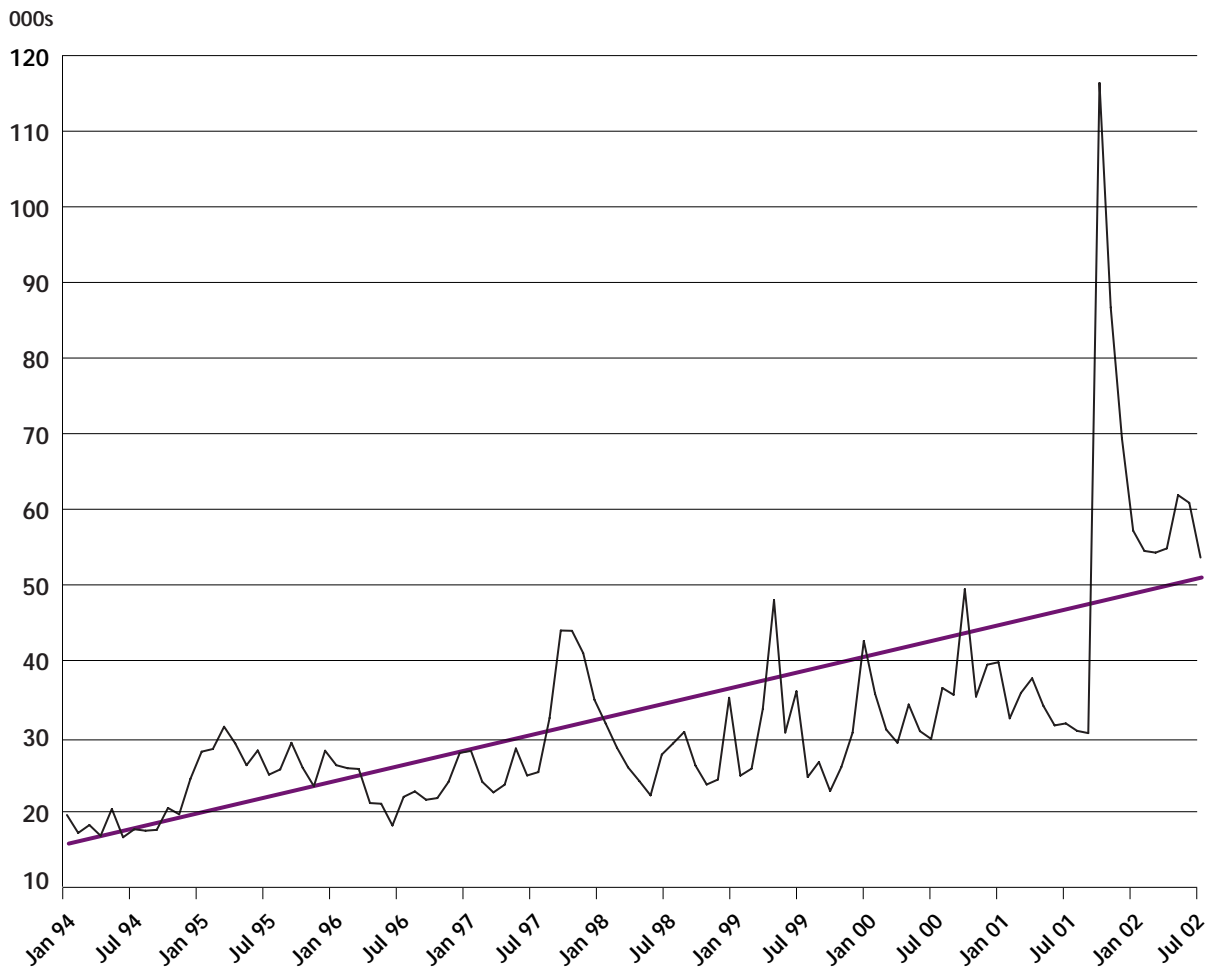
**AUDIENCE SHARE FOR BBC LATE-EVENING NEWS: MULTICHANNEL VERSUS ALL HOMES**



j. Can 24-hour news fill the gap?

The average audience for 24-hour news, meanwhile, has remained very small compared with those for the main bulletins. 24-hour news channels measure their audience in thousands, not millions, and their growth has followed but not exceeded the growth in multichannel homes generally. Newcomers in the 24-hour news game, such as the BBC and ITN, have thus gained audience share only at the expense of established news players, notably Sky. September 11, however, appears to have resulted in a boost for 24-hour news channels. In June 2002, the average daily audience for the three British rolling news services, Sky, BBC News 24 and ITN, was 54,000 (average numbers watching at any one time) compared with 32,000 a year earlier.

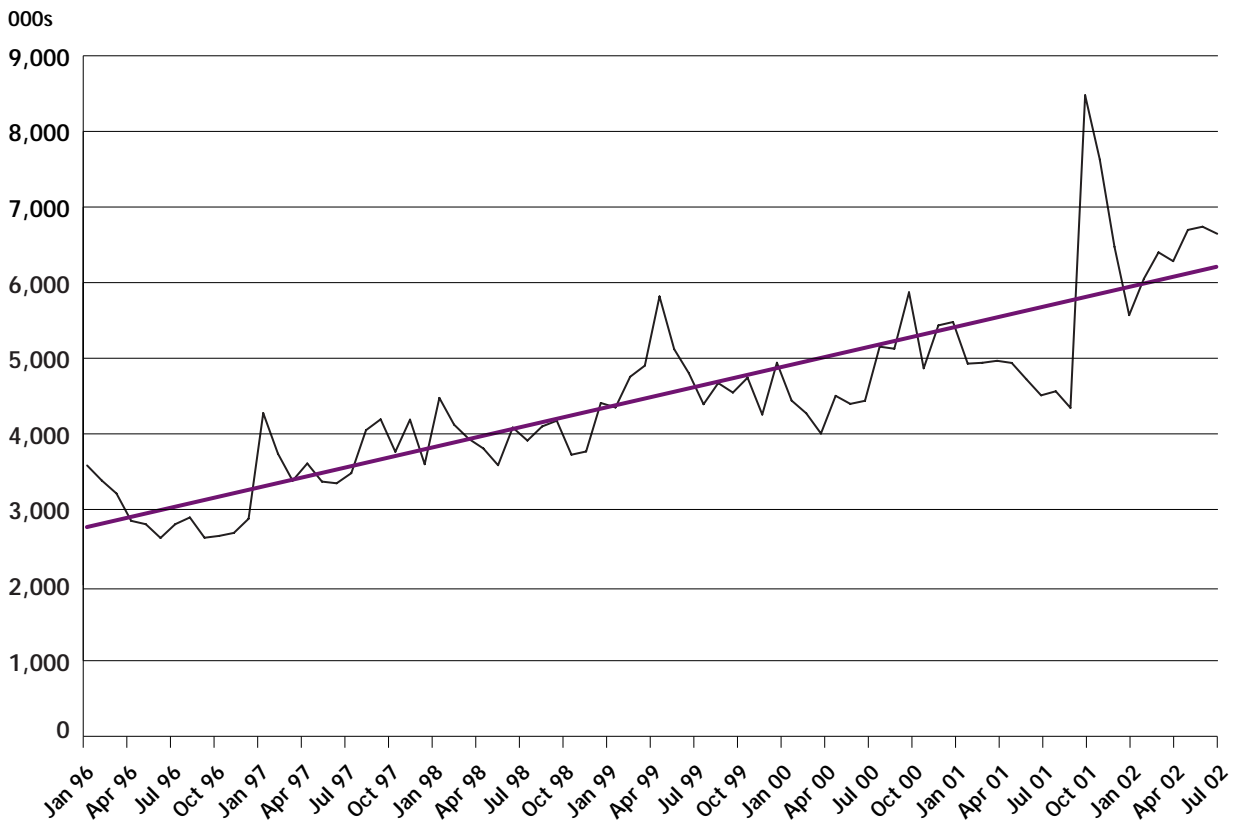
COMBINED 24-HOUR NEWS AUDIENCES (SKY, BBC, ITN: NUMBERS WATCHING AT ANY ONE TIME)



Source: BARB  
Base: multichannel homes

Measured by audience reach (defined by BARB as the percentage of multichannel viewers that watch more than three continuous minutes of 24-hour news per week), the combined weekly reach of these services has increased slowly to almost 20% in the first six months of 2001. In the first six months of this year, boosted by September 11, that figure has risen to 23.2% in multichannel homes. With multichannel television still spreading, and now accounting for more than half of all UK homes, the absolute audience reach in June 2002 was 6.6 million people, compared with 4.5 million people a year previously. These are numbers which start to weigh in the scale against the size of audiences for mainstream television news programmes.

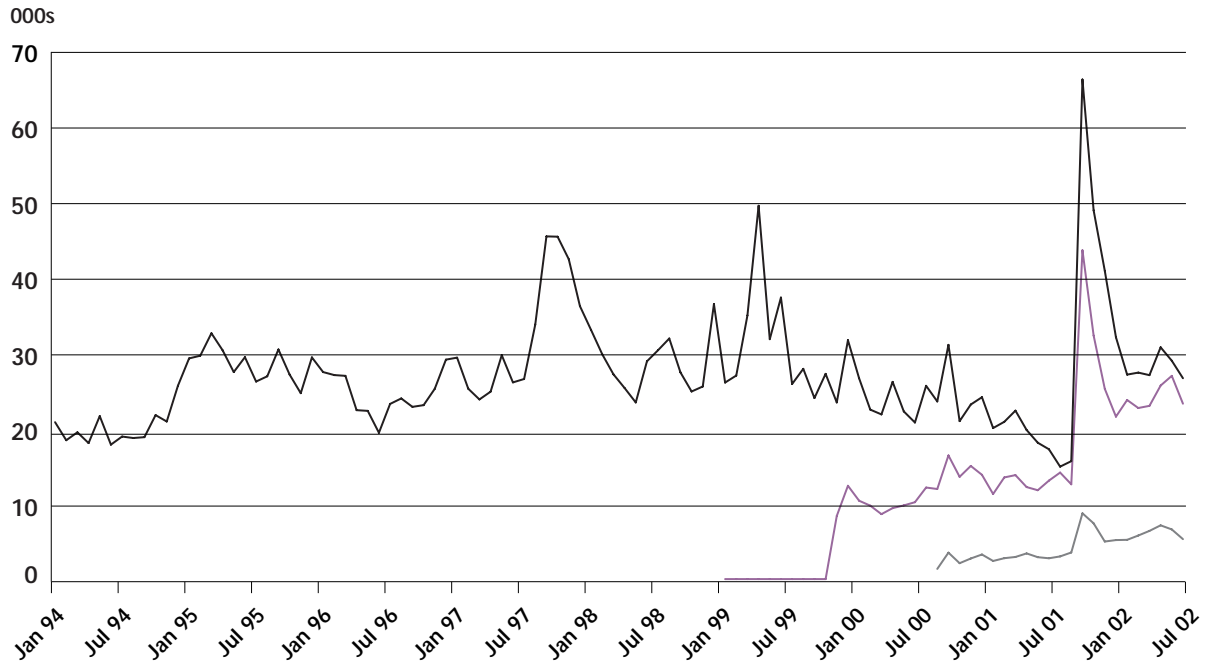
**COMBINED WEEKLY REACH: 24-HOUR NEWS**



Source: BARB  
(multichannel viewers watching 3+ consecutive minutes of Sky News, BBC News, ITN News or CNBC)

In terms of the competitive battle between 24-hour news providers, the BBC and Sky are now neck and neck. ITN, the last to launch, has also established itself.

**24-HOUR NEWS: THE COMPETITIVE BATTLE**



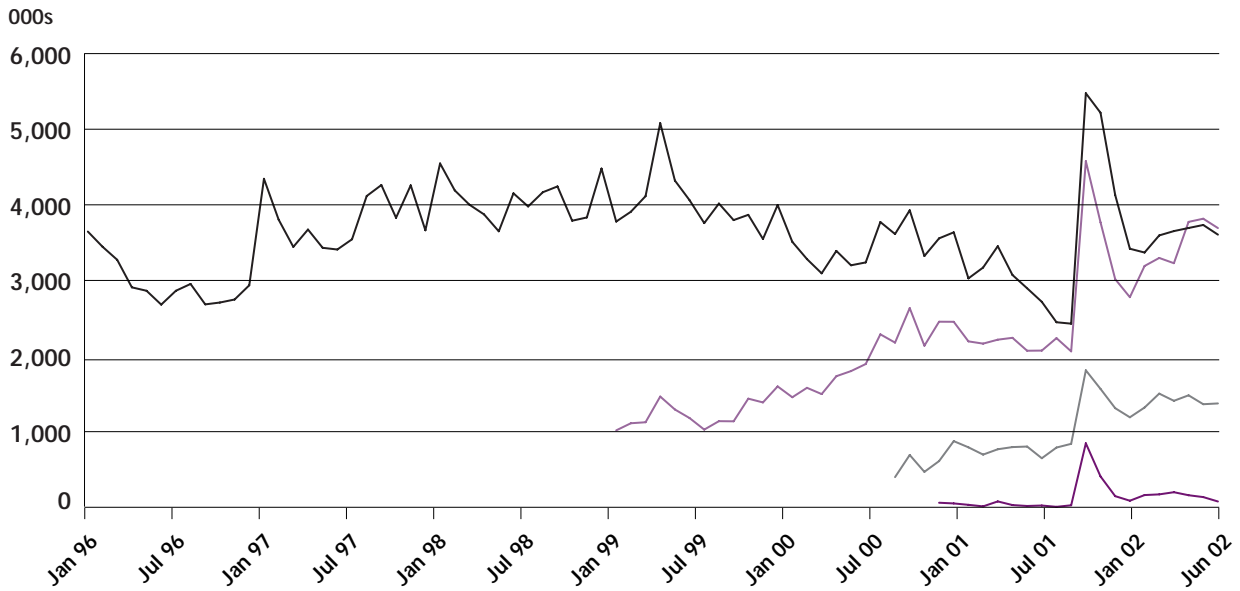
Source: BARB

Base: multichannel homes

- Sky News
- BBC News 24
- ITN News

In terms of reach, the BBC appears to have just overtaken Sky, for the first time, in the early part of this year. However, Sky's more popular performance during the Soham murder story in August falls outside the scope of the chart.

### AUDIENCE REACH ACROSS CHANNELS



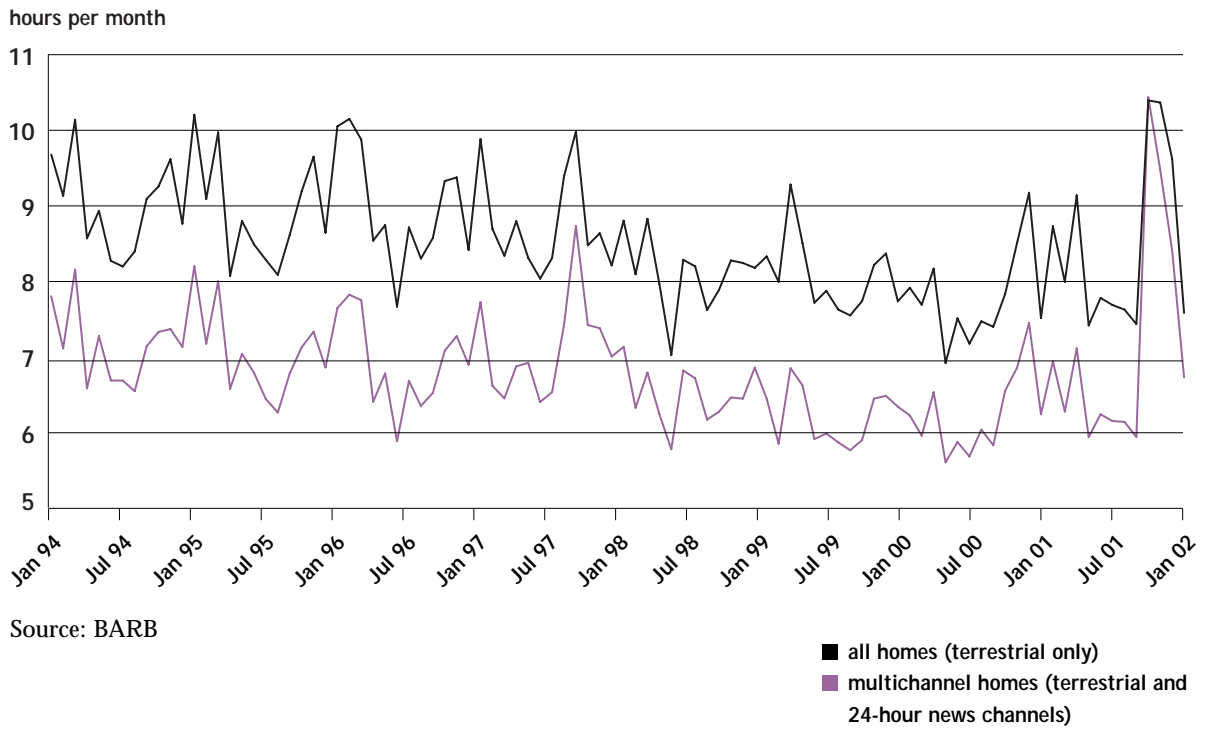
Source: BARB

Base: multichannel homes

- Sky News
- BBC News 24
- ITN News
- CNBC

As 24-hour news grows in popularity, and as more people have access to it, it may be that news viewing figures in multichannel homes and homes with few channels will start to look more like each other, at least during periods of intense news awareness. An example of this was provided on September 11 2001, when for the first time, news viewing patterns in both types of home briefly coincided.

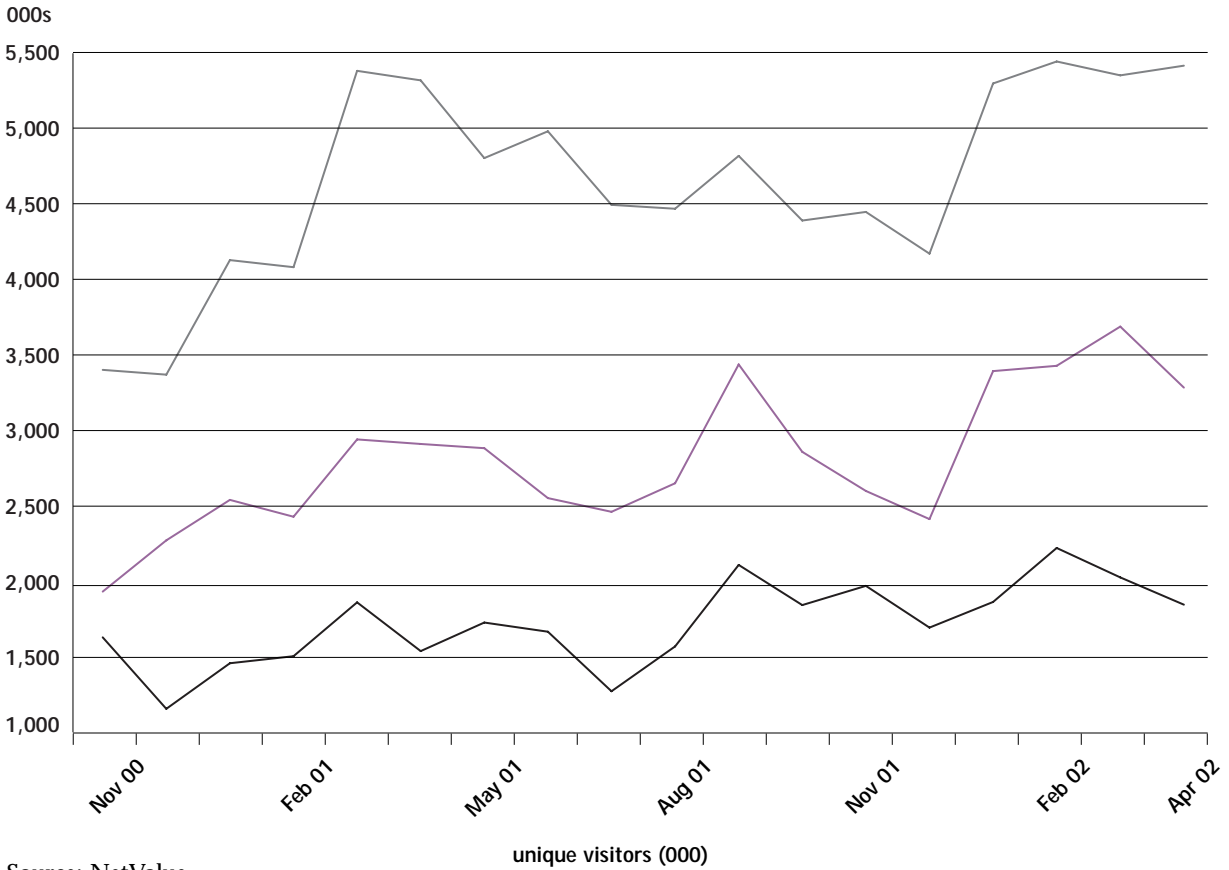
**SEPTEMBER 11 EFFECT: NATIONAL NEWS VIEWING IN MULTICHANNEL VERSUS ALL HOMES**



**k. The impact of the internet**

A significant number of people are now using the internet for news. By the first half of 2002, it is estimated that 10.6 million people per month were accessing sites that were either news sites, or which contained news, up from 7.1 million in November 2000. Given that these figures are for home use only, this understates the level of internet news consumption.

**VISITORS TO INTERNET NEWS SITES**



Source: NetValue

- society/news
- media/television
- media/print press

The average user of news online is more likely to be male, ABC1 and young. Site traffic illustrates the power of established news brands. The BBC topped the list of most popular news-related sites, used at home by nearly four million people in April 2002, an increase of 37% compared with the 2.8 million who used it a year earlier. The average user spent 25 minutes per month on the site. BBC News Online recorded 150 million page impressions in March 2002.<sup>87</sup> Along with the growing reach of 24-hour news, these figures suggest that new news media are starting to make a serious impact upon the audience and demand to be taken into account in discussions about the future of news consumption.

#### **VISITORS TO MAIN INTERNET NEWS SITES, APRIL 2002**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Unique visitors (000)</b>
bbc.co.uk	3,912.0
Guardianunlimited.co.uk	719.6
Channel4.com	510.6
Sky.com	470.0
Skysports.com	467.9
itv.com	390.8
Upmystreet.com	351.4
ft.com	265.1
Telegraph.co.uk	261.8
Cnn.com	255.4

Source: NetValue April 2002

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<sup>87</sup> BBC Annual Report 2002, BBCi on the web, p.37.

## 6 FIELDWORK RESULTS

The survey work undertaken for the *New News, Old News* project has sought to build upon the picture available from the BARB audience data and previous research. It extends our knowledge in several important respects.

First, it provides an up-to-date description of news consumption patterns by age, class, ethnic group and region: providing a map of UK news media consumption at a time of rapid change. This map confirms the supreme importance of television news, but also illuminates the growing importance of the internet and the relative decline of radio and newspapers as a medium of news. It explores current views about the legal framework governing broadcast news, notably the requirement for news to be impartial and accurate. Those participating in the survey also contributed their views about the extent to which they feel adequately informed about local, national and international issues, and specifically about British politics. The survey illuminates changes in basic attitudes towards news and the way it is followed.

The survey also specifically examines the views of certain key groups, including: young people; those who did not vote in the 2001 General Election; members of social groups C2DE; the minority which says it is dissatisfied with television news and Britain's ethnic minorities.

### **a: Ambient News and Staines Man: old news meets new news**

It has become a cliché to speak of a communications revolution. What this survey shows is that in spite of the roller-coast movements of stock markets and media investment patterns, there is a strong, underlying current of change in media consumption habits which is reshaping the news ecology of Britain. This change is not melodramatic in pace or style; it is like global warming: a gradually visible process, shaped by strong and identifiable forces.

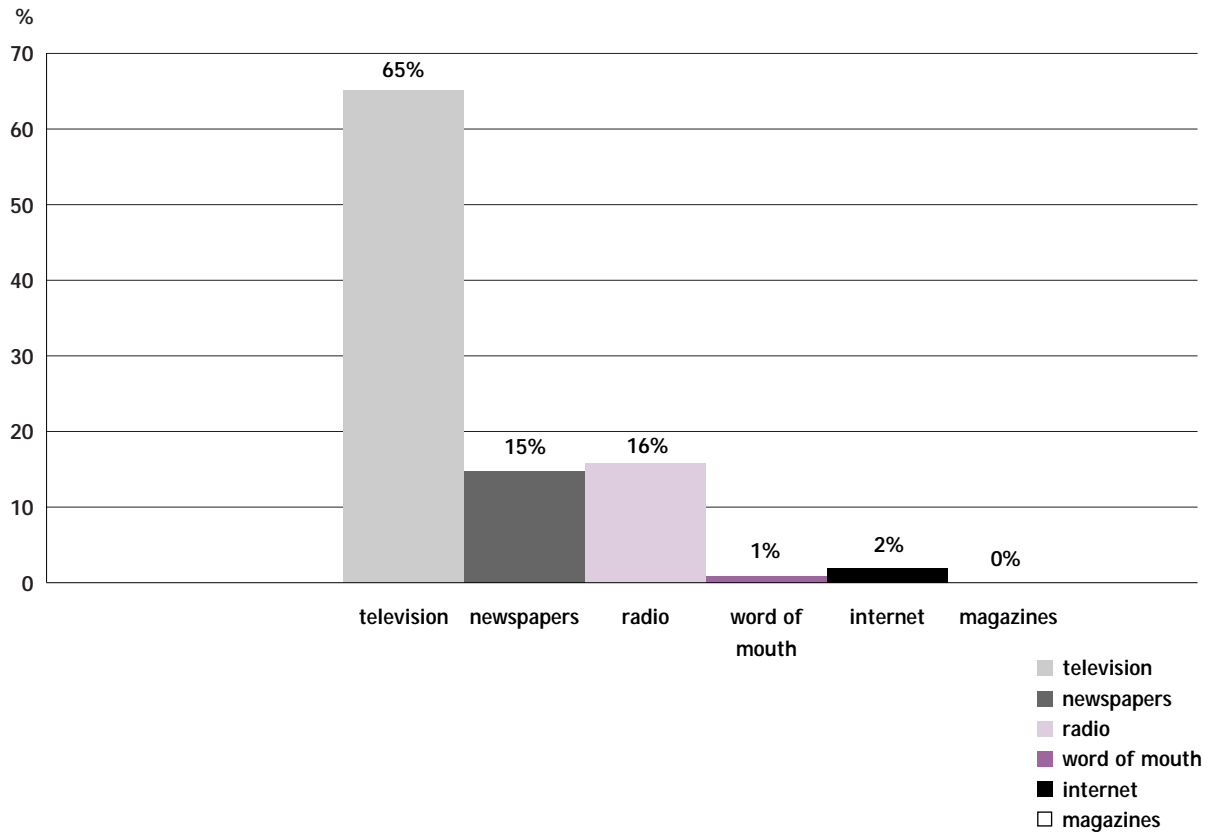
The decisive feature of today's news landscape is that news is very easily available, through a host of different media, and is usually free at the point of consumption. News is, in a word, ambient, like the air we breathe, taken for granted rather than struggled for. All television and radio news is free at the point of consumption and so is most internet news. The most successful newspapers launches of recent times, the *Metro* titles, are also free. At the same time, this research shows the huge extent to which people make use of news transmitted by word of mouth, which is another essential feature in the ambient news ecology. One major London property development is even explicitly building into its infrastructure an ambient news and information system, delivered by a variety of media. No wonder people feel that they no longer need to make a huge personal effort to find the news. As a young man from Staines said in one of our focus-groups: "News grabs you more than you grab it".

However, television news is now the only news medium available, used, trusted and valued across the whole of British society. In this survey, 65% of the British public say they regard television as their main source of news, compared with 16% who regard radio as their main source, 15% newspapers, 2% the internet and 1% word of mouth.

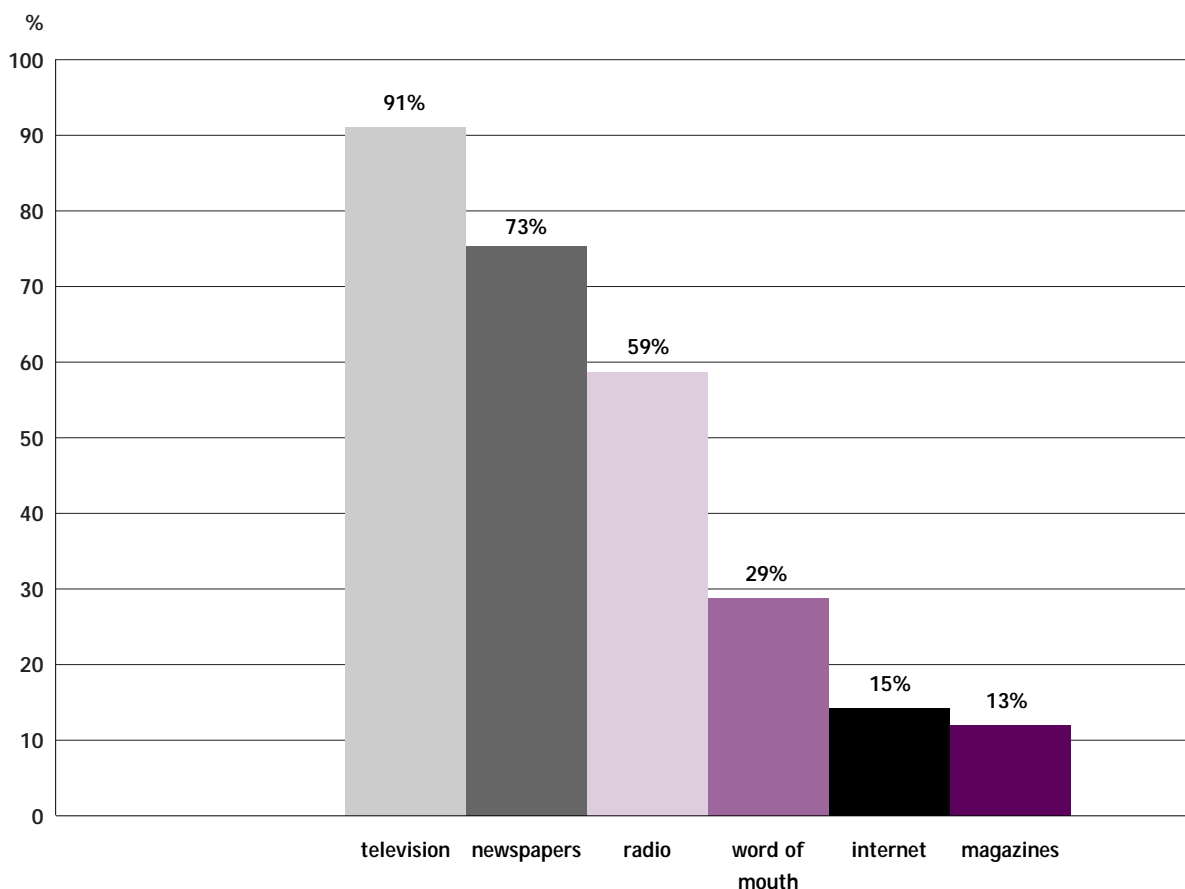
Almost everyone (91%) regards television as a source of news, against 73% for newspapers, 59% for radio and 15% for the internet. Some 13% mention

magazines as a useful source of news and 29% mention 'word of mouth'. It is important to recognise that for one in four people today, newspapers play no direct part in their regular access to news, though newspapers do also influence communication via word of mouth and through broadcasting.

### MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS



## ALL SOURCES OF NEWS USED



There are also some significant differences in news media consumption between different ages, social and ethnic groups. Broadly speaking:

**Radio** is most highly valued as a news medium by ABC1s, reflecting the unique influence of Radio 4 among this group and, arguably, a BBC record of ‘super-serving’ the metropolitan middle class at the expense of local radio audiences and ethnic minority groups. More than a fifth (22%) of ABC1s rate radio as their main source of news, compared with only 11% of C2DEs. Radio is struggling among ethnic minorities: fewer than half find radio a useful source, compared with 60% of whites.

**The internet** is regarded as the main source of news by 3% of 16-34-year-olds and as a useful source by 23% in this age group. The internet is also more popular as a source of news among men (18%) than women (12%). It is also very popular among young Asians, 37% of whom make use of it and 8% of whom regard it as their main news source. The internet, in short, appears to be emerging as the news home for those who feel under-served by conventional mass media. It is also, however, a medium used chiefly by the better off: 20% of ABC1s use it, against only 10% of C2DEs, confirming the concerns of those worried about a digital divide.

**Word of mouth** is a more used news source for women and younger people: 43% of 16-34-year-olds name oral communication as a useful source of news. This probably reflects their greater sociability, which itself results in less time to read newspapers and watch television.

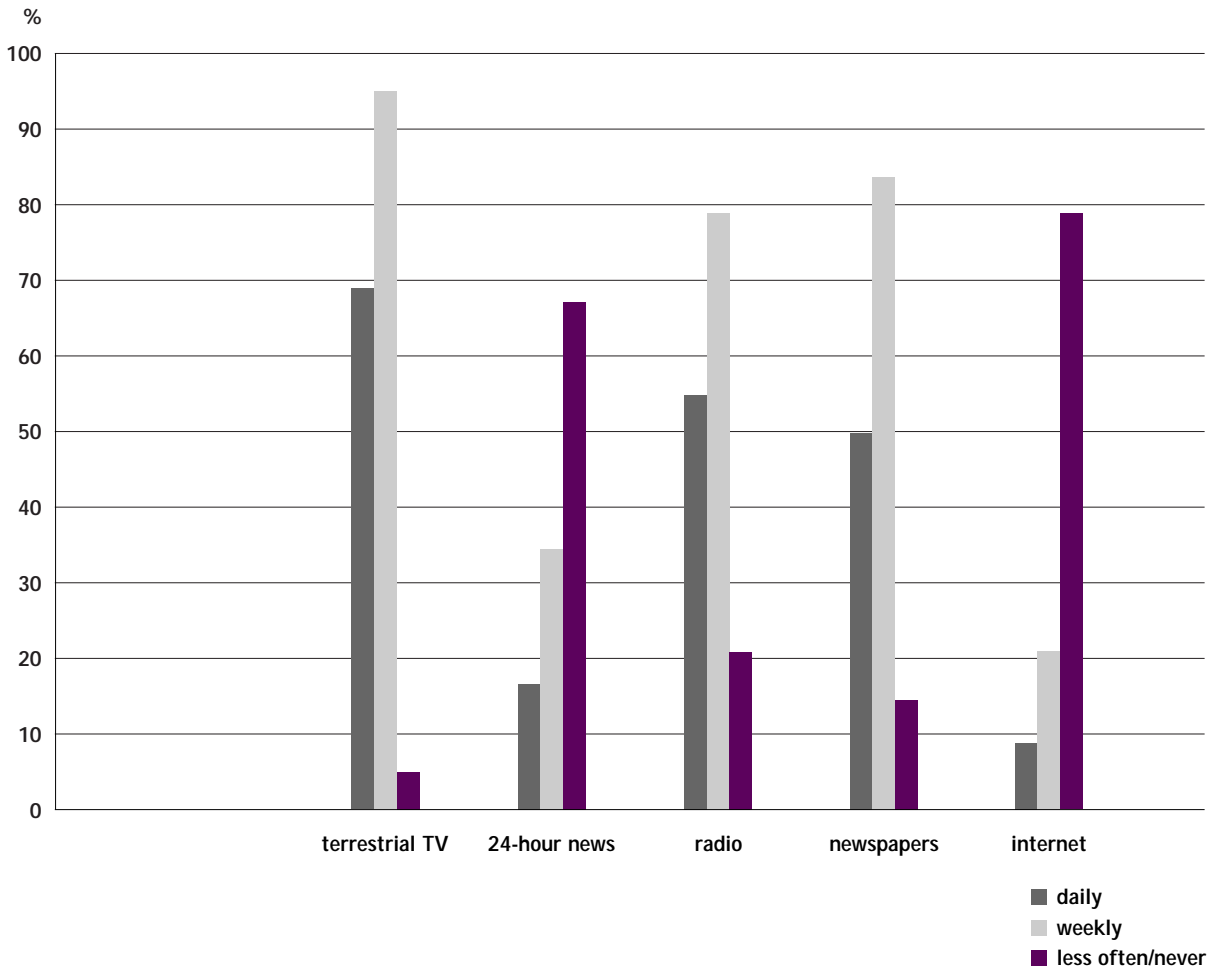
The appeal of **magazines** is broadly spread across the whole population, reflecting the diversity and range of titles provided. This suggests that in a fragmenting media marketplace, niche-oriented news publishers stand the best chance of being able to publish successfully across the whole social spectrum.

**Newspapers** are used at roughly the same level across age groups, with 73% of people finding them a useful source, although they are in real difficulty among ethnic minorities, one-third of whom do not make any regular use of newspapers. This figure rises to over 40% among young black people. Newspapers are more heavily read in certain parts of the UK, notably Scotland, than others. Newspapers are under somewhat more pressure among younger people, in the sense that the young read newspapers less frequently than older people.

It is interesting to note those news media which are relatively more popular among **ethnic minorities** than the population as a whole. These are: the internet (24% versus 15%), magazines (17% versus 13%) and word of mouth (32% versus 29%). All of these are media capable of avoiding the mass audience assumptions of wider-cast media like national newspapers and most broadcasting. If news providers are to increase their engagement with ethnic minority communities, as well as with younger people, they will need to do a better job of providing material which engages their interest. Television is, however, generally popular in ethnic minority communities, especially the black population.

When it comes to frequency of use, mainstream television news is the most heavily used, with 68% turning to it at least once a day, followed by radio (55%), newspapers (50%), 24-hour television news (16%) and the internet (7%).

## FREQUENCY OF NEWS USE



The reasons why people prefer one news source rather than another are mostly self-evident. Radio is valued above all for its convenience. Rolling television news services, however, are considered useful because they are ‘more in depth’ (51% say this) as well as convenient (44%). The internet’s virtues are thought to be convenience (41%), up-to-dateness (34%) and variety (23%).

The overall picture is one of people, increasingly, grazing widely in an ambient news space, sometimes reading newspapers, sometimes not; becoming aware of news by word of mouth, and following up by catching a television news bulletin, or going online. Those who took part in our focus-groups were also asked to complete news diaries, showing their own weekly patterns of news media usage.

The results reveal a huge range of news habits. Many people use a dozen or more different news sources in a week. Colin, a 25-year-old shopfitter, makes use of 11 different sources, including the internet, radio, local and national newspapers, Channel 4 and BBC television. Ben, a 20-year-old non-voter in the last election, on some days picks up information from BBC, ITV, 24-hour news and a local newspaper. On other days, he consumes no formal news media. Philip, an unemployed council worker, gets news daily, chiefly from commercial radio and Sky News, with an occasional national newspaper thrown in.

Samantha, a C2DE woman who lives in a five-channel-only television home, gets all her news from commercial television, which for her means ITV and Channel 5. Katie, like Samantha from Nottingham, in the 16-24 age group, uses a lot of BBC radio and an occasional newspaper. Laura mixes regular readership of the *Sun* with ITV and BBC News 24. In multichannel homes, some, even those who are not exceptionally heavy news consumers, glance at foreign television news services, such as Fox News. A 17-year-old Asian woman from Leicester said she relied almost entirely upon the internet, ethnic minority television channels and Sky for news. Nazim, from Hounslow, uses BBC1 in the morning, radio in the afternoon and ethnic minority channels and 24-hour news in the evening.

### **b. Are we satisfied with the news we get?**

A number of questions were asked in order to gauge the levels of satisfaction felt about the performance of UK news providers, especially broadcasters. Given the huge increase in choice of channels, and of news services, we asked for overall indications of satisfaction with the choice of news and current affairs programmes on radio and television these days.

The verdict can only be described as overwhelming. No fewer than 95% of people say that they are either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with broadcast news and 90% for current affairs. There is some indication that the current affairs performance is less admired than news in that only 29% say they are 'very satisfied' with current affairs, against 43% for news.

Nor is there any sign of major disaffection among young people. The 16-34 group states a 96% level of satisfaction. There may be concern among their elders about young people's level of engagement with politics, but if that is so, the young people themselves certainly do not blame this state of affairs on the choice provided by broadcasters. Among black people, satisfaction ratings are lower, with almost one-fifth expressing dissatisfaction. Among Asians, however, the level of satisfaction is higher than for the population as a whole. Satisfaction ratings about current affairs show that 90% of white people are satisfied, against 84% of Asians and 78% of black people; this may indicate a failure by mass broadcasters in finding current affairs topics with specific appeal to ethnic minorities.

At the end of the survey, a number of statements were offered summarising possible positions on television and radio news in the UK. One said that "TV and radio news in Britain is first class". Overall, 18% 'strongly agreed' with this statement, with another 45% 'tending to agree'. Only 8% disagreed.

The focus-groups confirmed these impressions.

*"I'm very satisfied with the news – I don't think it's dumbed down."* (Male, 35-44, C2DE, Leeds)

*"I think news is better nowadays. With satellite technology, we're more informed."* (Afro-Caribbean male, 35+, C2DE, Manchester)

*"News has improved. More specialised news like Channel 4 isn't afraid to tackle hard news. There are more ways to get it."* (Afro-Caribbean female, 16-34, ABC1, London)

*“The standards of the actual news programmes have gone up in leaps and bounds.”* (Male, 45+, ABC1, Nottingham)

*“They have got away from the ‘small print’ language.”* (Afro-Caribbean, male, 35+, ABC1, London)

### **c. New News**

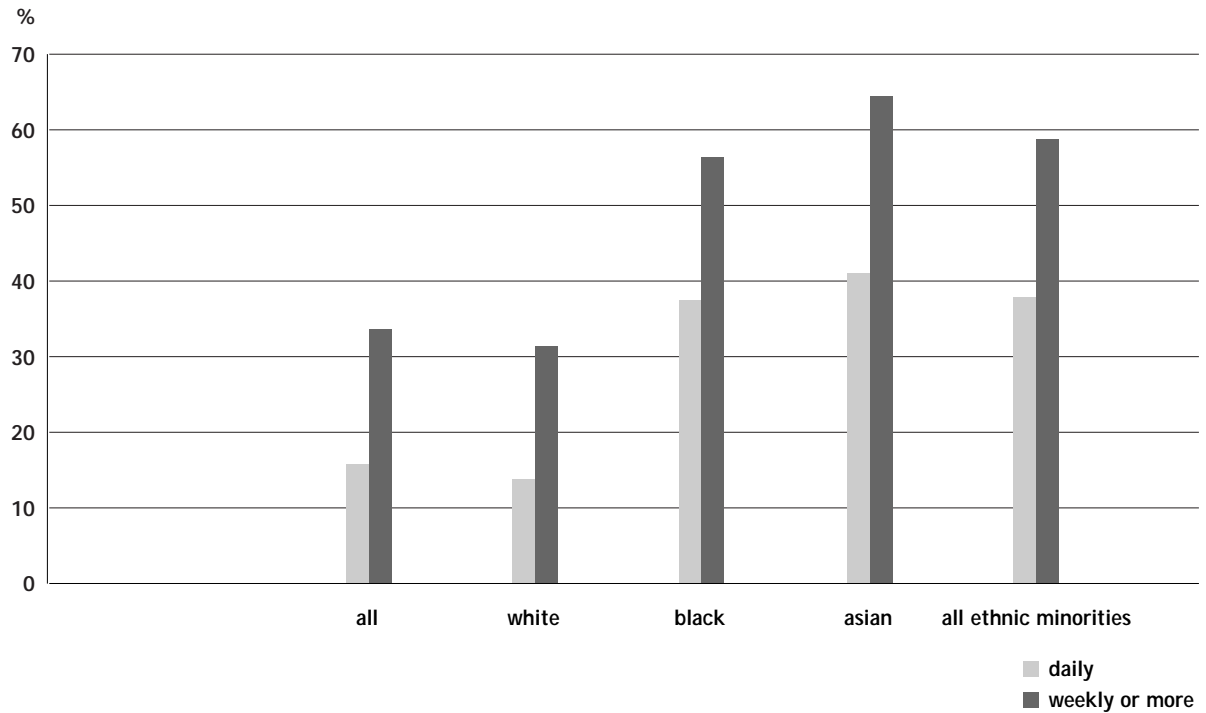
#### **(i) 24-hour television news**

There has been much debate over the importance, and cost, of rolling television news services. Are they emerging as a vital and valued part of the news landscape or as an expensive and little valued optional extra, merely replicating at a more extended pace the concerns of fixed news bulletins? This discussion centres chiefly upon the three main UK rolling news services: Sky News, which began broadcasting in 1989, BBC News 24, which started in 1997, and the ITN news channel which opened in 2000. News 24, at roughly £50m a year, is more costly than Sky (£35m) and ITN (under £10m). In addition, UK multichannel homes can receive a number of non-UK rolling news services, including Fox News, CNN and Bloomberg.

Earlier this year, Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, invited Richard Lambert, former editor of the *Financial Times*, to review the performance of BBC News 24. Previous audience analysis (see above) has shown that the 24-hour news channels’ share of audience in multichannel homes has remained small and rather consistent in recent years, with the result that the total size of the audience has grown only in line with multichannel take-up. New entrants to the market have found their place by taking share from the pioneer, Sky. Overall, the weekly reach of these channels in multichannel homes is currently put at just under 24%, according to BARB.

The message of this survey is that 24-hour television services are forming an increasingly important part of the news landscape, especially for those who work unsociable hours or those (the young) who routinely stay out very late at night for social reasons. The survey suggests weekly reach for rolling news of 34%, with 16% saying that they make use of these services at least once a day across the whole sample surveyed. Within multichannel homes, which remain the predominant means of reception for these news services, 59% say they make use of 24-hour news once a week and 28% say they use it daily.

## 24-HOUR NEWS USE



These services are also exceptionally attractive to members of ethnic minority groups, which record daily reach figures of 38%, with especially high levels of viewing among older black and Asian people, which probably reflects the wider international news agenda of BBC News 24, along with the distinctive non-UK oriented news agendas of other providers, such as CNN, which appears to be popular among UK black audiences as a means of accessing news about black America. The survey may also be picking up interest in some non-UK news services which are not strictly speaking all-news channels, such as the Asian language channels, Zee TV and Prime. Al Jazeera, the Arab-language channel, also seems to be finding an audience in the UK. The emergence of what might be called 'diasporic television', meaning television consumed by an ethnic diaspora, is potentially a very significant change in the character of broadcasting, which has previously been associated with strongly protected national jurisdictions. It is a moot point whether these services are, in practice, subject to a degree of regulatory scrutiny comparable with that which applies to mainstream UK television news services.

24-hour television news users value it because it is 'in-depth' (51%); convenient (44%); up-to-date (36%) and more varied (23%). Asian viewers (47%) especially rate the depth of 24-hour news, reflecting its greater coverage of events in parts of the world which concern them, as do black viewers. These ethnic groups also value 24-hour news for its convenience and relevance. Rolling television (and radio) news is an important feature of the emerging phenomenon of ambient news: news which is free at the point of consumption, available on demand and very often available in the background to people's lives without them even looking.

Focus-groups confirmed these points of appeal:

*“Waiting for the evening TV news would seem like going back to the dark ages. News fits around you now.”* (White female, 35-44, C2DE, Leeds)

*“News grabs you more than you grab it.”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“I remember as a boy my parents watching both the 9 o’clock and the 10 o’clock news and it would be a nightmare. So as soon as you get your own telly, that’s it: goodbye Mr Newspeople.”* ( Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“With Sky interactive you feel like you are in control, like a personal service.”*  
(Male, 16-24, ABC1, London)

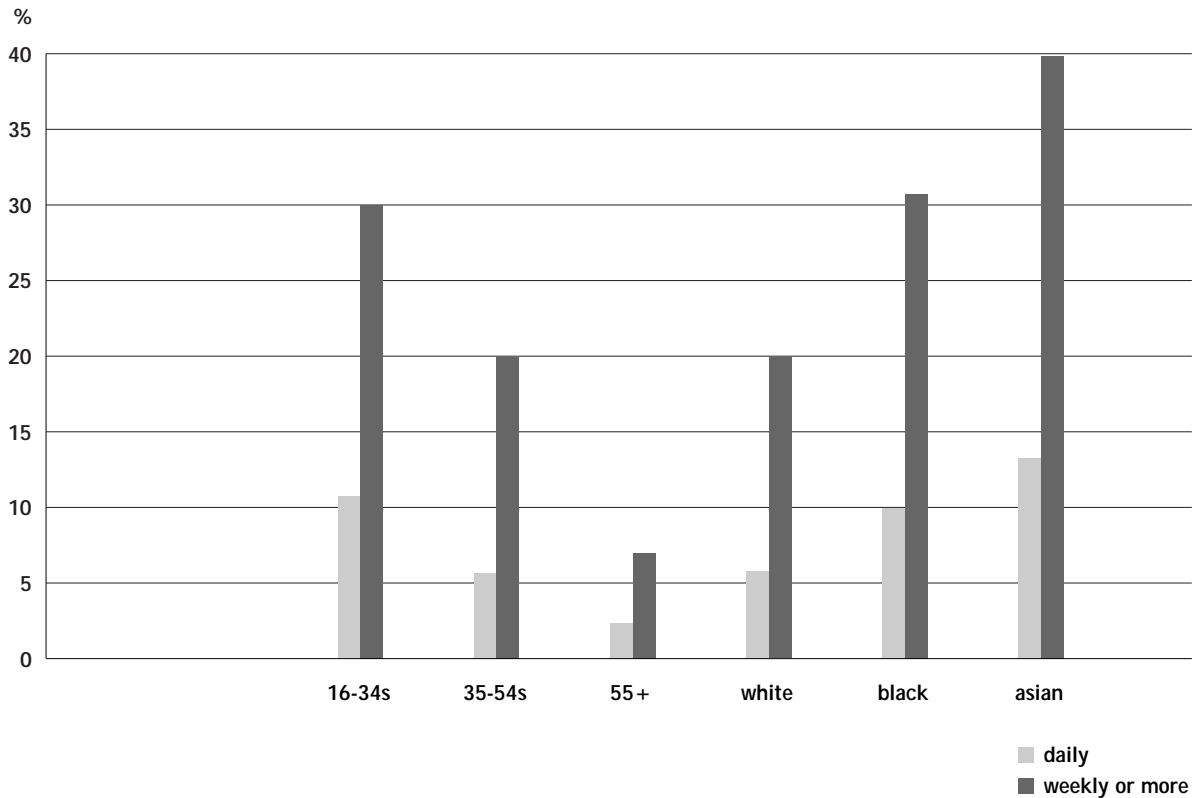
*“News 24 is on BBC1 late at night – it’s good for night workers and shift workers.”* (Asian male, 35+, C2DE, London)

*“If you’re a business person and you come in late – it’s the only station worth watching.”* (Male, 35+, ABC1, London)

#### **(ii) The internet**

The internet, as we have already seen, presents a paradox. It appeals most to the more prosperous social groups, but it also appeals strongly to young people and especially to young people from minority ethnic groups, some of whom are among our most politically disengaged citizens. When asked why they use the internet, users say they value a wide range of characteristics, rather than any one in particular. What young people, under the age of 25, most enjoy about the internet is its convenience, topicality and variety. Ethnic minority groups which use the internet, by contrast, find the internet significantly more relevant to them than do other internet users, probably reflecting their ability to tap into news and information sources outside the UK mainstream.

## INTERNET NEWS USE



Internet users were also asked what type of news they look for when they go online. This is how their answers ranked:

World news: 57%  
 UK news: 50%  
 Sports news: 45%  
 Entertainment news: 38%  
 Business news: 22%  
 Political news: 16%  
 Local news: 14%

This illustrates the important point that the internet is not yet making an impact as a source of local news, an issue further discussed below, though young ethnic minority people find the net relatively more useful than others for local information. Nor is the internet perceived as being a useful source of political news. Subjects of news interest vary a good deal between different groups. Entertainment news is massively more popular among the young (53%) than those over 35 (18%). Political news is of most interest to those over the age of 55, but there is a strong and consistent level of interest in UK news across all groups. Business news chiefly interests older white males. Ethnic minority groups have an exceptionally high level of interest in world news.

Patterns of internet use for news show that 7% use it daily, 22% once a week and 66% never. Of the relatively small number in this survey who consider the internet their main source of news, the pattern of use indicated (the numbers must be treated with caution because of the size of the statistical base) is that

61% turn to it more than once a day and a further 23% daily, suggesting that internet users are vigorous updaters.

*“I don’t like waiting and watching a load of news I’m not interested in – if you use the web you can control and get what you want.”*

(Male, 25-24, C2DE, Staines)

*“You don’t use internet for mainstream news – you have to be focused when you get the news from the internet. TV is easier.”*

(Male, 35+, ABC1, London)

*“There was a story about Bristol Helicopters, one of my customers. I wanted to find out more about it. There was nothing in the papers overnight – that’s an instance where I’d use the net.”*

(Female, 25-34, ABC1, Bristol)

*“I search the net for news from home and work as many times as I can without getting the sack. I always go in through the news, then the sport.”*

(Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

### (iii) Entertainment as news

According to some proponents of new news, not only are conventional news media being challenged by new technologies, they are also under attack from new forms of news and current affairs, deploying approaches more familiar in the world of entertainment. Mark Thomas’s political satire programmes for Channel 4 have been dubbed ‘investigative comedy’, for example, and entertainment genres such as quiz shows, talk shows and even soap opera are presented as effective sources of information and opinion for the modern, media-soaked audience. As Rory Bremner put it about his political comedy act: “Yes it’s about having a laugh, but it’s also about informing people”.

Nor should we see entertainment as a force outside the political domain – rap music, for example, has been described by one leading rapper as ‘the CNN black people never had’. Entertainment is an important site for discussion about race and gender relations, sexual minorities, and can be influential in shaping our understanding of social and political issues such as crime and politics. While there are clear limitations, it should, argues one leading academic, ‘be recognised as a positive part of the media’s contribution to the democratic process’.<sup>88</sup>

Factual television programmes, such as daytime talk shows, which entertain but fail to inform would almost certainly not succeed, just as news programmes which fail to entertain will also fail.

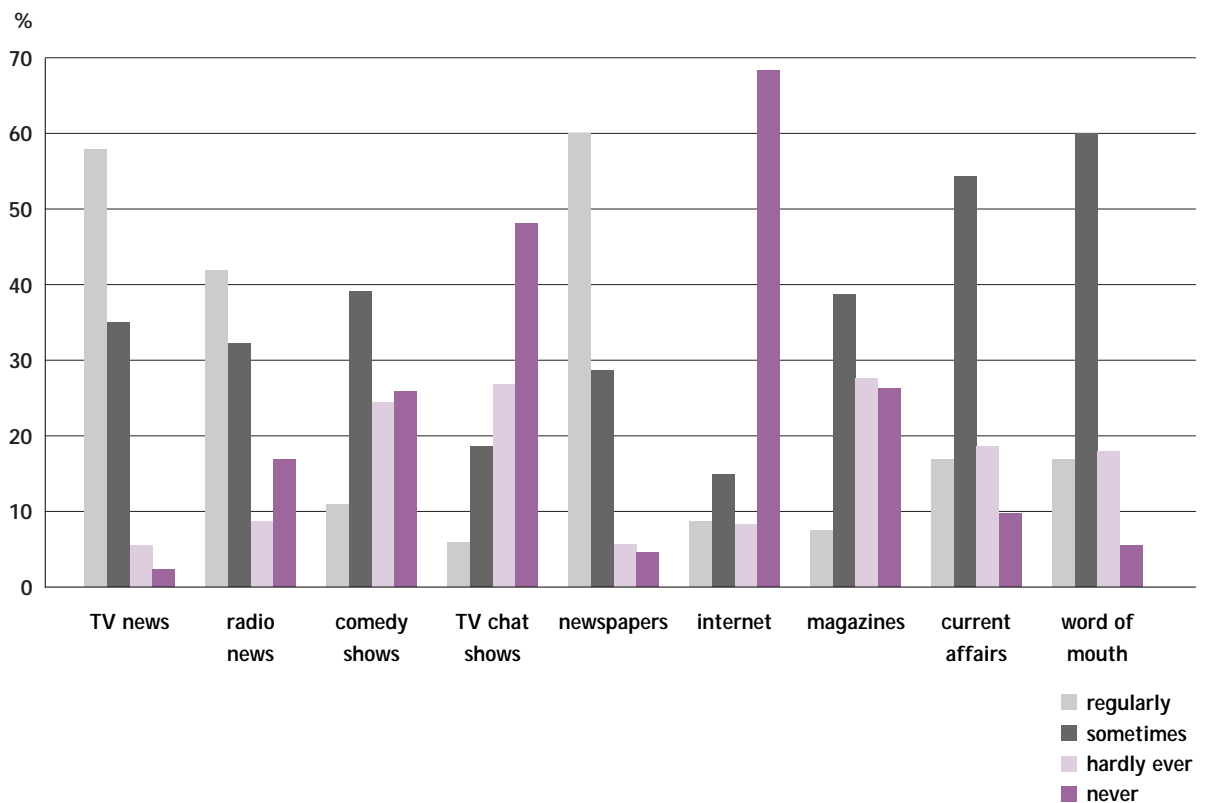
Our survey tried to test an aspect of this matter by inserting into a list of conventional news sources two relatively unconventional ones: television chat

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<sup>88</sup> Curran, J, *Media and Power*, p.238.

shows and comedy shows. The question asked how often individuals felt they learned something from different sources and mentioned specific examples of non-news genres. The chat show option mentioned *Kilroy, Richard and Judy* and *Trisha*. Topical comedy shows were exemplified by *Have I Got News For You* and Rory Bremner. The chart below confirms top billing for television news, though newspapers also do well. The point, though, is that 50% of people say they regularly or sometimes learn something from topical comedies, a figure which exceeds that for magazines (47%) and the internet (23%). Those most likely to say they learn from comedy shows are younger and white, reflecting the audience for these shows.

**DO YOU FEEL YOU LEARN ABOUT THE NEWS FROM... ?**



Such findings were also supported by the focus-groups where entertainment shows were viewed as a useful, if secondary source of information about the news. “You do learn something,” argued one young C2DE Nottingham female. “It might be the same facts, but put in humorous terms.” Answers to this question also confirm the importance of word of mouth as a news source (77% says this is a means of receiving news regularly or sometimes) and the fact that radio news makes most impact upon older people. Ethnic minorities are more likely to rate television chat shows (42% said they learned regularly or sometimes), magazines (58%) and the internet (32%).

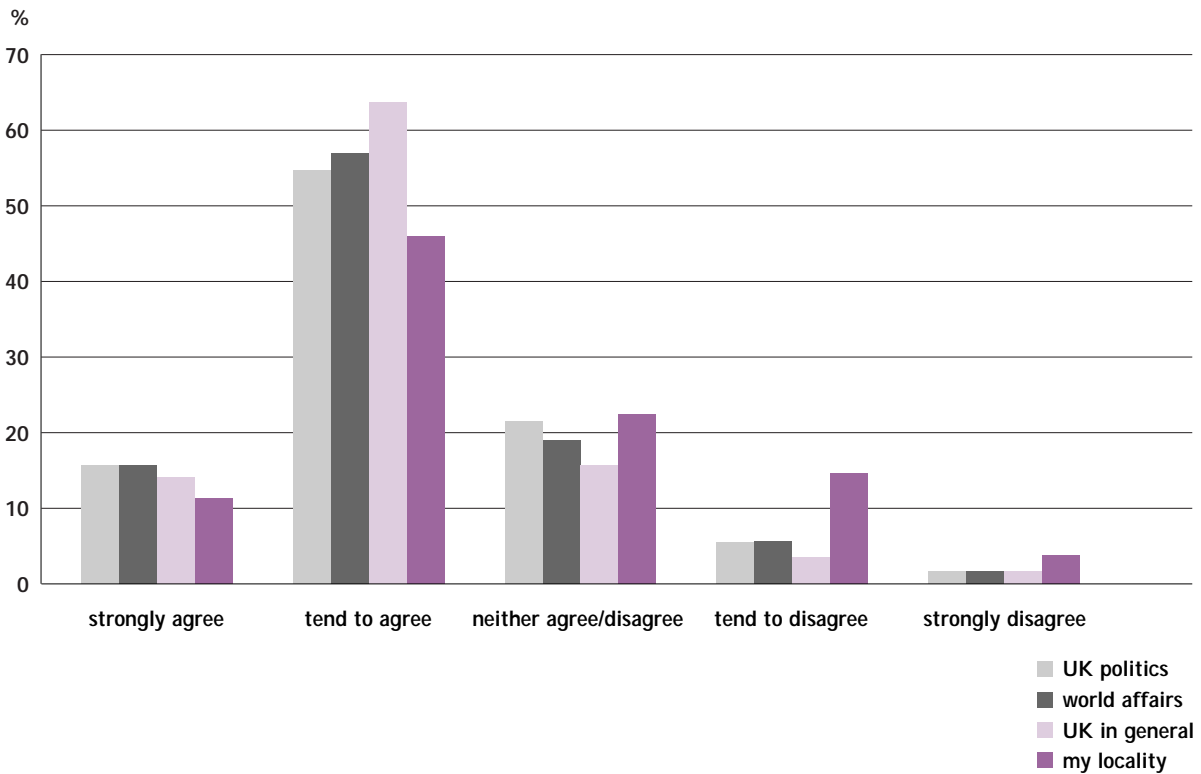
d. Problem areas

(i) Politics and the audience's knowledge base

In spite of these strong approval ratings for broadcast news, however, people might still feel they are not getting enough, or the right, information to make political judgements in an increasingly complicated world. We asked whether broadcasters were providing enough information to understand what is going on in UK politics, world affairs, the individual's locality and the UK in general.

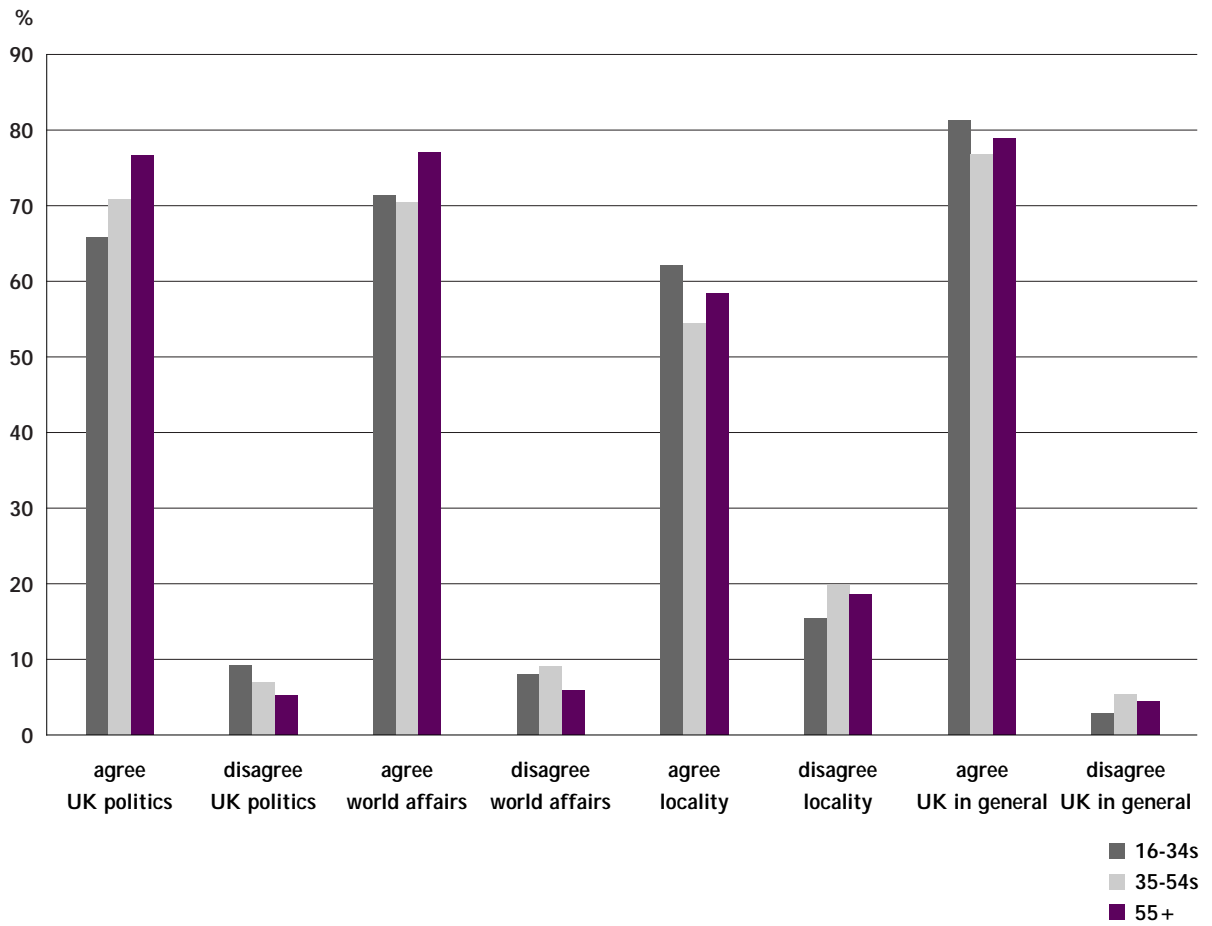
In general, people think that television does a good enough job of informing them about UK politics (only 7% disagree), the world (7% disagree) and the UK generally (5% disagree). Only when it comes to understanding local events is there a significant minority willing to admit that it cannot get the information it wants from television and radio. Here, 58% say that they receive the necessary information, whereas 19% disagree and 23% neither agree nor disagree.

NEWS/CURRENT AFFAIRS PROVIDES ME WITH ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT... ?



Young people were slightly more inclined to express disagreement with the idea that they can get the information they need about British politics, although this imbalance was reversed when it came to questions of local information, probably reflecting the greater prevalence of word of mouth information among the young.

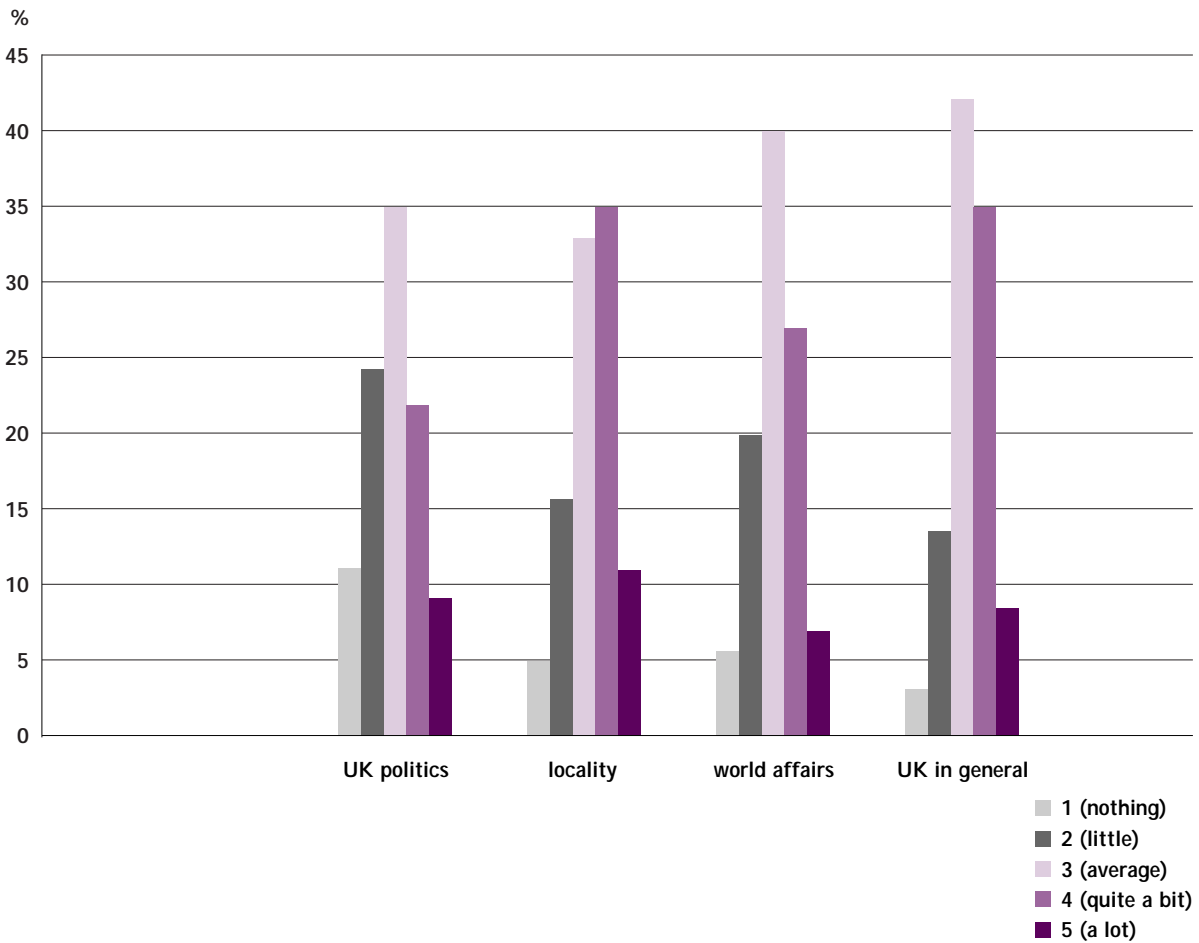
NEWS/CURRENT AFFAIRS PROVIDES ME WITH INFORMATION ABOUT... ?



Another way of exploring this question is to ask people how well informed they feel generally about a range of things. We proposed a five-point scale, from nothing, through little, average, quite a bit and a lot, to inquire about knowledge of UK politics, the locality, world affairs and the UK in general. This provides a more general reading of how good a job the news infrastructure as a whole is doing in giving people the information they need to make sense of things.

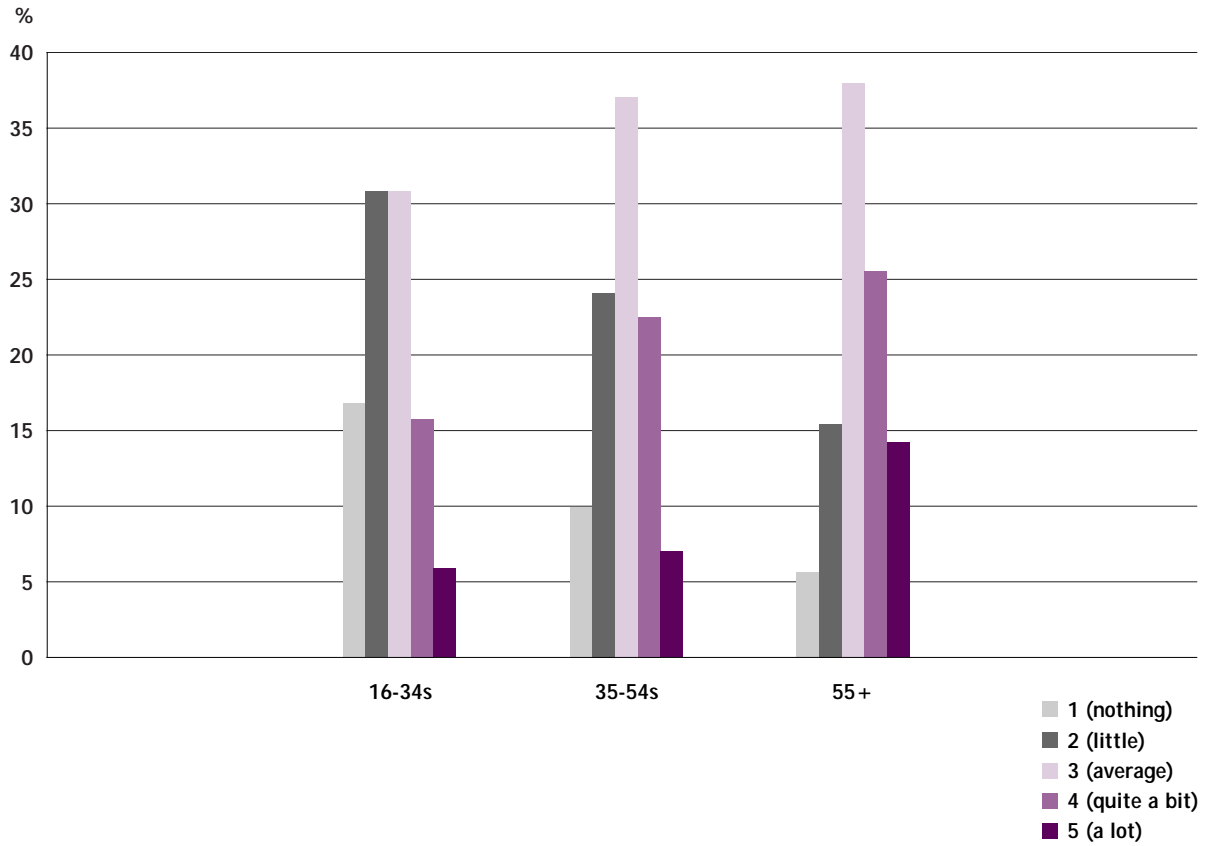
As can be seen from the chart, the highest proportion admitting to little or no knowledge relates to UK politics (35%), compared with world affairs (26%), locality (21%) and the UK in general (16%). Here, the figure on UK politics stands out. When it comes to local media, newspapers, as we would expect, are supplying a vital part of the local news base. But still, only a minority (46%) say they know a lot or quite a lot about local affairs.

**HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT... ?**



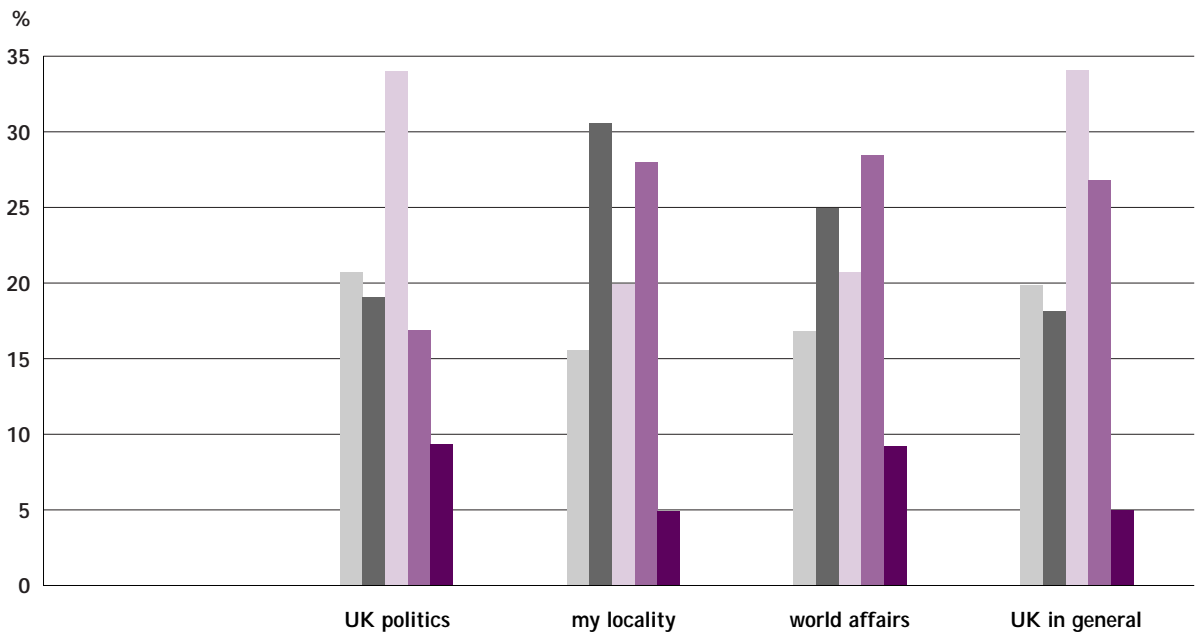
There were some notable age differences here, with older groups more confident in their knowledge than younger groups. In the case of British politics, a striking 48% of 16-34-year-olds said they knew little or nothing about UK politics and even 34% of 35-55-year-olds said the same.

### KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BRITISH POLITICS



Among ethnic minority communities, Asians generally expressed higher levels of confidence about their knowledge of events, but black people were most likely to state that they 'knew nothing' about UK politics (21%), the UK in general (20%), the world (17%) and their locality (16%). Almost half (47%) of black people said they knew little or nothing about their locality, compared with 14% of whites and 20% of Asians.

### KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES AMONG BLACK PEOPLE



Base: all black people

- 1 (nothing)
- 2 (little)
- 3 (average)
- 4 (quite a bit)
- 5 (a lot)

There is, therefore, further evidence here of a serious loss of contact between a minority, but a significant one, of UK citizens and the core information base which makes democratic societies able to function at the local, national and international level. This finding supports those who argue that there is an important information gap opening up in UK society, but taken alongside earlier findings of this survey, it suggests that those who feel uninformed do not at present blame the broadcast media for this state of affairs. More consistent collection of data would be necessary to establish whether the scale of this information gap is increasing.

In order to explore the issue of levels of public knowledge about major political issues, we also asked a question about the NHS, which had recently been allocated a major increase in resources in Gordon Brown's budget. This question, which specifically referred to spending on the NHS, found that only a minority (31%) felt competent to judge the issue: a discouraging result. The young and ethnic minorities expressed below average levels of confidence.

Faced with a political question of this type – hugely important, high profile but quite complex – we also wanted to know whether there was any difference in the types of news media people found most useful. The answers confirmed television's supremacy (87% found it useful), with radio second (67%) more or less alongside broadsheet newspapers (65%) and well ahead of tabloid newspapers (29%) and the internet (23%). Word of mouth was also acknowledged by 58% as a useful source of information on the NHS story.

The focus-groups also discussed political knowledge and took part in a short quiz designed to test it. Of this very small sample of people, 60% could not identify Alan Milburn as Health Secretary, 70% could not identify Estelle Morris as Education Secretary and over 80% could not identify Romano Prodi as President of the European Union. Only 20% know that President Chirac is a conservative. A majority of nearly three-quarters could identify, in a multiple-choice answer, the name of the region disputed by India and Pakistan. A similar proportion successfully identified one of the then current *Big Brother* housemates.

In the focus-groups, there was familiar vitriol against politicians and politics, but again no real sign that people blame the news media for this state of affairs. Participants in the survey are looking to politics for relevance to themselves and their families and for political situations in which they can make some sort of difference. Politics has become remote, dull or, worse, devious and dishonest. On the big issues that do concern people – health, education, housing, employment, transport – they think politicians 'won't do what they say'. They also place a high value on the news media holding the powerful to account.

*"It's to do with a lack of true democracy with the politicians... I don't think you can blame the media... the politicians make the rules... it doesn't matter what the media says."* (Male, 45+, ABC1, Nottingham)

Some stories prominent in the media, such as the row about Tony Blair, Black Rod and the Queen Mother's funeral, were of minimal interest but, on the whole, they decline to blame television for choosing the wrong stories, though some are critical of the newspapers. Recalling the story about Euan Blair's drinking binge, one young woman said:

*"The newspapers carried it on and on. TV got it right, but newspapers got it wrong. Newspapers are out of order most of the time."* (Female, 35-44, C2DE, Leeds)

Other points from the groups:

*"Politics overall is not that interesting – but we are interested in certain areas, like health and animal welfare."* (Female, 35-44, C2DE, Leeds)

*"The word politics or politicians – it makes you think 'Oh God, switch off.' They are grey suits, just droning on."* (Female, 16-24, ABC1, Nottingham)

*"Politicians are shifty perverts, shiny suits, podgy, pompous old actors, egomaniacs, blind, in their own little world. They don't get caught up in the traffic."* (Afro-Caribbean female, 16-34, ABC1, London)

“*Shifty, devious. That is what is meant by playing politics.*” (Asian male, 16-34, ABC1, Manchester)

“*I used to follow politics, but there’s nothing I can do to affect it. The MPs are not addressing the issues.*” (Afro-Caribbean male, 16-34, C2DE, London)

#### (ii) Local news: the missing link

We do not have sufficient research into changing consumption patterns of local news to draw firm conclusions, but it is a matter of fact that in recent years certain developments have worked against the development of local news services in Britain. These factors include:

- Newspapers are under strong business pressure, with falling circulations among morning and evening titles and heavy consolidation, resulting in less competition and, in some areas, reduced investment in journalism. The growth of free newspapers, most recently the *Metro* titles in major cities, has also contributed to the idea that news is free of charge. Newspapers’ classified advertising markets are under attack from other media.
- Radio’s biggest area of growth has been in lightly regulated commercial music radio, which mostly delivers minimal and probably decreasing local news. At the same time, the BBC has pursued an erratic course of investment in local radio, whilst investing heavily in a new national service, Five Live. On commercial radio, news agendas have moved towards being dominated by entertainment and sports news. An indication of the state of things is provided by the experience of the 2001 election when IRN, the ITN subsidiary which provides, in effect, a free news service to commercial radio, offered all 250 stations the opportunity to join a live phone-in to party leaders, including the Prime Minister. Only 12 stations were willing to take part.

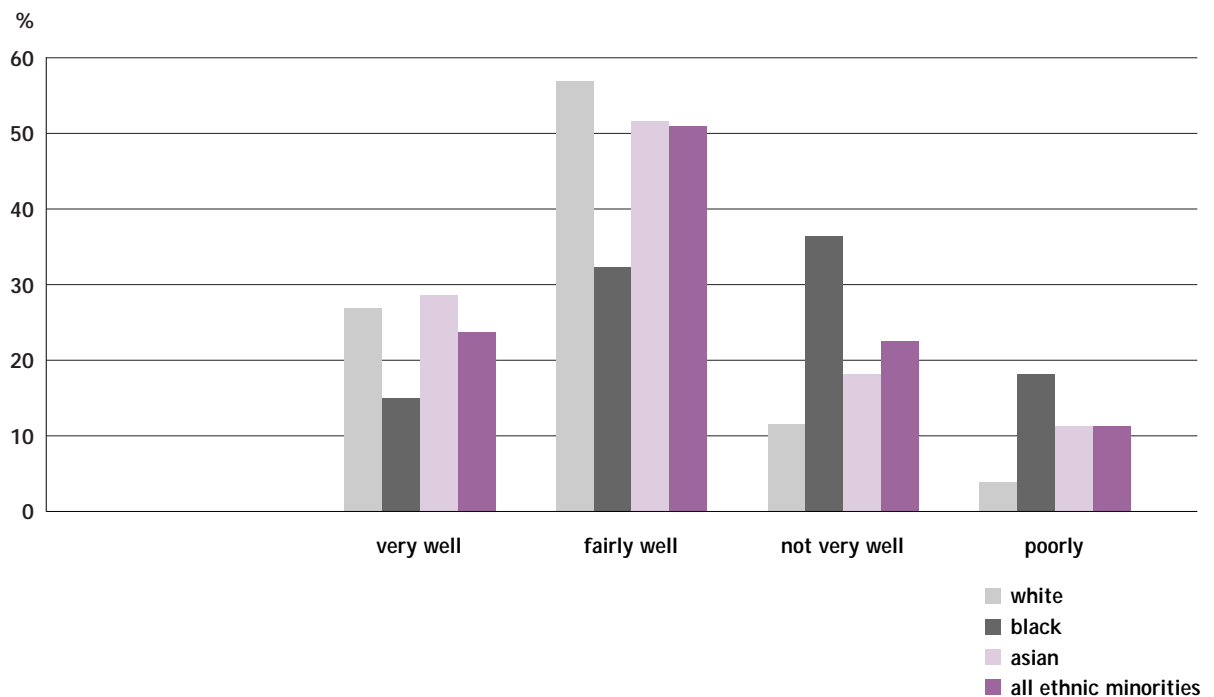
Radio is certainly capable of serving smaller communities and special niches, but has tended to concentrate upon replicating successful music formats, rather than pursuing smaller, less profitable audiences. There is sometimes an assumption that a station provided for a minority ethnic group will appeal to all minorities. Sunrise, for example, has successfully appealed to Asian audiences, but it does not attract Afro-Caribbeans. Stations which appeal to Hindus may well be unattractive to Muslims. The way that an issue like the future of Kashmir is reported can be intensely divisive; this is also the case for a television channel like Zee TV.

- Television has not yet emerged as a local news medium in the UK. There have been some small-scale experiments in local television, but, thus far, no clear public service strategy *vis-à-vis* the distribution of restricted service licences for local broadcasting. One interesting experiment is MATV, a local television service in Leicestershire that was granted a Restricted Service Licence to provide a service that reflected the needs of the local Asian community (totalling about 30% of the population). A spokesperson for the channel explains the rationale: “We felt that Leicester was being left out with not enough in-depth television news. We aim to fill that gap.” Its local news programme *Leicestershire in focus* is its most popular offering. MATV was mentioned positively in the focus-groups conducted in the area.

- Regional television news audiences have diminished sharply in recent years (see above) in the wake of rescheduling decisions on ITV.
- The internet, which has great potential as a local and even community news medium, does not yet appear to be fulfilling that function, other than perhaps via email networks, which are difficult to monitor.

In this survey, we asked several questions about attitudes to local news services and compared the findings with attitudes towards the provision of national and international news. One set of replies indicates that 83% think themselves 'well served' for news about their locality and so appears to suggest only modest cause for concern, but that has to be compared with the figures for national news (97% 'well served') and news about the world (93%). And only 27% declared themselves 'very well served' for news about their locality, compared with 54% of people stating they were 'very well served' for news about Britain, and 49% 'very well served' for news about the world. The almost one in five who feel not well served with local news are especially concentrated among ethnic minorities. Well over half of black people below the age of 54 say they are not well served for local news and almost half of Asians aged 35-54 say the same. These ethnic groups are also slightly less satisfied with news about Britain than white groups and they are less (relatively) happy about world news provision, but it is the local news figures which stand out. Those who live in homes with multichannel television are also slightly more likely to be dissatisfied with local news services, (19% versus 16%) indicating that the advance in television choice generally is making no impact upon the demand for local news services.

#### HOW WELL SERVED ARE YOU FOR LOCAL NEWS?

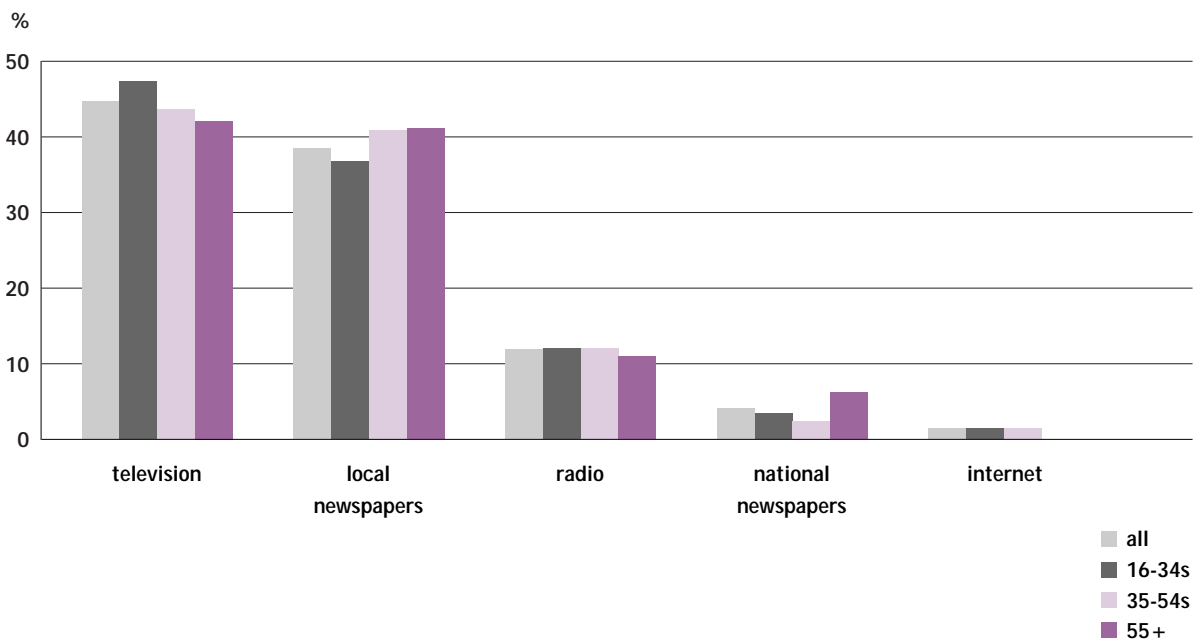


The research also investigated the extent to which levels of satisfaction about local news services vary around the country. The region with the most pronounced dissatisfaction about local news is London (26%); the regions with

the lowest levels of dissatisfaction are Northern Ireland (4%) and the North East (5%), both areas with relatively strong local newspapers and local radio.

From where are most people receiving their local news? ITC research in recent years has suggested that television and local newspapers run neck and neck in this respect; a picture confirmed in this survey, which finds 45% naming television as their main source and 39% newspapers. Radio is named by 12%, national newspapers by 4% and the internet by 1%. The young are somewhat more likely to name television and older people more likely to mention newspapers. Television is also more likely to be the preferred source for ethnic minority groups. Black people make remarkably little use of local and regional newspapers (12%) and find radio (27%) relatively more useful.

### SOURCES OF LOCAL NEWS



This is a worrying picture, in that most television news does not even attempt to focus at the truly local scale: the geographical areas served are, for the most part, much too large for this to be possible. Yet this is increasingly the medium upon which most people rely, a pattern even more marked for non-voters in the 2001 general election than for voters. Newspapers, which can serve quite small localities by the use of multiple editions, have a tenuous hold on younger readers and a very weak position among the black and Asian population. Black music radio stations are regarded as a useful source of news, though what they provide is rather limited, and the internet has not yet matured into a significant local news medium, though it is turned to especially by younger black people, who are otherwise ill-served.

It also became clear from subsequent questions about the level of knowledge people feel they have, and their ability to respond to political and other public questions, that people feel less adequately informed about their locality than either the world at large, or the UK in general (see section g p.78).

These local news issues were further explored in the focus-groups, where it emerged that for many people, politics lacks meaning because it is not rooted in a real, local context. In a world where people, increasingly, expect news to be free and ambient, local news in many circumstances simply does not exist. The specific problems raised in this regard for local democratic institutions, such as local authorities, the courts and local manifestations of public services, such as the NHS, are very serious indeed. But there is also a range of problems which, by extension, reaches into the current debate about political engagement at the national level.

*“Housing is a problem for us. It is difficult to get a flat. We need to know what’s going on in this area.”* (Male, 16-24, C2DE, Hounslow)

*“My girlfriend is about to have a baby, so I’m concerned about reports about the local hospital.”* (Male, 16-24, ABC1, Staines)

*“You want to know a local school will be good for your child – you don’t want them to go to schools where they’re talking about stabbing.”* (Female, 35+, ABC1, Manchester)

*“I am more interested in what is happening locally as it affects me and my kids.”* (Asian female, 35+, ABC1, Leicester)

*“We need to know about local crime – there’s a lot of problems with drugs in this area.”* (White male, 45+, C2DE, Cardiff)

*“Something might happen a mile away, but it could be a million miles away. If you want local news you do have to go out of your way to find out.”* (White male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“This is a community where word of mouth is often the best source of local news. There’s no TV coverage in our area, unless there’s a murder in the village. Now that we get our coverage from the Glasgow area, it’s biased to that.”* (Male, 35+, ABC1, Edinburgh)

*“We are a London suburb, but we are also Surrey, so we fall into two brackets, and fall into neither at the same time.”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“London Live is not really local. It could be over in Romford or something,”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“I like TV for local news but it doesn’t do as much as I would like about this area.”* (White female, 35-44, C2DE, Leeds)

*“The local papers are definitely getting thinner.”* (Female, 16-24, ABC1, Nottingham)

*“Basically we have a couple of freebies and the local paper is weekly, so not up to date.”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE Staines)

*“I don’t feel at all informed by local radio.”* (Afro-Caribbean female, 16-34, ABC1, London)

*“They have to keep certain things back so they don’t upset everyone. They’re keeping quiet about Terminal Five (Heathrow). The local paper is doing zilch.”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 16-34, C2DE, London)

*“I listen to Choice – but it isn’t local local. We’ve got Sunrise, but that’s for Asians.”* (Afro-Caribbean female, 16-34, ABC1, London)

*“Local news on TV is really boring – the people are really old.”* (Asian male, 16-34, C2DE, Leicester).

*“For local news I look at Metro, I don’t really look at BBC North West.”* (Asian female, 25-34, C2DE, Leeds)

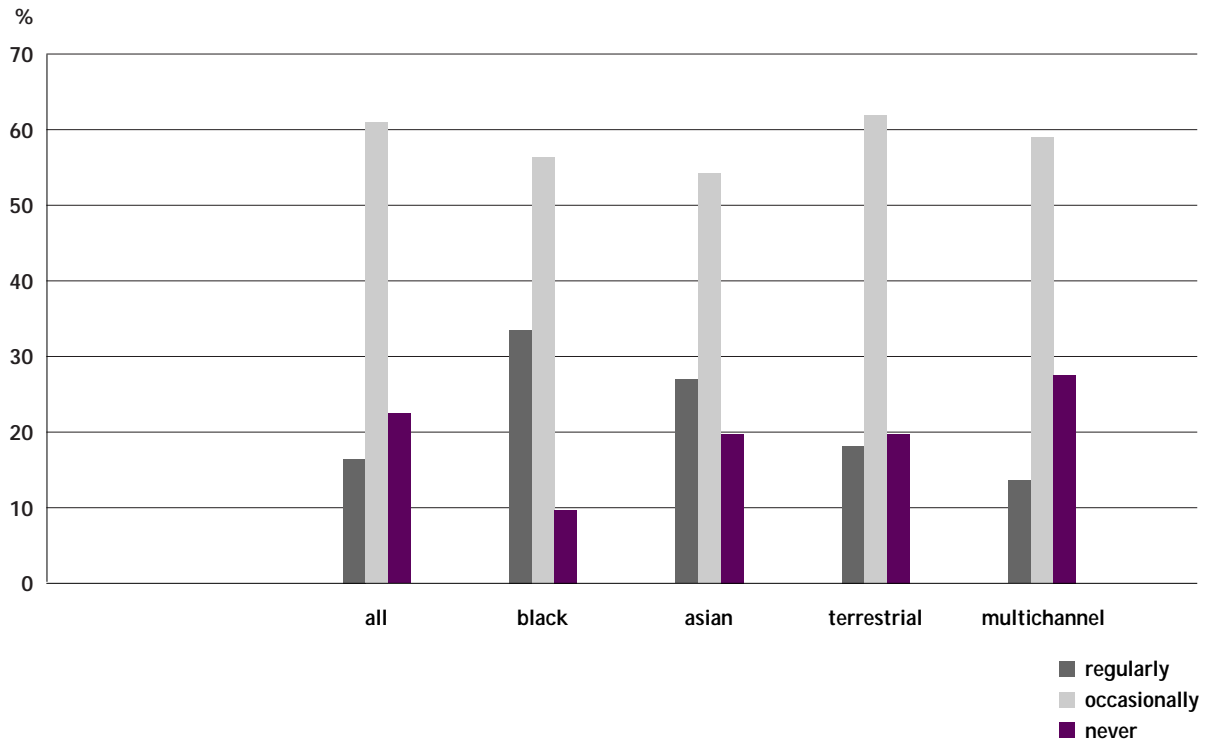
### (iii) The death of current affairs?

The evidence so far in this report is that the volume and prominence of current affairs offerings on UK television has declined sharply in recent years. With a landmark BBC offering like *Panorama* relegated to Sunday evenings and one-time ITV flagships like *World in Action*, *This Week* and *Weekend World*, long since abandoned, it is not surprising that people talk about the death of current affairs television. Professional television journalists often speak in the gloomiest terms about current affairs.

For the audience, however, the picture may be more confused, since it is not always easy to distinguish current affairs from other forms of factual programming or, for example, to say whether programmes like *Newsnight* or *Channel 4 News*, both of which have held on to or increased their audiences in recent years, are news or current affairs or a hybrid of both.

The survey attempted to find out whether there is public dissatisfaction about the state of current affairs television. What it found is that only 16% claim to be regular watchers of current affairs. Some 61% say they watch sometimes and for 23% current affairs is a genre of no interest. In other words, the mass appointment to view audience for the current affairs series no longer exists. Men (19%) are more likely to watch regularly than women (14%) and ethnic minorities claim particularly high levels of current affairs viewing. The most devout non-watchers are under-34-year-old white people (37%) and the most devout watchers are young black and Asian adults. Multichannel television, with its greater choice, works against current affairs: in these homes only 14% are regular viewers, compared with 18% in other homes. In multichannel homes, over a fifth (27%) say they never watch current affairs.

## HOW OFTEN DO YOU WATCH CURRENT AFFAIRS?



We explored in focus-groups the idea that the audience may be pining for a greater depth and range of treatments from radio and television current affairs, but it was difficult to confirm any such hypothesis. In the focus-groups, there was, however, strong evidence of people paying scrupulously close attention to specific current affairs programmes which directly concerned them. For example, a young Asian man had taped a programme about politics in the mosque and was showing it to friends and family to provoke discussion. This indicates the ability of current affairs to appeal, by selection of topic, to a highly defined audience. It perhaps indicates that broadcasters should take a more relaxed view of the audience ratings for current affairs, which will vary according to the subject; but even 'small' audiences of around one million may be meeting an important need.

The type of programme which received most favourable mention was the format which allows the ordinary viewer to interrogate a politician or someone famous. Viewers also speak warmly of television programmes which hold power to account: they seem to share to some extent at least the assessment of television current affairs professionals that there is insufficient backing today for investigative television journalism.

Invited to choose between a range of possible current affairs subjects topical at the time of the research, the most favoured subjects were: police corruption, paedophiles and Al-Qaeda. A piece about the relationship between President Bush and Prime Minister Blair was considered of some interest, but there was less enthusiasm for programmes about Israel, Northern Ireland and the reform of Parliament. People were also asked for their response to special days of programming, like the BBC NHS day. Although these were thought interesting enough to dip into, they did not elicit great enthusiasm.

Current affairs, it seems, is struggling to make itself heard in an ambient news world, with such a multitude of television choices. Current affairs only breaks

through when it has the right subject at the right time. However, specialist current affairs strands which have enjoyed consistent scheduling have performed well in audience terms.

*“I like to watch the debate. People are asking all the questions you want to ask.”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 35+, C2DE, Manchester)

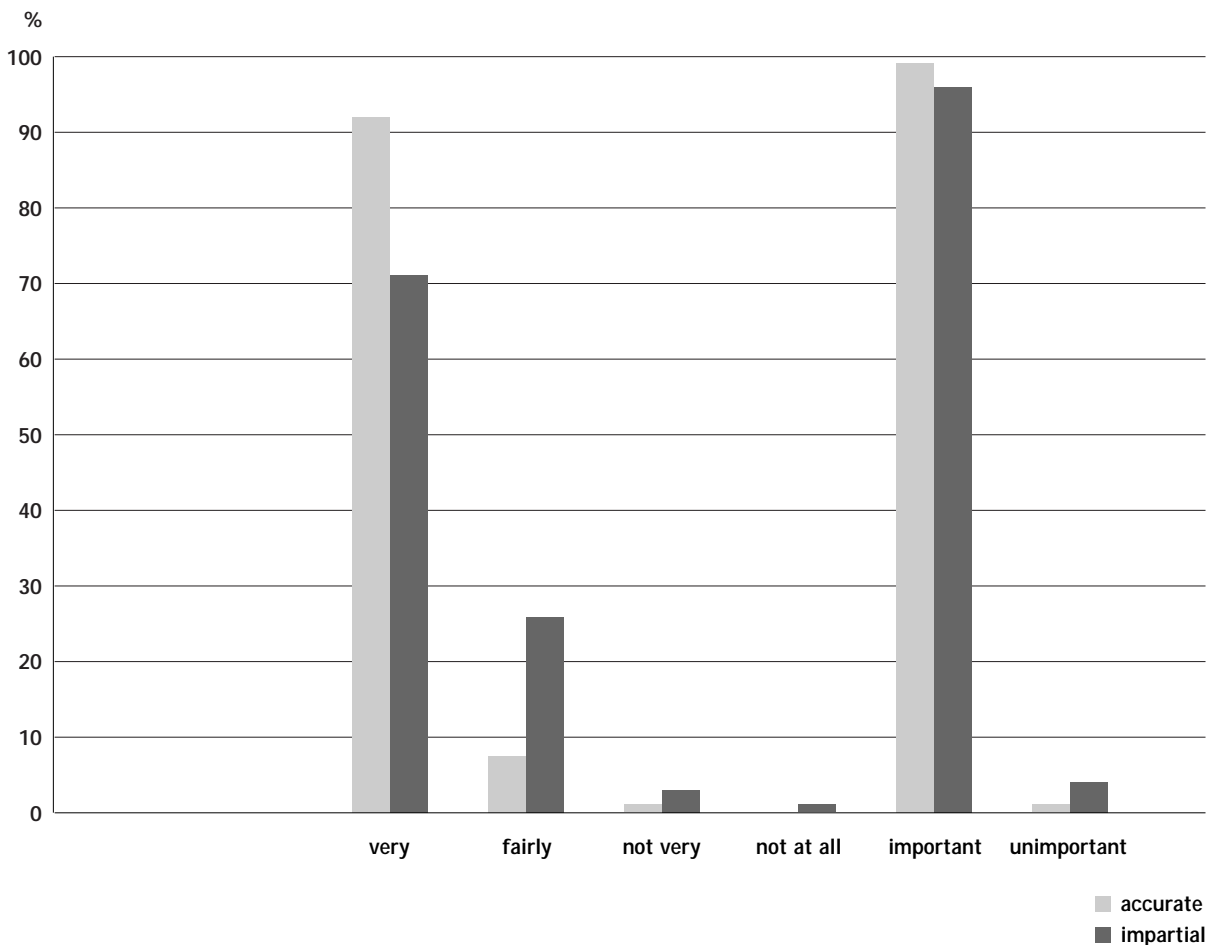
e. Regulatory issues

**(i) Impartiality and accuracy**

A founding principle of UK broadcasting regulation is that news services should be accurate and politically impartial. Advocates of a market-based approach to broadcasting and broadcast news, such as News International,<sup>89</sup> argue that this is a form of political interference which will and should eventually give way to a marketplace of rival broadcast news services on the model of the newspaper market.

The British public does not agree. Almost all (92%) think the principle of accuracy in news is very important and 71% take the same view about impartiality. Almost all (97%) say that impartiality is fairly or very important.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS IMPARTIALITY AND ACCURACY?**

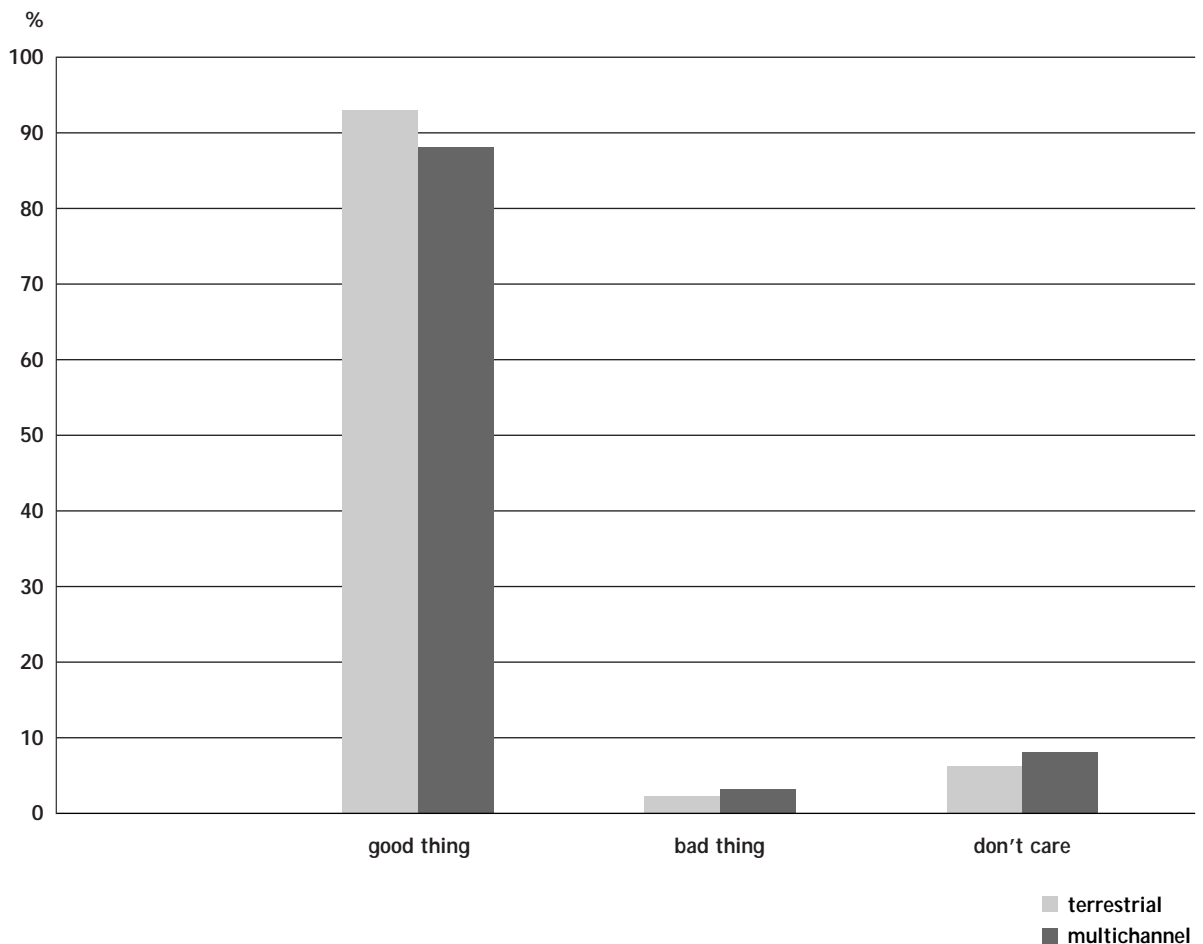


<sup>89</sup> News International, Response to the Communications White Paper Bill process, 2002.

When informed, or reminded, that UK law requires impartiality from broadcasters, 91% said this was a good thing, though support for this principle is less strongly held in the Asian and especially the black community (64%) than elsewhere, perhaps reflecting a view among these communities that broadcast news is not impartial in its reporting of issues of concern to them. Strikingly, more than one in five black people said they didn't care one way or another about a legal requirement for impartiality. There is also some evidence of less commitment to this principle among younger people: 88% of 16-34-year-olds agreed that a statutory duty of impartiality was a good thing.

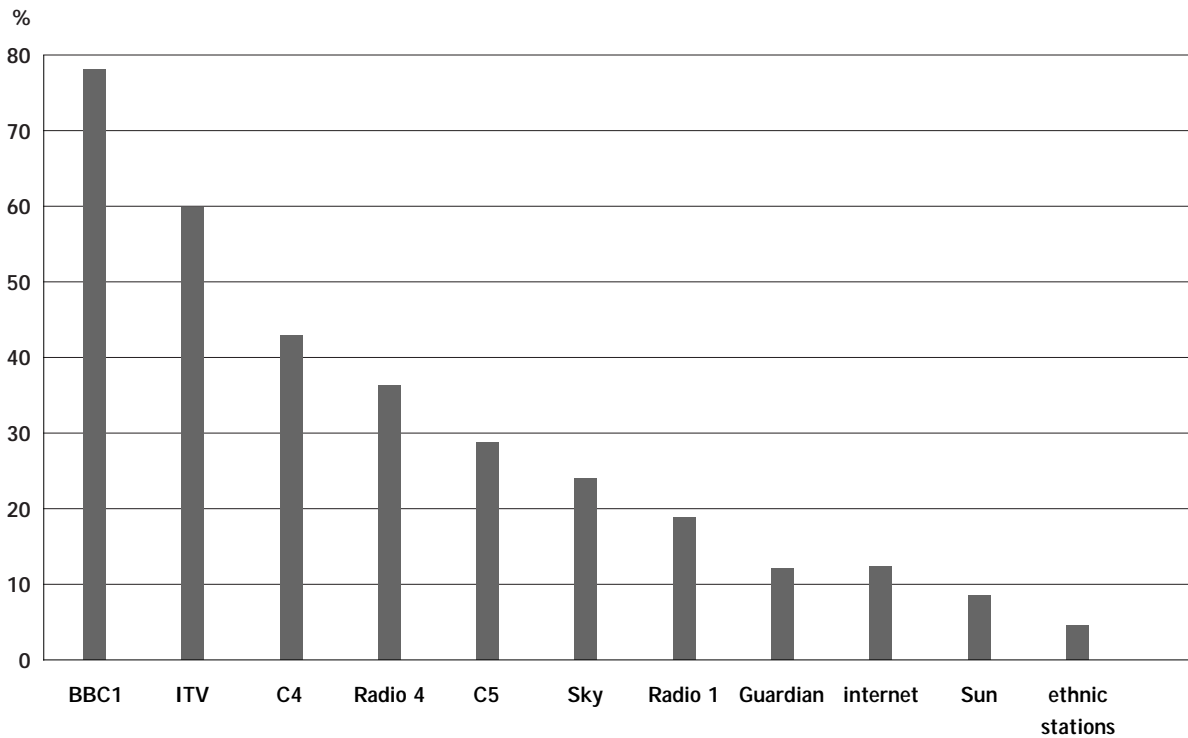
Perhaps most significantly, those who live in multichannel homes are also less supportive of this principle (88% compared with 93% in non-multichannel homes), adding weight to the view that there may be the first signs of a growing volume of dissent from this long-established principle as viewers enjoy greater choice. This may be an early warning sign that Parliament and regulators should be ready to understand and respond to a shifting view and to encourage innovation, rather than stifle it.

**IS THE LAW REQUIRING NEWS IMPARTIALITY A GOOD THING?**



Given the overall strength of support for the principle or goal of impartiality, it is interesting to know whether people regard current broadcast news suppliers as equally impartial, given that they are all bound by the same law. The chart demonstrates clearly that this is not the case: only the BBC and ITV television news attract a 50% plus rating

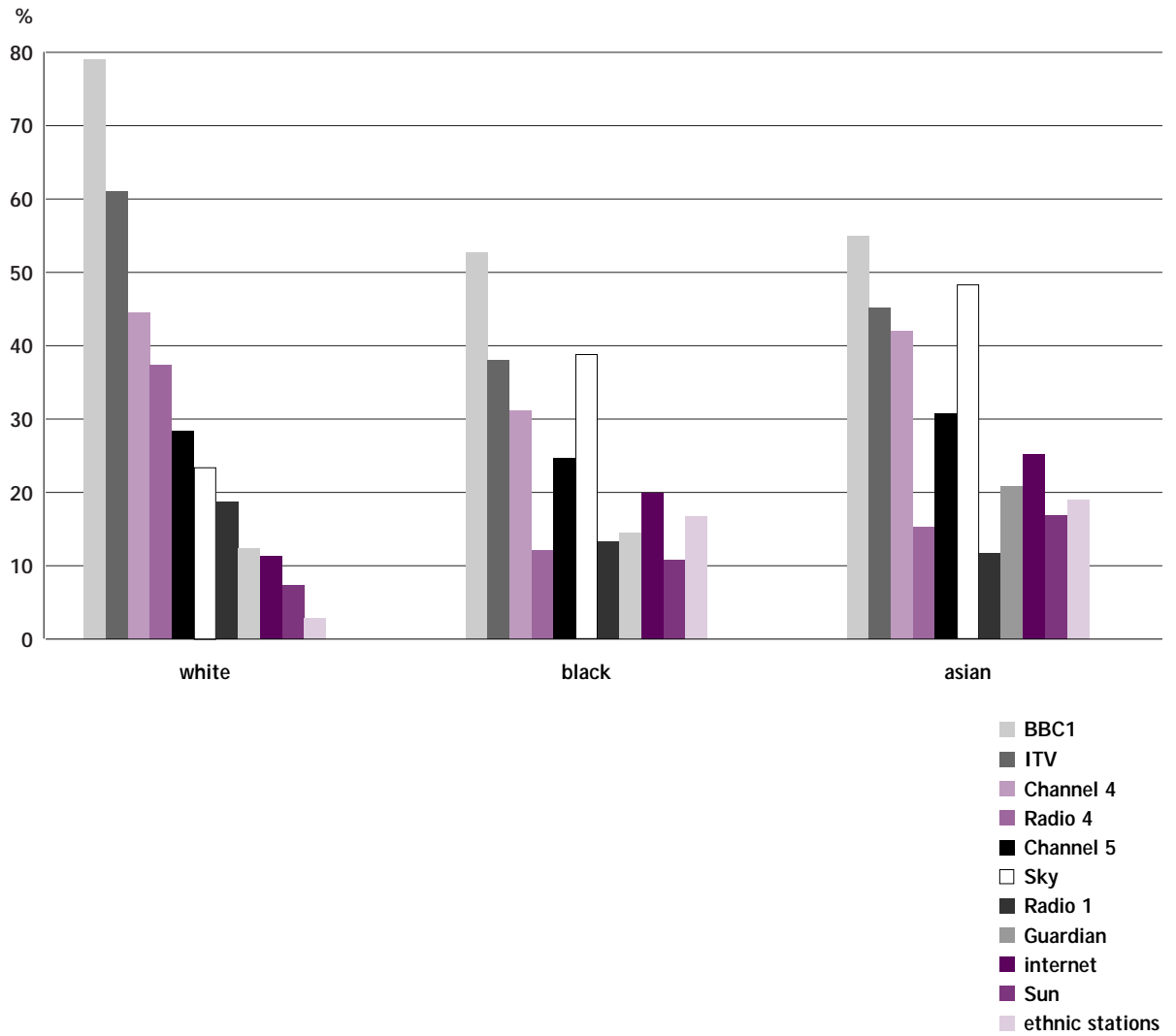
### ARE NEWS PROVIDERS IMPARTIAL?



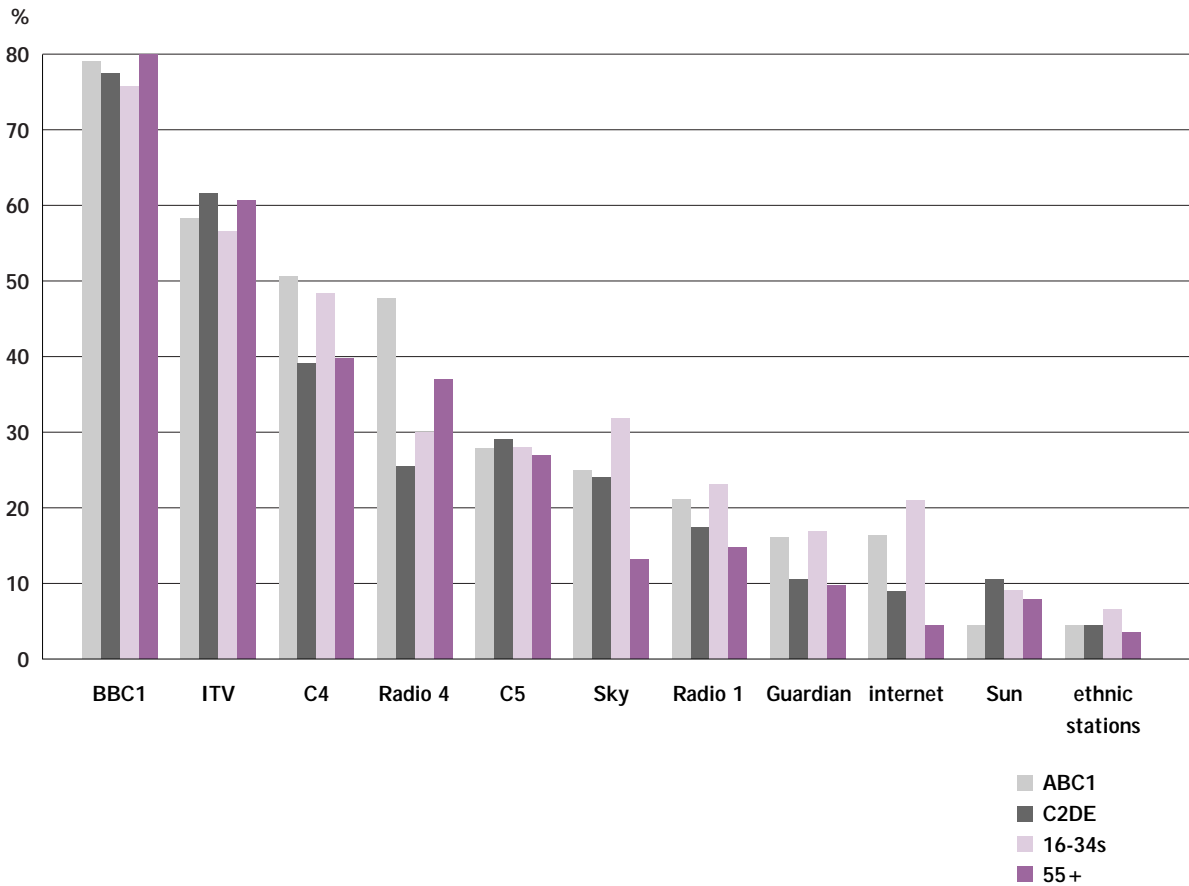
It is important, however, to bear in mind that those who use a particular news service are much more likely to view it as impartial. For example, Sky News, which is popular in multichannel homes, is regarded as impartial by 47% of those in multichannel homes, compared with 24% in all homes: so its impartiality rating is undermined by those who are not really familiar with its work. Radio 4's news impartiality rating, at 36%, is undermined by the very low confidence felt in it by ethnic minorities and because of its distinctive class profile. Some 47% of ABC1s regard Radio 4 news as impartial, against only 26% of C2DEs, a pattern directly reversed in views of *The Sun's* impartiality (11% of C2DEs versus 6% ABC1s). Likewise, young people have a more favourable view of Radio 1's news impartiality than their elders and 68% of those who say their main source of news is the internet regard the internet as an impartial source of news, compared with only 13% of the sample as a whole.

Taking an overview of the impartiality question by ethnicity, age and class, we can see that there is really a very highly differentiated view among different groups. Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky, for example, come out relatively better among black and Asian viewers than BBC television news.

TRUST IN IMPARTIALITY: ETHNIC GROUPS



## TRUST IN IMPARTIALITY: AGE AND SOCIAL CLASS



The focus-groups confirmed strong resistance to any relaxation of the laws on impartiality: they wanted the standard maintained, even if it was difficult or impossible to achieve.

*“It’s just too important. The main terrestrial channels especially reach and influence so many people in their homes. You don’t go out and buy a TV news programme like a newspaper, where you know it will reflect certain views.”*  
(Male, 25-44, C2DE, London)

*“Newspapers just aim stories at their readership. TV has to cover everybody.”*  
(Male, 45+, C2DE, Cardiff)

*“We don’t want Trevor giving his opinions as well.”* (Female, 16-24, ABC1, Nottingham)

Some focus-group members, however, felt that on certain stories, television news was definitely partisan. An example which came up on a number of occasions was the controversy over the MMR vaccine, which was of high concern to people with young children. The BBC, especially, was felt to be too readily sympathetic to official governmental and medical advice, to the point where the idea emerged in several groups that the law on broadcast news impartiality should be widened to include not only politics and industrial disputes, but scientific and medical controversies and social issues.

*“I’ve had my first child vaccinated with MMR but now I’m pregnant again and I’m not sure what to do. I’m concerned.”* (Female, 35-34, ABC1, Bristol)

*“Things, like risk in relation to HRT, we don’t get enough information.”*  
(Female, 35+, ABC1, Leicester)

*“On MMR, nobody has made their mind up. Tony Blair hasn’t said what he has done – so how can you build your life around it?”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 35+, ABC1, London)

The ethnic groups were, as the quantitative data suggests, less rigid on this point, indicating that the news often did not look impartial to them. This view was more strongly held by young black people than older black people. Some argued that news stations operating from a black point of view would help to redress this balance. Also, because many, if not most, Asians have access to Asian-language television news, which they do not regard as being impartial at all, they are very familiar with partisanship in news and feel confident about aiming off for it. One man said that he had been in Karachi on September 11, 2001 and witnessed Pakistani state television’s coverage of events, which he had found utterly partisan. He had turned to BBC World Service radio as an antidote. Within the Asian community, the BBC is often compared with Indian or Pakistani media.

*“People rely on TV for news and watch TV news because it is impartial. If it changed then you would pick a side that you watched all the time because it had the same views as yourself. I think that’s wrong... it would breed ignorance. People watch TV because they don’t believe the papers – The Star, The Sun and The Mirror.”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 35+, C2DE, Manchester)

*“News is about facts. All the opinions can come in documentaries, but they should still be balanced.”* (Male, 35-44, ABC1, Edinburgh)

It should be added that although neither the focus-groups nor quantitative work were on a scale sufficient to capture a thorough view of all of the UK’s national and regional preoccupations, members of the Scottish focus-groups very clearly expressed the view that they regard the domination of their television news by what they perceive as English or London perspectives as an abomination.

*“South of England is the main focus – Scotland is an add-on at the end. Our main news on telly is the English news.”* (Male, 35-44, ABC1, Edinburgh)

Similar, if less strident, complaints about ‘metropolitan bias’ were also made in the focus-groups in Wales and the north of England.

#### **(ii) Trust in truthfulness**

Viewers who consider a news provider to be impartial might be expected to trust that provider to tell the truth. We know from previous research by MORI that the public draws sharp distinctions among different professional groups, trusting doctors, teachers and, relevantly here, television newscasters rather highly, but trusting journalists and politicians very little.<sup>90</sup> It is also the case that a source of

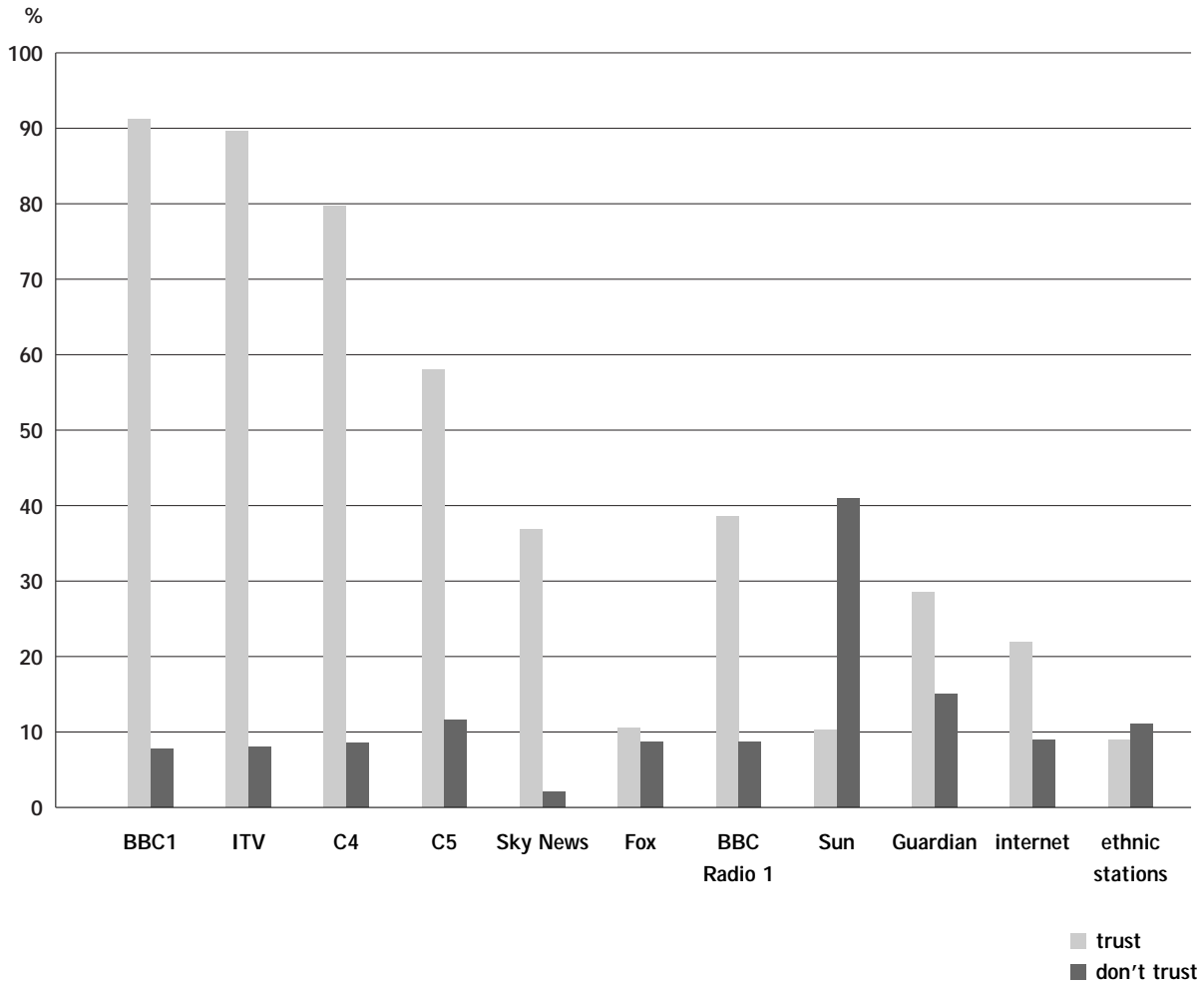
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<sup>90</sup> MORI, ‘Trust in Politicians, Civil Servants etc’, March 2002.

information might be impartial, but still not trusted to tell the truth in that the impartiality might be leading to an even-handedness which, in the view of the audience, works against truth-telling.

This survey suggests that people are more confident that they get the truth from news providers than that those news providers are impartial. The main television news providers all score well on this question, with BBC1 at 92% and ITV at 90%.

### WHO DO YOU TRUST TO TELL THE TRUTH?



These figures are lower among black and Asian viewers, but still strongly positive. They are also more positive among younger members of these ethnic communities than older members, which is an encouraging sign for the broadcasters. Significantly, the emergence of multichannel television does not appear to threaten this position: there is no difference in the level of trust in five-channel and multichannel homes for the BBC and only a slight drop in trust in multichannel homes for ITV. Channel 4 scores an overall rating of 80%, which is some way ahead of Channel 5's 58%. Sky's 36% again contrasts with the 81% who regard it as truthful when those who do not use it are excluded. Channel 4's score among those who use it is 91% and Channel 5's 81%. Sky, Channel 4 and Channel 5 are all trusted very highly by younger black and Asian viewers.

Viewing figures for foreign news broadcasters like Fox are too small to deliver reliable samples in an exercise of this kind, but for what it is worth, Fox's net trust rating comes in at 11%. This figure rises to just over half for those who claim to be users of Fox.

Among non-broadcasters, only 29% of the whole sample regard *The Guardian* as truthful, but this figure rises to 65% when non-users are excluded. For *The Sun*, the comparable figures are 11% and 21%. Black people are more likely than white people to regard *The Sun* as truthful, as are young people, compared with older people.

Radio 1 is trusted to tell the truth by 81% of its users and the internet by 71% of users. It follows from this that the internet is regarded as truthful by younger people and by ethnic minority communities. Ethnic minority radio stations are trusted by 69% of those who are both users and members of the relevant ethnic minority group.

Responses to this question also illuminate the tendency of today's news consumers to graze many sources. According to replies to the question about truthfulness, over 40% of the population says that it receives some news from the following sources: BBC television, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky News, Radio 1, *The Sun* and *The Guardian*.

We also know from previous MORI research that television newscasters are, as personalities, very highly trusted. We tested these trust levels against a variety of other television and public personalities, mostly from outside the world of news. Trevor McDonald of ITV confirmed his position as the nation's most trusted figure: 43% trust him a great deal and 92% trust him either a great deal or a fair amount. Channel 5's Kirsty Young, the only other newscaster in the list (24% trust a great deal) ran second, beating a list of other noted show business celebrities: Bob Geldof (22%); Ian Hislop (11%); Richard and Judy (10%); David Beckham (9%); Chris Tarrant (9%); Cilla Black (8%); Tony Blair (7%) and Ali G (1%). In ranking the Prime Minister second bottom to the fictional comic character Ali G, those surveyed are reinforcing their message about the state of UK politics.

Focus-groups fleshed out these views of channels and individuals. ITV is admired for its down to earth language, its light-hearted touches, and for Trevor McDonald. It is, in the view of those who watch, 'for people like us'. The BBC's reputation is supreme, 'the best in the world', but it is also criticised for being stuffy, aimed at the middle classes or, in the words of a young Afro-Caribbean London woman, at "ye olde school – the Ya people". *Channel 4 News* is admired for its seriousness, for its multicultural feel and for its analysis. Some criticise it for being anti-American and some find it dull. *Channel 5 News* is liked for its speed and liveliness, but it is not grown up enough for some viewers' tastes.

### **(iii) Should commercial broadcasters be allowed to cut back on news?**

Given the huge expansion in the BBC's news operation and the arrival of 24-hour television news, there is a case for saying that there is too much television news and that somewhere in mainstream television, there should be a news-free or news-light zone. Or, to take the argument advanced by ITV in recent years, news should be less prominently scheduled and take up less airtime.

Almost one in five in this survey (18%) agrees with this proposition and 56% disagree. Men are more likely to agree than women and the young more likely to agree than the old. Ethnic minorities are marginally more likely to agree, as are C2DEs and those in multichannel homes. This is an area of significant minority disagreement, but still with a majority preference for the *status quo*.

#### (iv) Ownership

The focus-groups were also asked about ownership of news media organisations, which is an important feature of the Communications Bill.

The groups displayed a high level of confusion. Most people did not know who owned different news organisations – some cared and some did not – and many assumed that there were governmental or regulatory checks to ensure that there were safeguards against any negative developments. There was no sign of strong anti-American views, though concern was expressed in one Afro-Caribbean group about French ownership of British television, given the perceived anti-immigrant mood in France.

There was, however, a widespread understanding that the best defence against any interest gaining too much power in the news media is strong rules on diversity. That said, when those taking part in the survey were asked in the final question whether they agreed with the statement: “I like a variety of news sources to compare reports”, only 50% agreed with this, 27% taking a neutral stance and 23% disagreeing. This reflects the practical difficulty of any individual consciously comparing broadcast news reports, but also provides a further indication of the level of confidence the audience has in public service broadcasters’ efforts to present a fair picture.

*“It could fall into the wrong hands. We could have a Middle East owner for our TV stations.”* (Male, 35-44, ABC1, Edinburgh)

*“If Murdoch had a monopoly he would just put his views.”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“There’s two sides to every point of view and you’re not going to get it if one man controls too much.”* (Afro-Caribbean female, 16-34, ABC1, London)

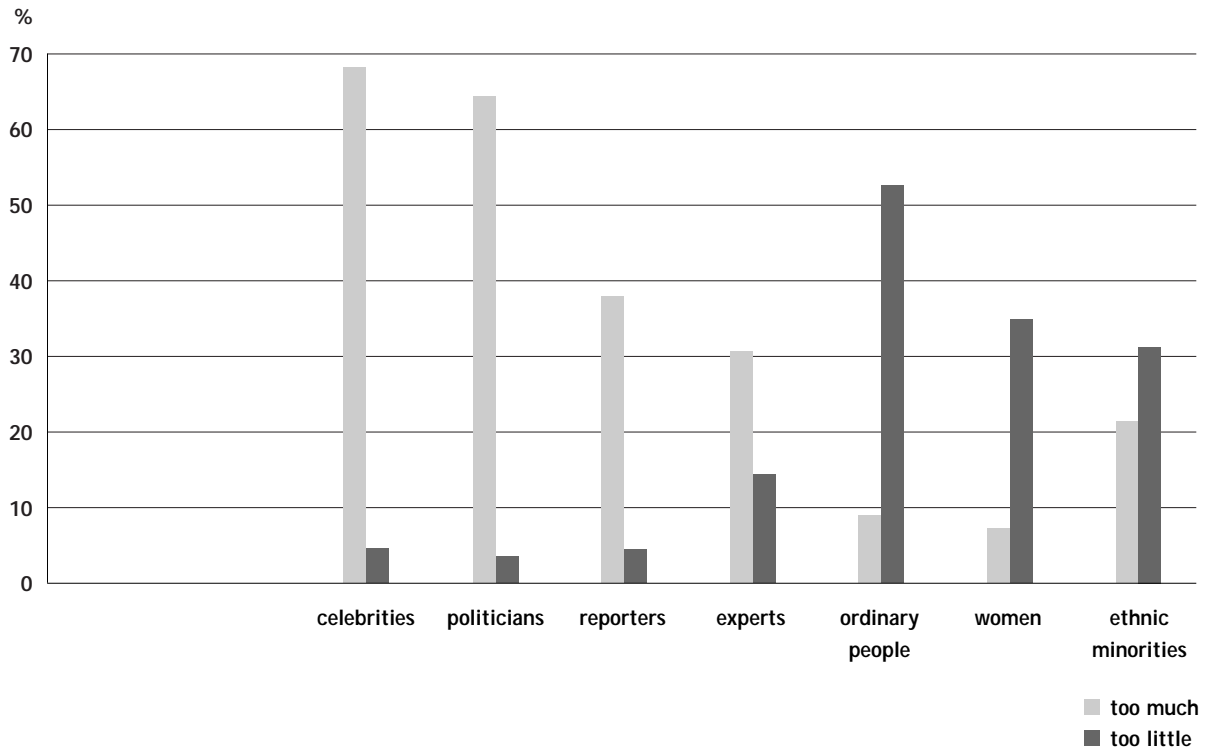
#### f. Other issues

##### (i) Who’s on the news

In spite of the high levels of satisfaction expressed in this survey, especially about television news, the survey explored a number of supposed points of dissatisfaction, to do with the style of television news: its alleged over-use of politicians, celebrities and star reporters, and its supposed move away from a more serious news agenda to a ‘dumbed down’ agenda of entertainment news, crime and general distraction.

The chart shows what people say they would like less of on the news, namely: celebrities (68%) and politicians (64%) This survey also suggests that news producers should be less liberal in their use of reporters and experts and more assiduous in their use of ‘ordinary people’.

## PEOPLE IN THE NEWS



Younger people are most hostile to politicians, but are less turned off by other experts, with only 25% of 16-34-year-olds complaining about experts, compared with 36% of over 55s. Ethnic minorities would like to see more of themselves, but 29% of white people over the age of 45 feel there is already 'too much' screen time given to ethnic minorities, though white people as a whole felt, just, that ethnic minorities had too little presence.

It would be unwise to draw too firm conclusions from these responses in that many television shows featuring celebrities are evidently very popular. But there does seem to be genuine public resistance to some broadcasters' belief that the key to public engagement with news and political news will be achieved via the medium of celebrity presenters or other celebrity involvement. The use of Geri Halliwell in the 2001 General Election might be a case in point. Halliwell was hired to urge young people to vote, but it turned out that she was herself not registered to vote because of privacy and security considerations. In spite of this, one conclusion drawn from the BBC's Kevill report is that young people might be drawn back to politics through shows presented by celebrities popular with young people. According to our survey, young people are almost as convinced as their elders that there are too many celebrities on television and radio news (60% of 16-34s say so compared with 69% of 35-54-year-olds).

The general theme of ethnic under-representation or misrepresentation was strongly endorsed by black and Asian members of focus-groups. Across all the focus-groups, there appeared to be a backlash against excessive attention to celebrities at the expense of properly explaining news of more direct relevance to people.

*“They should be giving in-depth information about the change in the laws on cannabis because everybody’s confused, but instead they’re chatting about Posh Spice’s new size 11 shoes.”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 16-34, C2DE, London)

*“We want people who know what it’s like in the real world.”* (Male, 45+, ABC1, Nottingham)

*“Parents talking about issues like the Child Support Agency.”* (Afro-Caribbean male, 16-34, C2DE, London)

#### (ii) What’s on the news: the news agenda

The suggestion that television, along with other news providers, have simplified or ‘dumbed down’ their news agendas to reflect popular disenchantment with hard news and a growth in taste for entertainment news, is widely made. The survey tested this by inviting people to rank five stories by order of importance. These were all news themes prominent at the time of the survey: the conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir; football results; the future of the Post Office; a new series of *Pop Idol*; controversy over government spin doctors. This is the running order of the news according to the views of this representative sample of UK citizens:

1. Kashmir (55%)
2. Post Office (28%)
3. Spin doctors (13%)
4. Latest football results (3%)
5. *Pop Idol* (1%).

If the public wants news which does not pay attention to world affairs, major domestic issues and UK politics, it is not evident from these answers.

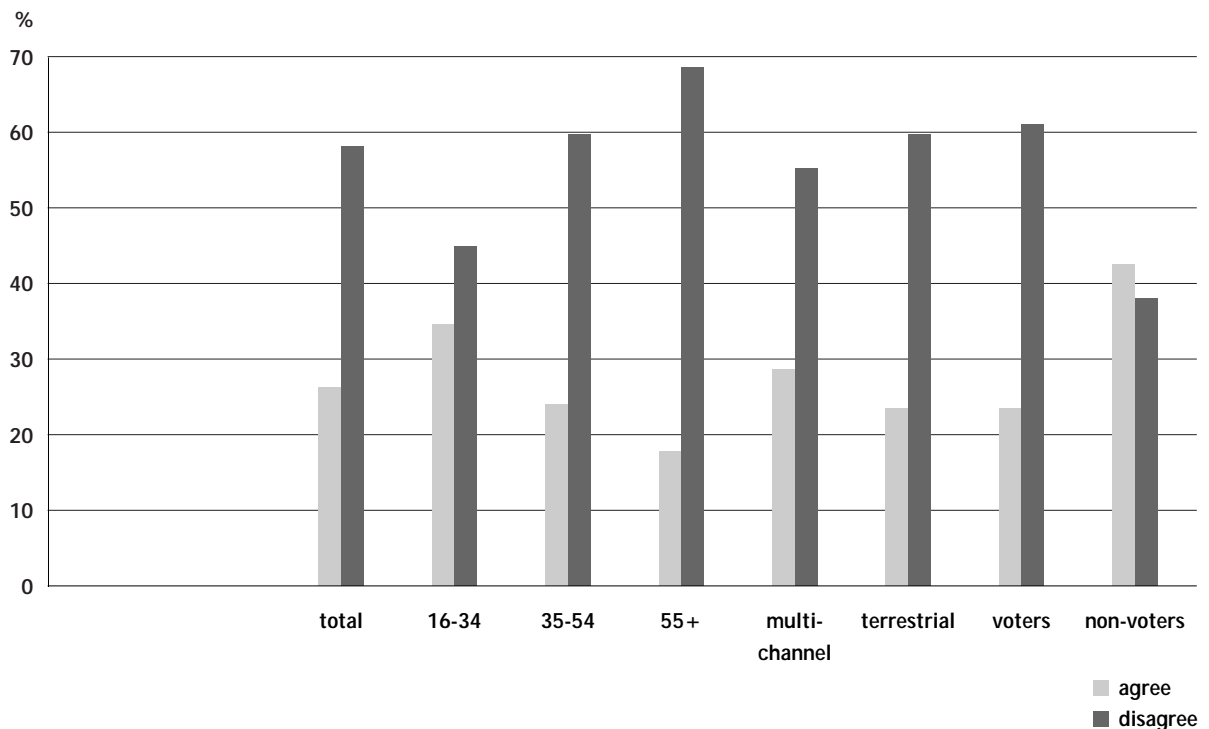
#### **g. And finally...**

A series of closing statements tested the overall views of those surveyed, providing a check against some of the more detailed points of inquiry. These were the outcomes:

- **“TV NEWS IS NOT AS GOOD AS IT SHOULD BE.”** 25% agree that this is the case, 43% are neutral and 33% disagree. So, although television is accepted as the most important news source, there is by no means uniform contentment about its quality.
- **“TV NEWS IN BRITAIN IS FIRST CLASS.”** 64% go along with this strongly worded statement; 28% are neutral and 8% disagree.
- **“TV NEWS TODAY IS NOT AS SERIOUS AS IT SHOULD BE.”** 21% agreed, 37% were neutral and 41% disagreed. The dumbing down verdict is, in the opinion of most people, therefore not justified. Those most likely to agree are ABC1, five-channel homes and ethnic minorities.
- **“TV NEWS REPRESENTS ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY FAIRLY.”** Only a minority (43%) agree with this statement, 20% disagree and 36% are neutral. Levels of disagreement among ethnic minorities are higher (35%) but even among these communities, 34% agree.

- **“IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP UP-TO-DATE.”** This tests motivation to engage with news and finds 90% agreement. Only 2% dissent and 7% express no view either way. The idea of a civic or social motivation to keep up with news appears to be alive and well.
- **“I ONLY FOLLOW NEWS WHEN SOMETHING IMPORTANT OR INTERESTING IS HAPPENING.”** Here is a notable difference between generations. Young people are much more likely to belong to that group which follows the spotlight of news only when it shines brightly; they are less likely to keep a sustained interest in running stories. In this survey, 26% agreed they belonged to this category, while 58% denied it. Some 16% declined to align with either camp. Those aged under 35, however, are as likely to agree as disagree with the statement, whereas older people mostly disagree. Significantly, multichannel homes are more likely to agree, as are ethnic minorities (42% of the latter agree, versus 43% who disagree). Non-voters are also more likely to agree (43%) than disagree (38%). Here seems to be the emerging zeitgeist about news: that it is an ambient phenomenon, there to learn from when you are alerted to something interesting, possibly by word of mouth.

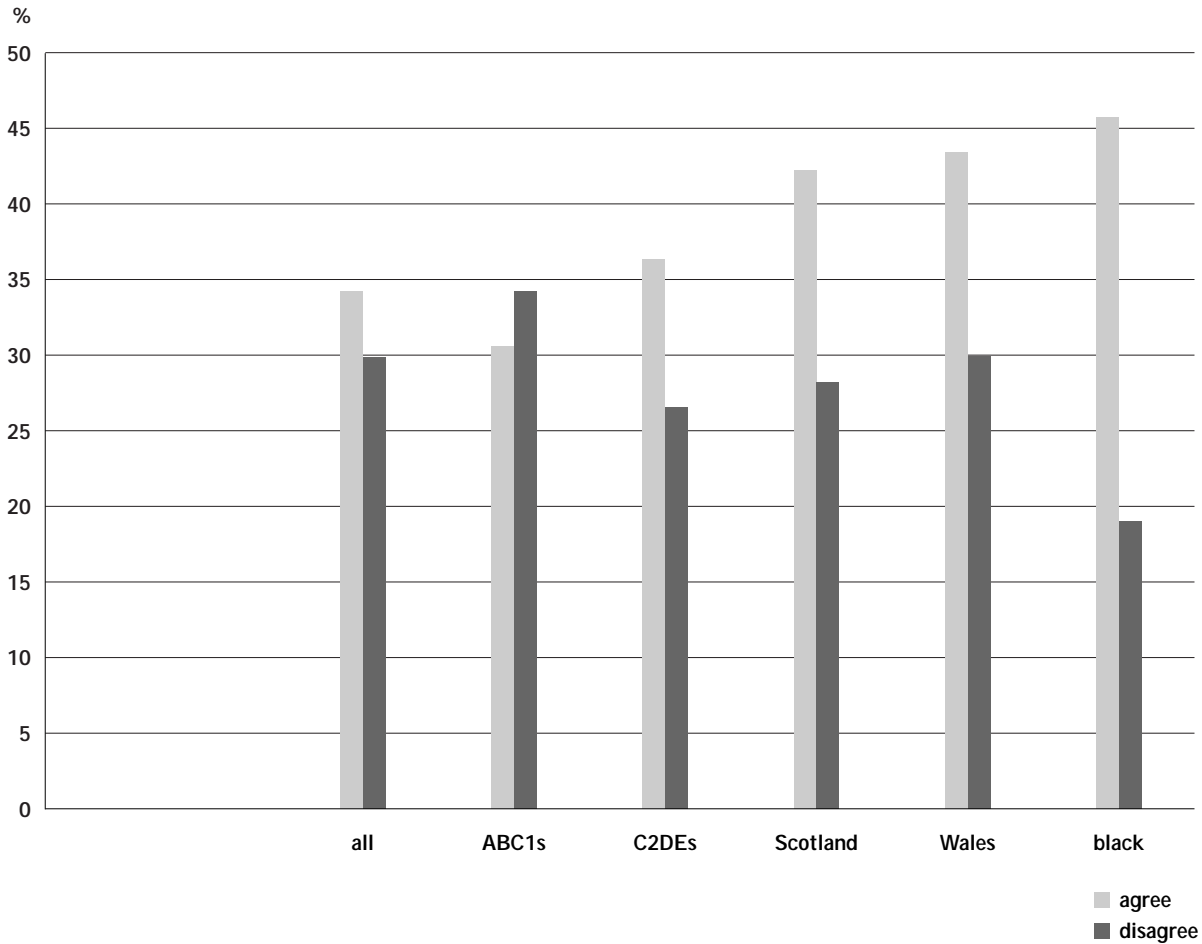
#### I FOLLOW NEWS ONLY WHEN SOMETHING IMPORTANT IS HAPPENING



- **“MUCH OF THE NEWS ON TV IS NOT RELEVANT TO ME PERSONALLY.”** A significant number, 34%, agree with this statement, which links with the previous one to suggest that for all the regard in which television news is held, it is failing to make contact with the issues that concern millions of people. Only 30% of people said they disagreed with this statement and 35% were neutral. Levels of agreement in response to this statement were highest in Scotland and Wales and among C2DEs rather than ABC1s. This fits with other findings in this research project, which suggest that

television news is increasingly failing to connect with people from the C2DE class base, younger age base, and is not doing a good enough job of responding to the concerns of citizens in certain geographic regions of the UK and certain ethnic minority communities. Among black groups, 46% agreed with this statement. Television's limitations as a mass broadcast medium are exposed in the answers to this question.

**MUCH OF THE NEWS IS NOT RELEVANT TO ME**



The focus-groups also discussed these issues and shed further light on the question of what motivates people to keep up-to-date with the news. A strong sense of democratic entitlement, conscience and social need informed the discussions:

*“News is about your conscience.”* (Male, 35-44, ABC1, Edinburgh)

*“It’s part of being democratic, being kept informed. It’s a democratic right to know what’s going on.”* (Male, 25-34, C2DE, Staines)

*“If you don’t know what’s in the news, you feel left out.”* (Male, 16-24, ABC1, Staines)

## **h. Postscript: views of particular audience segments**

It is possible, finally, to slice the data from this survey in a number of directions. This section of the report gives the main findings which shed particular light on the views of certain groups.

### **(i) Non-voters**

Since we know that these people were disproportionately young, C2DE and from the black community, it would be surprising if some of the more negative reactions exhibited by these groups were not replicated among the non-voter group. This, however, was not entirely true: the non-voters emerge as a group with very much in common with the average citizen. There was, for instance, no correlation between dissatisfaction with news coverage and voting, non-voters are just as likely to be satisfied with the news and current affairs programmes available, and to see themselves as equally well served as others about news of their locality, Britain and the world. They also support principles such as impartial broadcast news as firmly as voters.

The points of difference include the following:

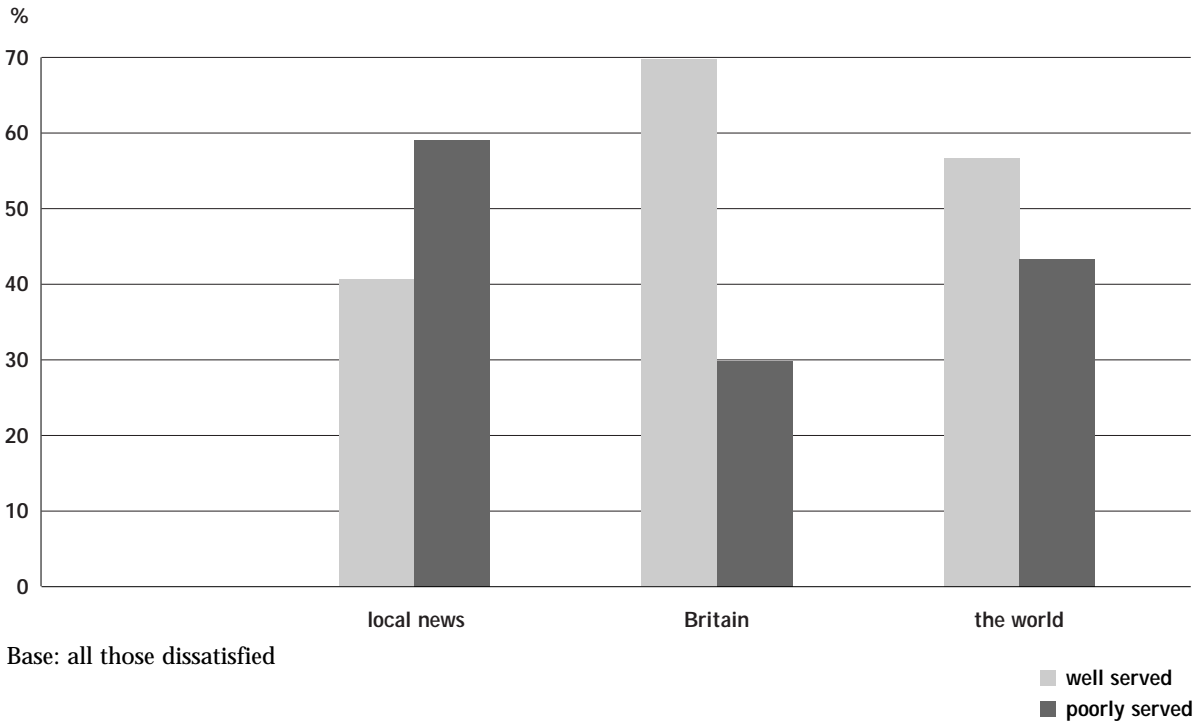
- Non-voters are less inclined to agree (59% versus 73%) that news and current affairs equips them to understand British politics
- Non-voters rely more on television and less on newspapers and radio
- Non-voters make more use of the internet, but their preferred news online concerns sport and entertainment
- Non-voters are less likely to watch current affairs programmes
- Non-voters are, in news terms, spotlight chasers: paying attention only when something big is known to be happening. They are also more inclined to feel that the news is not relevant to them (44% versus 33% for voters).

### **(ii) The dissatisfied**

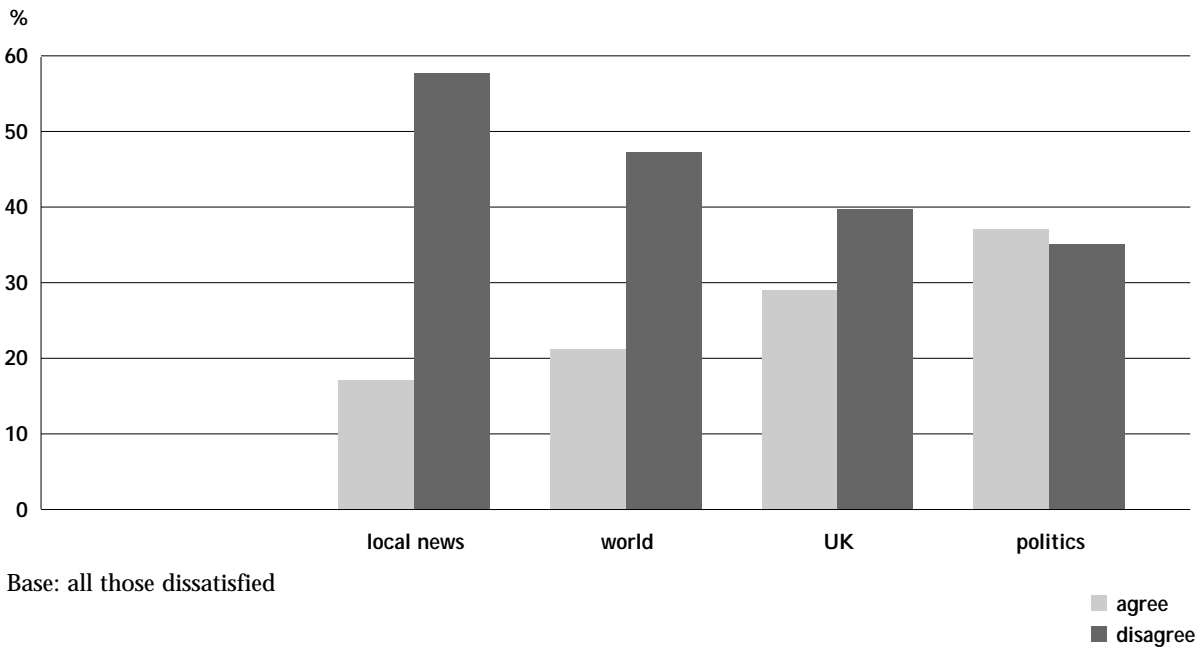
Those expressing outright dissatisfaction with the choice of news and current affairs in Britain form a minority, but one whose views are worth understanding in more depth. Only 5% of the panel falls into this category: those who responded negatively to a question in the survey (number eight): overall, how satisfied are you with the choice of news and current affairs programmes available to you on television and radio these days? Can we discern from their other answers what motivates their dissatisfaction and how it might be assuaged?

Most dissatisfaction concerns local news, with 59% stating that they are not well served in this area: conversely, most of the dissatisfied say that they are well served for news about Britain and the world. When asked whether news and current affairs provides enough information to understand things, the biggest negative area again concerns local news, with 58% stating they lacked the necessary information, compared with 47% for world affairs and 35% for UK politics.

**HOW WELL SERVED ARE YOU FOR NEWS ABOUT... ?**



**I GET ENOUGH INFORMATION TO UNDERSTAND... ?**



The dissatisfied use most news media less (newspapers, current affairs television, television news), but they are big internet users, presumably seeking a solution for their dissatisfaction. They find the internet pleasingly varied and convenient. They were also more likely to go online to seek local news (27%, against 14% of all respondents). They are less convinced of the impartiality of most news sources than most respondents, though they are more inclined to view Radio 4 and *The Guardian* as impartial, which gives some indication of their character. They were less trusting than the average respondent of the main television channels' news services.

### (iii) The young

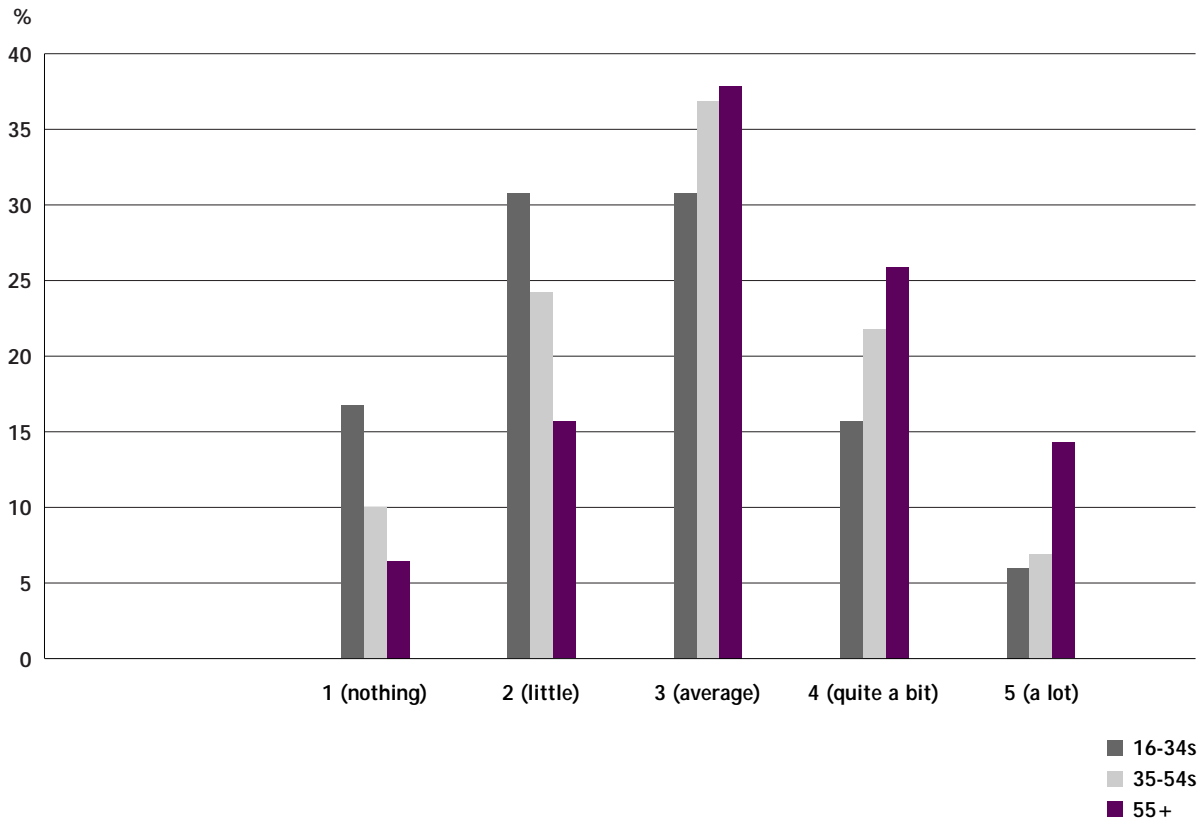
The young are usually defined for the purposes of broadcast research as either the 16-24s or the 16-34s. The survey provides both age breakdowns. It finds that television is a slightly less important source of news for young people (62% of under 35s, compared with 65% of 35-54s). The medium relatively more popular among the young is the internet: the main source of news for 3% of 16-34-year-olds. Almost one in five (23%) of this age group makes use of the internet as a news source. Although they do not rate newspapers less highly than their elders as a source of news, they use them less frequently: only 39% of 16-34s say they use newspapers daily or more, compared with 50% of 35-54s and 64% of the over 55s. Almost one in three under 35s (30%) never watch current affairs: this is the heaviest age concentration for current affairs rejecters.

In spite of these differences in media habits, young people are as confident that they are well served for news as their elders. Almost all of them (98%) say they're content with news about Britain and even for local news, they are as happy as older people (85% of under-35s satisfied, against 83% for their elders).

There is no sign of dissatisfaction among young people with the choice of broadcast news programmes available to them. The 16-34-year-old group returns a 96% satisfaction rating, which is the same as for the over-55s. Although they don't watch much current affairs, they are happy (91%) with the provision.

In terms of what young people learn from the news, four-fifths (81%) think that the programmes they watch and listen to deliver enough information for them to understand what's going on in Britain. This falls to 72% for world affairs, 66% for UK politics and 63% for their locality. Only in the area of UK politics do young people feel less adequately informed than their elders (71% for 35-54s). When it comes to knowledge of UK politics, however, young people acknowledge their ignorance. Almost half (48%) of 16-34-year-olds say they know little or nothing of UK politics, compared with only one in five (22%) over 55s. Here is the information gap which feeds disengagement.

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BRITISH POLITICS



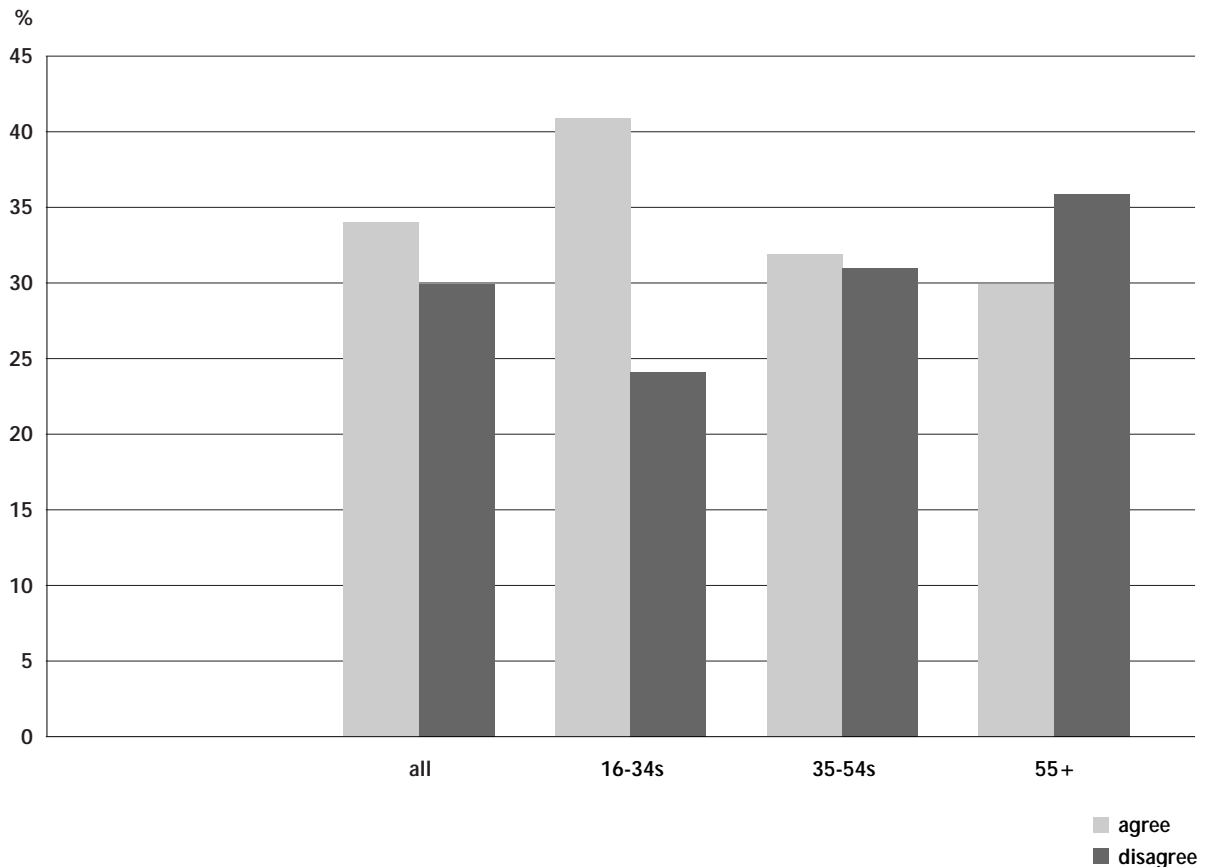
Young people are somewhat more likely, however, to say that they pick up topical information and news from unconventional sources such as comedy shows (56%) and television chat shows (29%). They are also more receptive than their elders to getting news by word of mouth (85%) and from the internet (36%).

In terms of who is on the news, younger people are exceptionally hostile to politicians (67% say they are on too often) and they are less likely to think there are too many celebrities, though a majority (60%) does think that. They are more strongly of the view than older people that ethnic minorities are under-represented.

Like their elders, young people are overwhelmingly in favour of rules requiring broadcast news to be impartial, but their degree of commitment is a little weaker. They rate the BBC as number one for impartiality, if slightly less enthusiastically than their elders (75% versus 80% for over-55s); they also trust ITV's impartiality a little less than older people. They are more inclined than their elders to trust the impartiality of Channel 4 (48%), Sky News and the internet. The internet is also trusted as a medium for establishing the truth by 34% of under 35s, compared with 25% of 35-54s. When it comes to newscasters and other showbusiness figures, Trevor McDonald is as trusted by the young as the old. Younger people are also a little more inclined to trust Kirsty Young. Drawing up a running order for a television news bulletin, young people barely deviated from the judgements of their elders. There was no sign of a youth movement to put *Pop Idol* and the football results at the top of the bulletin.

In the closing statements in the survey, the outstanding points with regard to young people were that they are much more likely to follow the news only when something important or interesting is happening – 45% of 16-34s disagree with this approach, compared with 60% of 35-54s and 69% of the 55+ group. Tellingly, more young people (14% of under 35s compared with 11% and 10% for older groups) think that there is too much news on television. Crucially, 41% of 16-34s agree that much of television news is not relevant to them personally, compared with 32% for 35-54s and 30% of those aged over 55.

**MUCH OF TV NEWS IS NOT RELEVANT TO ME PERSONALLY**



**(iv) The C2DE group**

It is clear from the survey that there are important class differences in attitudes to news and the news media, as well as some areas where there is consensus across class.

The notable areas of difference are:

- C2DEs value television (71%) more for news than ABC1s (59%)
- They value radio less (11% versus 22%)
- C2DEs are also lighter users of newspapers and the internet
- C2DEs are more likely to know news about their locality and to feel very well served for news in that regard (30% to 24%)

- News agendas: C2DEs are more interested in entertainment news, ABC1s more interested in business news and politics. Given a choice of running orders, C2DEs put the future of the Post Office ahead of troubles in Kashmir
- C2DEs are generally more satisfied about news services (46% very satisfied versus 40%)
- More in the C2DE band (41%) know little or nothing about UK politics, compared with 27% for ABC1
- C2DEs would like to see fewer politicians and experts on television news; they are less likely to say this about celebrities
- C2DEs are very slightly less emphatic in their commitment to rules on impartiality and accuracy of broadcast news
- ITV is trusted more by C2DEs than ABC1s. With Channel 4, the position is reversed
- Should commercial broadcasters be allowed to cut back on news provision? C2DEs are more likely to think so (20% to 15%)
- C2DEs are more likely (37% v 31%) to find television news not relevant personally.

(v) **Ethnic minorities**

The attitudes of these groups have been discussed throughout the report, but to recap the main findings:

- Ethnic minorities are significantly less satisfied with news services than white groups, with blacks being the most dissatisfied. Only 46% of blacks and 65% of all ethnic groups thought they were well served for news about their locality, compared with 83% of whites. While differences were less marked for news about Britain, they were again notable for news about the world, with 32% of blacks and a quarter of all ethnic groups not feeling well-served, compared with 6% of whites. Large numbers – 76% – felt there was too little of ethnic minorities in the news.
- When asked how satisfied they were with their news and current affairs programmes available, ethnic minority groups showed the most dissatisfaction, although their verdict was far from negative. Eighty-one per cent of blacks and 92% of all ethnic groups were satisfied with the choice of news programmes available to them, with the figures for current affairs being only slightly lower.
- Ethnic minority groups were less likely, across the board, to agree that the news and current affairs programmes available to them provided enough information to understand what was going on. The difference with whites was most marked across world affairs, where 75% of whites, compared with 51% of blacks and 56% of Asians thought that the media provided enough information. It was a pattern also visible in coverage of UK politics, and to a lesser extent in relation to ‘my locality’ and ‘the UK in general’.
- In statements at the end, only 32% of black people and 37% of Asians agreed that ‘TV news is first class’, compared with 65% of whites. A strikingly high 46% of blacks (compared with 34% of all respondents) also considered that ‘much of the news on TV is not relevant to me personally’. Ethnic minorities were also more likely to disagree that ‘television news represents all sectors of society fairly’, with 35%, although

even among these communities, 34% agreed. The focus-groups reflected familiar complaints about negative representation and stereotyping, and a demand for more positive representations. As one member of a London group put it: “You only hear bad news about black people on the white stations”. Although this was combined with a perception that coverage was improving, there was a demand, as one black group member put it, for a change in ethos which meant that their community be “represented deeper than the colour of the presenter”.

- Ethnic minority groups expressed lower levels of knowledge about British politics, their locality and the UK in general, with blacks feeling significantly less informed than others across all categories. Asians felt more informed than whites about world affairs, who in turn were more informed than blacks.
- Greater minorities within the ethnic minority communities were likely to say that impartiality was not important, perhaps reflecting their perception that they did not receive fair coverage anyway. More specifically, ethnic groups were significantly less likely to rate the BBC and ITV as impartial, as likely to rate Channel 4 and Channel 5 as impartial, and more likely to class the internet, Sky and ethnic minority stations as impartial.
- Similarly, when asked who they trusted to tell the truth, the main channels were trusted less, although ratings remained high. Channel 4 and Channel 5’s rating was high among Asians, Sky News was trusted as much by ethnic minority groups as white groups, while specialist ethnic stations showed a 70% trust rating.
- Television was as popular among ethnic minorities as whites as a news source, but both radio and newspapers were less popular. The internet, magazines and word of mouth were more popular – the internet noticeably so – with 35% of ethnic minority groups using it at least once a week, compared with 19% of whites.
- 24-hour news channels were also used much more regularly, especially among Asians.

# 7 CONTENT ANALYSIS

Previous studies (including Barnett *et al* and Harrison) have demonstrated a considerable degree of diversity in contemporary television news content and the present study confirms this picture. It finds a news agenda on terrestrial television that varies from the highly serious to the more populist, albeit within a framework of a broadly similar range of stories, remixed and reprioritised across different channels.

But diversity exists both across channels – with Channel 4 and BBC offering a more serious agenda than ITV and Channel 5 – and across bulletins, with the late evening bulletins on BBC, ITV and Channel 5 all offering an agenda that devotes more space than their earlier counterparts to international news, politics and social and economic affairs. This strategy by the broadcasters is based upon their own analysis of the market: the early evening audience includes more children, older people and women than the later audience and programmes are often watched while other activities, such as meals, are taking place. When critics say that some television news has become ‘more tabloid’, care needs to be exercised in the meaning of this term and any automatic association of it with low quality.

## a. The debate about tabloidisation/changing content

This study has examined the much debated question of the ‘dumbing-down’ of television news content. Barnett *et al*’s detailed examination of trends in television content since the 1970s categorised stories into tabloid, broadsheet and foreign, and found that despite fluctuations television news offered an agenda that offered a largely serious approach to television news across all bulletins.<sup>91</sup> We briefly revisited these research findings with a seven-day analysis across a three-week period in May 2002 that measured the percentage time devoted to different categories of news<sup>92</sup>. We then combined this with a 10-week longitudinal analysis of leading stories across all terrestrial news bulletins. Taken together these investigations point to an agenda that is composed largely of foreign and broadsheet stories on Channel 4, predominantly broadsheet on BBC late evening and BBC early evening; a more mixed tabloid/broadsheet menu on the two ITV bulletins with a most (if far from total) tabloid approach on Channel 5. They also illustrate an agenda that becomes more ‘serious’ in the later evening news, with BBC, ITV and Channel 5 showing greater proportion of broadsheet material than their early evening counterparts.

One of the problems, as numerous studies point out, is defining precisely what a tabloid story actually is. Some of the complaints about tabloidisation, for example, have been countered with claims that the changes in content within British television should be more accurately compared with a changing broadsheet press agenda that has itself become more popular (and in the case of

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<sup>91</sup> Barnett, S, Seymour, E, and Gaber, I, *From Callaghan to Kosovo: Changing Trends in British Television News 1975-1999*, ITC, 2000.

<sup>92</sup> This is distinct from some analyses that measure the number of stories devoted across each category; to avoid the possible ‘bunching’ of story categories in one week, seven days were selected across a three-week period, with each day of the week being selected once, and no two days following each other. Where entertainment, human interest, sport and crime stories had international boundaries, the former categories overrode the international.

important sections of papers like *The Guardian* physically tabloid) while still retaining a commitment to serious news reporting and heavyweight opinion and analysis. To explore this question, and to test the extent to which the television agenda had more in common with broadsheet or tabloid newspapers, we compared, over a 10-week period between May-July 2002, the lead television news stories with the headlines on the front pages of the tabloid *Sun* and *Mail*, on the one side, and the broadsheet *Times* and *Guardian*, on the other. To deal with the problem that daily newspapers operate in a different time zone from evening television news, we counted stories if they featured on the front-page of the newspaper on the morning before the bulletin, or the morning after.

These figures suggests a television agenda that reflects the broadsheet press much more than the tabloids, with a tabloid newspaper agenda that has no, or virtually no impact on Channel 4 and BBC news, and which only constitutes 10% of ITV.

**TABLOID/BROADSHEET LEAD STORIES THAT LED IN EVENING NEWS BULLETINS MAY-JULY 2002 (%)**

	<b>broadsheet</b>	<b>tabloid</b>	<b>appeared in both</b>	<b>did not appear</b>
BBC early	26.5	4.4	17.6	51
BBC late	32.4	1.5	19	47
ITV early	22.4	10.4	16.4	51
ITV late	25	10.4	13.4	51
Channel 4	32	0	15.5	52.5
Channel 5, 5.30pm	7.5	22	19.7	51
Channel 5, 7.30pm	18	11	20	51

In terms of variations across channels, Channel 4 is the least tabloid. Channel 5 is the most tabloid, while the BBC is overwhelmingly closer to the broadsheet end. ITV has more tabloid stories, although its broadsheet element is still double its tabloid content. It is also noticeable that over half of television stories do not fit the broadsheet/tabloid agendas found in the papers coded, which reflects a wide range of tabloid stories about celebrities and scandals which television simply does not cover, along with a significant range of broadsheet stories, many of them narrowly angled ‘exclusive’ reports, which television also ignores. It further suggests that television news performs a different, and not easily comparable function to that of either the tabloid or broadsheet press.

The only significant tabloid agenda, by these definitions, can be found on Channel 5. Its early evening news is the only programme where the tabloid lead agenda is higher than the broadsheet. It is possible that even this is over-stated since the period studied included the approach to the football World Cup. If these stories are excluded then the tabloid and broadsheet figures become closer. Channel 5 also has the highest proportion of stories which appeared on the front pages of both tabloids and broadsheets.

There is also diversity visible across bulletins as well as channels. The later evening news stories tend to a more serious agenda than early evening. This is true in the case of BBC and ITV. There is even a notable difference for Channel 5’s 7.30pm offering, compared with its 5.30pm bulletin. The content analysis did not track the agenda of Channel 5’s later evening, top of the hour headline-only bulletins, though there is evidence from the focus-group work that this is a noticed and appreciated service.

## b. Changing content – a closer look

Looking in more depth at news coverage across the week’s content study, we examined the extent to which international news, politics (measured to also include policy issues, for example, a government announcement in education) and social and economic affairs have been increasingly replaced with stories about crime, sport and entertainment. The figures below show the percentage of space, measured in terms of time allocated to the story, to the following categories.

### DISTRIBUTION OF ITEMS BY SHARE OF EVENING BULLETIN AIRTIME – SEVEN-DAY PERIOD (%)

	BBC1 early	ITV early	BBC late	ITV late	C4	C5 early
international news	27.4	22.8	35	24.8	48.3	17.6
politics	14.7	8.9	16.6	13	22.2	12.1
social/ economic	13.3	10.1	13	8.8	10.1	8.2
sport	13	20.3	12.9	17.8	5.8	20.2
crime	10.1	13.1	7.6	8.4	9	11.7
entertainment/ human interest	8.4	5.3	1.2	11.1	5	21.3

Again, this demonstrates a diversity of approaches across channels. Channel 4 is by some distance the most determined provider of international and political news, followed by the BBC1 *Ten o’clock News*. A more populist agenda that gives more attention to ‘lighter’ categories, while still offering a high proportion of serious and international news, is more visible across the early evening bulletins compared with late, on ITV compared with BBC, and on Channel 5.

## c. Content shifts over time

If we compare these findings with those by Barnett *et al* and others that looked at coverage since 1975, then the following conclusions can be drawn.

**International news** BBC early evening news continues to devote a high percentage of space to international stories and, despite fluctuations, has shown little overall change since the mid-1970s. Various studies have estimated the share of international news at between 22% and 34% in this period. In our one-week study period, the share was 27.4%. In the same period, ITV’s attention to international stories has varied more greatly. In the week studied it was 23%, which compared with a range of between 19% and 28.5% in previous assessments since the mid-1970s.

BBC late evening shows a continued high level of commitment to international news, although ITV’s late evening news appears to be on a downward trend: the 25% figure recorded in our study was lower than those in previous surveys of the last 20 years. Channel 4’s international agenda, however, is stronger than ever, while Channel 5’s early evening bulletin has the lowest percentage of international news.

**Politics** Other studies have suggested a marked decline in the space devoted to politics from around 20-25% in the mid 1970s<sup>93</sup> and this study confirms this finding, suggesting that today the level of political coverage is around 15%, though the pace of decline has not been great in the last five years. None-the-less, this represents a significant shift in the priority given to politics on the main, mass-audience bulletins, at a time of greatly increased investment in television news services generally. Taking a comparison with Barnett's 1999 findings, the current figures suggest a level of political coverage that has remained largely static on both the BBC, but has shown a decline on both the ITV late and early evening bulletins. Channel 4 and particularly Channel 5 both register increases on the 1999 figures.

**Crime** What is filling the space once devoted to politics? Part of the answer is crime, up from a figure of around 4-7% in the 1970s.<sup>94</sup> All channels register a rise on Barnett's 1999 findings, although our figures need also to be compared with surveys in 1996/97 and 2001 which reported that crime stories accounted for between 15% and 20% of story space on BBC and ITV.<sup>95</sup> Our study week showed crime taking 10% and 8% of the BBC early evening news respectively, compared with 7% and 5% three years earlier. The share of crime stories on ITV's early evening news was 13% in the week studied, compared with 4.4% in a 1999 study and 10% in a 1995 report. On Channel 5, the high level of crime coverage has remained constant.

**Sport** This also shows an increase across the board from Barnett's 1999 findings (under 10% for all channels apart from ITN *News at 10* with 12.8%) to a range of 12-20% across BBC and ITV in the week studied. However, the approach of the four-yearly World Cup during our sampling period will certainly have overstated this aspect.

The trend, found in other recent studies, towards a higher proportion of lighter **entertainment and human interest** stories since the 1970s is also visible, most notably on Channel 5, ITV late, and BBC early evening bulletins.

It is important to stress that the percentages referred to here show shares of programmes of very different duration. So, for example, Channel 4's total time devoted to social and economic issues was greater than that of BBC bulletins despite being lower in percentage terms, though arguably, a fairer comparison would also include BBC2's *Newsnight*. The table below shows the total story minutage for each channel, demonstrating that the ITV late evening offering has not only moved around the schedules in recent years, but has also slimmed down to the point that in the sample week it accounts for not much more than half the length of its main BBC rival.

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<sup>93</sup> Barnett, S, Seymour, E and Gaber, I, *From Callaghan to Kosovo, Changing Trends in British Television News 1975-1999*; Winston, B, 'Towards Tabloidization? Glasgow Revisited', 1975-2001, p.8; Harrison, J, 'The diversification of British TV news: a cause for comfort or concern'.

<sup>94</sup> Barnett, S, Seymour, E and Gaber, I, *From Callaghan to Kosovo, Changing Trends in British Television News 1975-1999*, p.18; Winston, *ibid*, p.9.

<sup>95</sup> McLachlan, S, 'Who's Afraid of the News Bunny?', p.11; Winston, B, 'Towards Tabloidization? Glasgow Revisited', 1975-2001, p.9; Harrison, J, 'The diversification of British TV news: a cause for comfort or concern'.

**TOTAL TIME OF STORIES IN EVENING NATIONAL NEWS BULLETINS – SEVEN DAY WEEK (MINUTES)**

	<b>BBC1 early</b>	<b>ITV early</b>	<b>BBC late</b>	<b>ITV late</b>	<b>C4</b>	<b>C5 early</b>
Total story time	149.3	136.2	151.9	87.7	253.9	119.2

Looking more specifically at the approaches offered by the various channels we see a variety of styles, from the unashamedly highbrow in Channel 4 to the equally unashamedly populist on Channel 5. These offer the two extremes around other approaches on the most popular channels, which are aimed at the whole audience.

Channel 4 offers the most ‘serious’ news, in a one-hour bulletin that regularly spends over five minutes covering stories and sometimes much longer – one special programme, for example, spent its first 28 minutes investigating the government’s record on education. Typically, the programme covers up to 20 stories in its bulletins, with a series of in-depth stories or interviews read or conducted by its main presenter, Jon Snow, supplemented by briefer items from his co-presenter. The programme provides in-depth interviews and profiles about political, social, business and international issues. During the week sampled, the programme offered a range of international stories ignored by the other channels. These included the release of the Burma opposition leader, a special report on aid workers demanding sex for rations in West Africa, a report on western companies offering bribes for contracts in Africa, the rise of the far right in Italy, a bomb attack in Ireland, the Common European fisheries policy, and the failed coup in Venezuela. Its domestic stories included the crisis facing British libraries, plastic bag recycling costs and benefits, eight minutes on the Communication Bill, and an equally long survey of the government’s plans to introduce regional assemblies.

Channel 4 also has a strong multicultural and international feel. Several of its on-screen figures are from ethnic minorities, while its choice of interviewees and the stories that it covers further convey this multicultural feel. During the week of coding, for example, most of the programme’s ‘crime’ coverage was devoted to a special, and unsensational profile of ‘black on black’ gun crime in London. Even the programme’s choice of light-hearted stories reflected its serious agenda, and included former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl falling victim to a particularly strong red pepper that he had eaten, and a play opening in Iraq about Saddam Hussein.

On the other extreme Channel 5 offers the most populist news programme, with two main news half-hour news bulletins, at 5.30pm and 7.30pm, along with an on-the-hour summary. The programme offers quite a diversity of stories, that can produce, on one day, a leading story of the ‘Premiere Punch Up’ between a pop star and a photographer, while on another occasion devoting a three-day series of reports by Martin Bell on the famine facing Malawi. The channel offers a higher than average coverage of sport, entertainment and human interest stories. The week studied saw pieces on a party hosted by David and Victoria Beckham, and details of the ‘*Penthouse* Bust-Up’ that followed the magazine mistakenly thinking it had acquired topless photographs of a female tennis star. Other stories concerned Barnsley being marketed as the Tuscany of the north, and a profile of a controversial new Eminem song. The main news bulletin has a modern feel, presented by the young and fashionable Kirsty Young, perched on her desk. The fast, upbeat and dramatic opening credits, the accompanying

music, the friendly informality between presenters and the absence of ‘men in suits’ all suggest a very different style, aimed at a younger audience. The channel shows a keen interest in crime stories, for example, during this sample, the story about a woman mugged for £2. Channel 5, however, does also cover mainstream, serious news stories, such as Kashmir, a visit by President Bush to Paris, two disasters in China and Mozambique, and the Pope’s visit to Bulgaria. Political stories included transport policy and health service reform.

Somewhere in between the approach of these smaller audience channels stand ITV and BBC. In the early evening, ITV offers a more populist approach than its BBC counterpart, devoting more space to crime and sport – particularly the trials and tribulations of England’s World Cup preparations. The bulletin devoted less, although still substantial space, to international, political and social affairs. Both main early evening programmes have a ‘lighter’ feel and content than their late evening equivalents. Along with ITV, the BBC’s six o’clock, the most popular news programme in Britain, has consciously set out to pursue a more ‘popular’ and accessible style and content. This was clearly visible in the week of the study in an exclusive interview with Elton John about his upcoming performance at the Jubilee concert, a profile of the new *Spider-Man* film and the story of a 17-stone American fitness instructor. None of these featured in the late evening news on BBC1. On May 9, the BBC led at 6pm with the charging of a woman who had falsely accused Neil and Christine Hamilton of sexual assault, while at 10 the lead was a pay increase for health service workers.

The same pattern was also true of Channel 5, where the 7.30pm evening bulletin had a more serious political agenda, with significantly fewer crime stories, and more about British politics and international affairs. For example, the early evening bulletin lead, ‘Premiere Punch Up’ on a fight between a pop star/photographer, was replaced on the later bulletin with a lead on a David Blunkett’s speech to the police federation (15 May). Similarly, an early evening bulletin lead on the hospital rape of a grandmother was replaced with a late-evening profile of the row over Tony Blair’s role at the Queen Mother’s funeral (14 June). Meanwhile an early evening profile of the mystery of missing tickets at the World Cup was followed by a later-evening lead on a Bush/Putin nuclear agreement. Channel 5 has also experimented with a more ‘current-affairs’ style to its later news programme, typically offering a package that consists of the story, followed by a lengthy discussion between a panel of experts, heavily drawn from the journalism or politics. This format is now under review (see chapter eight, below)

#### **d. Headline stories across categories**

Another way of corroborating the priorities of different television news broadcasters is to examine their choices of lead stories. The table below shows the percentage of occasions that international news, politics and crime appeared as the lead story on the main evening bulletins across the 10-week period from May to July 2002. Channel 4 has the highest proportion of space devoted to international news, Channel 5 the lowest. The same patterns found above for the increased presence of international and political news across BBC bulletins compared with ITV, and late evening compared with early evening are also evident. Crime stories have greater prominence on ITV than BBC, with ITV bulletins, at least in this survey, showing as great a tendency to lead on crime as

Channel 5. On 25 June for example, ITV early lead with a story about ‘Milly’ Dowler (a favourite ITV story in this 10-week period) while BBC reported a speech by Yasser Arafat after George Bush had demanded he step down.

**LEAD STORIES BY SUBJECT: EVENING NEWS MAY-JULY 2002 (%)**

	<b>BBC early</b>	<b>ITV early</b>	<b>BBC late</b>	<b>ITV late</b>	<b>C4</b>	<b>C5 early</b>
international news	38	28	54	40	53	18
politics	11	10	16	12	16	10
crime	13	18	13	17	5	18

If we take the top three stories over the 10 weeks, the distribution is similar to above, most evidently in the politics category. The biggest differences occur across international affairs, with BBC’s and ITV’s late averaging slightly lower, while Channel 5’s figures are higher. The issue of crime also shows some subtle differences, with Channel 5 showing a slightly higher percentage of items for this than the lead story analysis, while the BBC and ITV bulletins are slightly lower.

**TOP THREE STORIES BY SUBJECT: EVENING NEWS MAY-JULY 2002 (%)**

	<b>BBC early</b>	<b>ITV early</b>	<b>BBC late</b>	<b>ITV late</b>	<b>C4</b>	<b>C5 early</b>
international news	37	29	45	35	52	26
politics	11	11	15	13	14	9
crime	12	16	9	14	7	18

**e. Length of time devoted to stories**

The figures below show the average length of time devoted to the main stories compared with earlier years. The evidence does not appear to point to a shortening of an average item that numerous studies have found to be a feature of US television news. The evidence, on the whole, suggests a largely stable length of story where comparable data exists. The apparent slight decline between 2001 and 2002 may indicate some very recent pressures on story and bulletin length, most markedly on the late evening ITV news. However, the problems of comparable data (the 2001 figures refer to weekdays only), along with the similar figures for the mid-1990s, suggest that caution should be exercised in interpreting these figures. Taking a longer view, since the 1970s, the average length of story has increased significantly, particularly on the early-evening bulletins where the total length of bulletin has also more or less doubled. This meant that in 1975 most items in the main early BBC and ITV evening news bulletins averaged about 30 seconds. Now the largest number of items per bulletin on both BBC and ITV are found in the 1.5-2.5 minute range. Across bulletins, the longest stories are found on Channel 4, with the lead story being rarely under four minutes and often double that. Its tendency to mix its longer stories with quite a large number of 20-second stories accounts for the fact that the figure below is not even higher than those of its rivals.

#### AVERAGE ITEM DURATION 1975-2002 (MINUTES)

	BBC early	ITV early	BBC late	ITV late	C4	C5 early
2002	2.1	1.9	2.1	1.5	2.3	1.5
2001	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.2	–	–
1996	2.0	1.3	2.0	1.6	–	–
1993	2.2	1.5	2.1	1.4	–	–
1975	1.3	1.0	1.7	1.6	–	–

#### f. Continuous news channels

Despite promises to offer a more diverse range of stories, there is little difference in the range of stories offered by BBC News 24 (and even more so Sky News) compared with the main terrestrial channels. If we compare the stories broadcast on BBC News 24 with those found on the main BBC evening channels during the sample week in May, we find that only 11.8% of the broadcast time on News 24 was devoted to stories that did not feature on either the BBC early or BBC late bulletins. Most of these stories tended to be short (20-30 second) items, broadening the item agenda (although often with stories that were also covered by the BBC's terrestrial rivals), but suggesting that the story agenda for 24-hour news is not particularly different from that of terrestrial channels.

In the week studied, only a couple of stories stood out as being outside the existing terrestrial agenda – these included a story about the conflict between China and Japan over North Korean asylum seekers, and the Israeli army killing of a Palestinian civilian. While the agenda may not be significantly different, a more convincing case can be made for saying that News 24 offers a greater depth of coverage, at least in time devoted, to existing stories. This is true in its tendency to return to top stories twice or more in the bulletin, supplementing the main story with interviews with experts or reporters. For instance, in the period discussed, News 24 offered a longer account of the arrest of an internet paedophile ring, and the elections in Holland.

The fact that News 24 continues its normal bulletin length throughout the weekend also provides viewers with a more detailed account of the day's news than provided by the often truncated terrestrial bulletins. For example, an international story about a meeting between Bush and Putin was allocated 20 seconds on BBC early and late evening news, but ran for over three-and-a-half minutes on News 24. This also accounts for the fact that News 24 devoted about a third more minutes to news stories during the sample week than the main BBC bulletins.

#### g. Differences across 24-hour news channels

While the BBC offers coverage that does not differ markedly from the terrestrial bulletins, it offers a somewhat upmarket approach to both the style and content of its main 24-hour news rival Sky News. Sky offers a more dynamic package, complete with computer graphics, a one-person presenter (sometimes standing, sometimes sitting), and interactive screens, complete with the occasional online vote (during the study period, on whether Gibraltar should stay British, and Roy Keane should have been sent home from the World Cup). Sky's content, while

covering most of the same stories as News 24, tends to offer a greater focus on lighter issues, with the channel devoting particular space to sports news and stories about crime. The latter was most recently visible in the extensive, and highly popular attention it gave to the murder in August 2002 of two children in Soham.

The attention to sport was most marked during weekends in the sample week (where the main bulletins of 9-9.30pm were examined) where the whole of the second half of the Saturday and Sunday bulletins was given over to sport, capitalising upon Sky's brand strength in this area. BBC News 24, which encourages a slightly informal interaction between presenters and keeps viewers up to date with the story with text at the bottom of the screen, offers a more reserved approach. News 24's stories tend, as a whole to be slightly longer, in part because BBC News 24 has more airtime available. Across the week sampled, the lead story averaged 2.4 minutes on Sky compared with four minutes on News 24. ITN's approach in the 24-hour market is to provide a regularly repeated loop of the main stories of the day.

It is true then that in continuous news, as in mainstream terrestrial television news, there is some diversity of approach, both in style and content, but that this is limited and could clearly be taken further, especially in the use of News 24 to provide a national showcase for stories and perspectives from the UK nations and regions.

Further diversity is offered by long-running and highly successful programmes like BBC2's *Newsnight*, which serves an audience interested in greater depth and discussion of news. Another heavyweight recent addition to the news scene is the 30-minute evening news programme on BBC4, which goes out at 8pm. Now that the BBC has received permission to reshape BBC Choice as BBC3, it will certainly be expected to go beyond Choice's emphasis upon entertainment news, in its *Liquid News* programme, to develop other news and current affairs formats attractive to an audience of young adults. Given the widespread availability in most UK homes of non-UK television news channels, there does not promise to be any shortage of volume of television news from which to choose in the period ahead.

## **h. Conclusions**

This content analysis tells us that claims that television news has dramatically shifted its focus away from 'serious' to 'lighthearted' or 'dumb' news are overstated. There is, however, a measurable drift away from the priority given to UK politics in television news. The analysis also shows that there is considerable diversity of approach within UK television news, in terms of both content and style, though this diversity may still not be great enough to serve the interests of those groups which feel least well served by television news: the young and some ethnic minority communities.

## 8 INTERVIEWS WITH SENIOR NEWS FIGURES

As part of the current research exercise, short interviews were conducted with five leading figures in the world of television news. The purpose was to give them the opportunity to express thoughts on the themes covered in this research project. What follows are some extracts from these interviews.

### **Richard Sambrook, Director of News, BBC**

Sambrook is among those who think that there are “fundamental changes going on in the way people watch news”. People under the age of 45 “no longer sit down with news as appointment viewing, but it would be wrong to conclude that they don’t care about news”. Because they are surrounded by opportunities to pick up news, “by the time they get home at night, they already know roughly what’s happened”.

As for disengagement with politics, Sambrook thinks that much of the problem can be laid at the door of politicians, but the broadcasters do not escape responsibility. “People do see the way we cover politics as being complicit with the politicians. White middle aged, middle-class men in a studio discussing things which don’t have an immediate impact on their lives.”

The BBC’s recently announced £5m additional investment in political programming, along with the scrapping of well-established programmes like *On the Record* and *Despatch Box*, are part of the attempt to deal with this perceived difficulty. “I do think television can help do something about the political engagement problem,” says Sambrook.

He acknowledges that there has been an intended change in the style and approach of some BBC News programmes, especially the *Six o’clock News*, using clearer, larger graphic displays (the ‘big board’) and taking a more consumer-oriented focus on stories. “The feedback is that the audience like it. It’s not dumbing down – it’s explaining serious issues in a way people can understand.”

When it comes to communicating news to Britain’s ethnic minority communities, Sambrook acknowledges that there is much more to do. The approach of the new digital radio station, 1extra, is seen as one way forward: a black music station which incorporates news and other factual material. With regard to Britain’s Muslim communities, Sambrook says the news division is “on a steep learning curve.”

Will new news media, such as the internet and continuous news fill the gaps left by declining audiences to mainstream bulletins? “Instinctively, my answer is yes,” he says, “but I don’t have the evidence. My guess is that we’re seeing the establishment of news-on-demand services and that there will be quite a large demand for these, either on interactive television or broadband. They will emerge as primary sources of news, rather than the kind of added value element you currently get on interactive television.” As this happens, continuous news channels will be freed from their role as catch-up services, able to do “something more interesting and diverse. You are starting to see this in the US, with appointment-to-view programmes and big name presenters, on Fox and CNN.”

Is current affairs dead? Only, he says, in the sense that “the days when you could put current affairs in a peak-time schedule and hammock it with entertainment are gone for good”. To win an audience today, you have to do something

different: “to make events out of issues, as we did on our NHS day or the recent Cracking Crime day. You have to have more ambition to create landmark programmes. Another example was the way *Newsnight* spread an interview with Tony Blair over three days, which was well marketed and got a lot of attention.”

A regular current affairs strand like *Panorama* has a future on the BBC, but it will also depend upon getting midweek, peak-time exposure on BBC1 for special editions. “Quite often, something that’s in a strand just doesn’t get noticed,” says Sambrook.

### **Chris Shaw, Head of News and Current Affairs, Channel 5**

Channel 5 runs two early evening news programmes, one at 5.30pm, the second at 7.30pm. It also runs two-minute news summaries throughout the evening. The 7.30pm programme is based around a discussion format and was created in response to pressure from the ITC that Channel 5 should deliver a full-scale news programme in peak-time.

“The early bulletin,” says Shaw, “is quick, purposeful and accessible and does the trick.” The news summary format is unique on mainstream television and also does well. The 7.30pm discussion format, although it appeared to do well at first, is now under pressure and being reviewed.

“The big fact is that 55-60% of all television news viewers are over 55-years-old and that doesn’t change,” says Shaw. Like others, he is exploring ways of appealing to a younger audience. He thinks the approach being taken by the BBC, in bringing forward younger reporters and presenters, is misjudged.

“After years of Birtism, this represents a slightly thoughtless conversion to a populist ideal, prizing presentational skills, fluency, grooming and looks over conviction journalism. It’s not the age of the presenters that brings younger people into television, it’s character and personality.”

This explains why Shaw has made a point of working with ex-BBC veterans like Martin Bell. “The BBC are peddling old-fashioned American ideas: they don’t do that stuff any more in America: they just don’t have lots of 30- and 40-somethings presenting the news. Other people’s prejudices are our opportunity.”

Channel 5 could also be interested in stretching the limits of regulatory control of news, on the issue of impartiality. Fox News, he says, is striking because “it feels passionate. I’d be interested to see for regulatory reasons whether we could get away with that because they do take sides. Their anchors engage – they call it like they think it. For us, this would be uncharted territory, but if Channel 5 can’t do it, I don’t know who will.”

Shaw believes that the intensity of regulation of news is likely to increase as a result of the Communications Bill and that this is “the wrong thing to do: it holds us back. What annoys me is how same-ish all this news is. We’re all covering the same stories in pretty much the same way. That’s something that the establishment welcomes and it’s fostered by a tough climate of regulation.” The row over ITV’s late evening news scheduling, and its subsequent consequences, illustrates the dangers: “You’ve ended up with a pig’s ear.”

The challenge in current affairs is to be noticed: “how to make analysis grabby and watchable”. Shaw is considering running short current affairs films in the 7.30pm slot, which is regarded by the channel as an audience graveyard, but a place where experiments can be conducted which enhance the channel’s reputation, such as the recent decision to schedule arts programmes at 7pm.

As for efforts to increase political engagement, Shaw is prickly. “I’m a free marketer by instinct and I don’t take kindly to the view that it’s television’s responsibility to engage people’s interest in politics – I think it’s all our responsibilities, as citizens. But there is something about mediation which puts younger viewers off.”

An admired example of the less-mediated encounter was US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s debate with young people on the music channel MTV. “Maybe a junior *Question Time* would make good television and possibly help re-engage an audience. But these things are always going to be a minority interest.” He agrees, however, that much political television has been made obscure by the techniques used by both journalists and politicians during interviews.

“I resist politicians who say ‘everything would be OK, if only you’d just put us on telly and get rid of the fluff and allow us to talk about issues’. But a bit more original journalism might help. The biggest response to Five news stories is when we’re exposing something new or outrageous. In practice, these are usually foreign items, such as a recent report on young prostitutes in Vietnam. If we could show the same curiosity about our own society, that would be something.”

#### **Steve Anderson, Head of News and Current Affairs, ITV**

Is television news in crisis? “Only in the sense that it always is. It makes us take the job more seriously.”

Today, he says, ITV has more news in peak-time than at any previous point in its history, but “things can’t be allowed to go on with BBC1 and ITV news head to head and three 24-hour news channels also running head to head”. Continuous news services are growing strongly in their appeal, pointing to “a new crisis for the established television news programmes, which will have to be even more adept to make an exclusive proposition to their customers”.

The decision in 1999 to reschedule *News at Ten* to later in the evening was, Anderson says, being commercially vindicated when the ITC intervened and forced it back earlier into the evening. “But we probably underestimated the impact the decision would have politically and socially. *News at Ten* was identified with the workings of Parliament, able to deliver a vote live at 10. It gave the programme a high level of visibility at Westminster.” The fact that the ITV heartland is also the Labour heartland intensified political pressure. “*News at Ten* was a fixture in people’s lives, even though its audience was falling. It was like visiting granny. Fewer people were doing it, but they didn’t want granny to die.”

He agrees that as a result of two rounds of rescheduling, the audience has become confused and viewing diminished further, especially among C2DEs. “There’s no doubt now that television news is super-serving ABC1s.”

With BBC1 and ITV competing head on at 10pm, news audiences have risen again, “but it’s quite hard to defend as a business plan”. He thinks it is now up to the BBC to rethink the scheduling of its late evening news on BBC1, since the decision to move to the 10pm slot was taken so quickly and without, in his view, adequate scrutiny by the BBC Governors. “It’s a classic example of one law for ITV, which has to go through a protracted negotiation with the regulator and have its schedule the subject of intense national debate; and another law for the BBC, which axes its flagship *Nine o’clock News* at two weeks’ notice and with none of the scrutiny the commercial sector is forced to undergo.”

He agrees that ITV has been trying to widen the appeal of its news, but denies that there is anything new in it pursuing a populist agenda. “In 1986, I covered the story of the death of Boy George’s boyfriend and it led *News at Ten*, when David Nicholas was in charge and Alastair Burnett was the presenter. Today, the main point is that we have to be different, to tackle stories in a more lateral, more aggressive way. We’ve made our current affairs more newsy in recent years, now I’d like to see a bit more current affairs thinking going into news.”

Is the decline in political engagement a problem for television news? “No: this is a challenge for politicians not for us. Take the occasion when we relocated the *Jonathan Dimbleby* programme to Newcastle in order to accommodate an interview with Stephen Byers over the Martin Sixsmith affair. We gave an hour of network time to a leading member of the Cabinet and what happened? Two days later, he tells Parliament that he didn’t tell the truth on our programme. Why should we expect any member of the public to sit there and believe these people if, when they’re given the chance to appear, they lie. So how can anyone say the decline in political engagement is our fault?”

He does agree, however, that coverage of politics needs to change its style. “The idea that three MPs talking about an issue on College Green is good television is just not acceptable. You do have to challenge these conventions.”

### **Stewart Purvis, Chief Executive, Independent Television News**

ITN is the supplier of news to, among others, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. It also runs a continuous news channel, now rebranded as the ITV News Channel.

Purvis absolutely rejects the idea that news has ‘dumbed down’. It has simply responded to changes among the audience which means that by the evening, most people already know the main points of the news:

“They have more choice and less time. The content of television news today is more focused and it reflects better what people are interested in. People have a ridiculously rosy view of what television news was like 20 years ago. Then, there were huge access issues and technology constraints: whole countries, even continents, went uncovered. The truth is that television news is much better than it was – it just doesn’t take up such a lot of its viewers’ lives, which reflects changes in their lifestyle.”

As for whether television can be blamed for the decline in popular engagement with politics, Purvis says: “I don’t think television news has made an enormous difference either way,” though he is sure that improved access, for example, to Parliament, has made political reporting on television better than it used to be. “But there are many other factors at work: the role of the politicians, the rise of spin: these things are more likely to have affected the relationship between voters and politicians.”

Asked about the effects of the rescheduling of ITV's late evening news, Purvis notes that in the early evening, ITV has continued to perform well against BBC competition. "As I told the House of Commons select committee before the scheduling changes in March 1999, ITV's proposals were likely to see the audience share for the early evening news going up and audience share for the later evening news going down – but that no one could predict the net effect. That is exactly what happened."

#### **Tim Gardam, Director of Programmes, Channel 4**

Gardam does not think that people are any less interested in news than they were, but "those who are interested in what's going on in the world seem to be less interested in parliamentary politics than was the case 20 years ago. News has a problem when it reports politics".

He says that Channel 4 learned a salutary lesson when it took part in an exercise to give politicians direct access to airtime at the back end of *Channel 4 News*, which resulted in a bid, led by Labour, for a fixed number of slots in which politicians directly addressed viewers on camera. "This was such an arrogant and counter-productive approach. If they had said: 'why not explore making little films together', we might have got somewhere. But politicians fight for minutage and don't realise the moment they're on air, people can escape. They have to find ways of interesting people.

"For me, the growth of Millbank and American political techniques coincided with the turning of politicians inwards. It's not just that Blair has a big majority. The House of Commons under Major, who had a tiny majority, was less interesting than when Thatcher had a bigger majority. The problem today is that we're in an 18th century situation. We have a court, we don't have a Parliament. And television has proved that it can't be an alternative parliament, which is what we get accused of being. What we have is a vacuum. It's a fundamental constitutional issue and unless there is a rebalancing of power back from executive to Parliament, you won't find television covering Parliament."

There are, he agrees, also significant changes afoot in the way people watch television news and current affairs. It is harder to hold audiences to long duration programmes: MTV, for example, expects an average audience stay of eight minutes.

But that does not mean current affairs is impossible, merely that it must find new ways of drawing attention to itself. "That's why we moved away from *A Week in Politics* and *Despatches* at a fixed point in the schedule. By concentrating current affairs into particular slots and particular times, maybe to cluster some programmes over a weekend or a week, you can draw more attention and bring a larger audience. You get greater visibility by breaking into the strip and strand of the schedule and make a bigger claim. You can no longer expect audiences to watch out of a sense of civic duty."

One exception to this rule, he believes, is coverage of international affairs, where Channel 4's *Unreported World* slot, along with the BBC's *Correspondent*, offers regularity.

What is most of all missing is a place where broadcasters can respond to a big idea, or a shift in thinking. “There’s a huge need to reinvent *Weekend World*: that’s why I’m planning to introduce into the schedule the issue of the growing division between Britain and America. September 11 showed us the public appetite for something which falls between news and the polished documentary. These programmes won’t get huge audiences, but in absolute terms they’re still significant numbers.”

Does the channel which ran *Big Brother* think that its success with interactivity has any lessons for news and current affairs? “The future of television in a multichannel world is going to be to identify those viewers who see themselves as your members. The use of text messaging votes and other means of being a participant in material on screen is being exploited aggressively by entertainment. What news and current affairs hasn’t done is to extrapolate that into the idea of membership as a citizen. But when all these millions of people vote in *Big Brother*, it shows that people do delight in exercising a choice and making a tiny contribution to the result. Videophones will make a big difference in this type of programming. You know from the duty log that when we run a debate, like the one we did on Iraq, there’s a lot of interest in contributing.”

*Channel 4 News*, he says, is “the gold standard” of the channel, the last thing that would be changed or move. But even Channel 4 has to recognise that its news programme is watched significantly less in multichannel homes than in homes with only five channels.

## 9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey does not provide clear support to either the optimists or the pessimists in the debate about the changing character of broadcast news and its impact upon political engagement among citizens of the UK.

The most encouraging aspect of our findings is that people still have a very high level of confidence in television news, which they mostly trust to tell them the truth and to be impartial. They understand and are committed to a regime of regulation which underpins this trust. They recognise the importance of competition and diversity in news provision and, on the whole, they say that they are reasonably confident about their understanding of Britain and the world.

In other words, there is a heritage at stake in British news broadcasting, the value of which should not be understated. The Communications Bill is right to recognise the huge importance of broadcast news and to take the view that the public wants it to be strongly regulated into the new age of multichannel television and the internet. The trick is to combine secure protection of this inheritance with a regime which also permits experimentation and innovation from a diverse range of players: to combine the benefits of the market with the necessities of regulation.

**Recommendation one: the Communications Bill's emphasis upon defending the publicly regulated broadcast news sphere, in terms of investment, scheduling and diverse ownership, is correct and should be supported as the Bill progresses through Parliament.**

There are, however, some significant difficulties, if not already on the agenda, certainly on the horizon, with which OFCOM will have to grapple and which those debating the Communications Bill would do well to bear in mind.

The first is that in a world of ambient news, the economics of the news business is under assault. If news is to be given away on television, radio, the internet and even in many newspapers, the public cannot be blamed for getting the idea that they need never pay directly for news. The consequences of this state of affairs is likely to be especially acute at the local level, where this report suggests that the public is most concerned about its ignorance of the kinds of things which local newspapers have traditionally tried to inform them about.

At present, no part of the media industry has a convincing stance with regard to this problem of local news, where newspapers, radio, television and the internet all have a role to play.

In the pre-legislative hearings on the Communications Bill, it became clear that the newspaper industry wishes to be allowed to consolidate at the local level to defend its advertising base, but that it also wishes to be as far removed as possible from the jurisdiction of OFCOM, which is charged with ensuring the sound working of electronic media markets, locally and regionally as well as nationally.

Local television has not, so far, worked well in Britain and it is not clear that anyone currently has a strategy for its future, following the collapse in the 1990s of some high profile experiments. The Communications Bill's proposal that local authorities be allowed to become licensed broadcasters flies in the face of the entire modern British tradition of media independence from government: this provision should be removed from the Bill by Parliament.

Commercial radio, somewhat deregulated in the Broadcasting Act 1990, faces tighter regulation of its local character (meaning in part, presumably, its news services) in the Communications Bill, but it is not yet clear that OFCOM intends to equip itself with an information base to make such regulation a reality. The lack of such an information base has made it impossible for the Radio Authority to be an active regulator in this respect.

As for the internet, we are still in the age of trial and error, but if there is a place for 'access radio' in the Bill (as there rightly is), it would surely also be sensible to imagine what powers might be necessary to facilitate the creation and, if necessary, subsidisation at local level of public service, internet-based news services, rather than simply allowing them to emerge on the BBC, through its 'where I live' sites. One important issue here concerns competition between broadcasting based providers of local news services and newspapers, which are commercial organisations. It is difficult to see how OFCOM can make a useful contribution to understanding this important area of the news market without taking a close interest in newspapers. OFCOM might well conclude that newspapers should be helped, whether through a more permissive regime on mergers, more relaxed cross-media ownership rules or in other ways, to play their part in ensuring that the UK continues to benefit from a high quality news and information system in all localities.

OFCOM clearly also has a role in holding public service broadcasters to their commitments to regional news programming, which has been severely weakened in recent years by scheduling decisions aimed at securing greater commercial advantage.

**Recommendation two: recognising the emerging difficulties in local and regional news markets, OFCOM might be encouraged to undertake an early study of these issues, with a view to making recommendations upon the rules applying to local newspaper mergers, cross-media ownership in local and regional markets, the role of access radio in news, a strategy for local television and a possible regime for public service internet news operations at the local level.**

**Recommendation three: OFCOM will no doubt wish to uphold and take further the ITC's Charter for the Nations and Regions and to establish itself within the nations and regions in a way which ensures that it possesses the knowledge and ability to act effectively at the regional and local level. For example, its proposed regular assessments of the public service landscape might include assessments by region, as well as nationally.**

**Recommendation four: the clause in the Communications Bill awarding to local authorities the power to hold broadcast licences should be removed.**

This survey suggests that the public is overwhelmingly supportive of the idea of rules requiring broadcast news to be impartial and accurate. There are, however, issues which should be debated during the passage of the Communications Bill.

One concerns the scope of the impartiality rules, which currently focus upon party politics and industrial disputes. This survey provides support for the idea, advanced in a recent IPPR pamphlet,<sup>96</sup> that in a time of diminished party loyalties, impartiality should be more broadly defined, to require that broadcasters provide even-handed treatment of issues of race, science, environment, health and any other matter of public controversy.

The IPPR report correctly states that “broadcast news is the nervous system of our democratic life,” but it also argues that there is a case for taking a more relaxed view of impartiality in parts of the broadcasting system, as spectrum scarcity diminishes. One possibility is to license channels which are clearly labelled as ‘opinion channels’. Another possibility would be to waive standard news impartiality requirements for any channel which is an ‘active purchase’. This last idea, however, is problematic, since the next stage of development of multichannel television in Britain is to include a strong, free-to-air digital terrestrial platform. Nor is it entirely clear what amounts to an ‘active purchase’ in a satellite television environment, where services are bundled together for sale to consumers.

If the UK is to hold, across the board, to its standards about the due impartiality and accuracy of broadcast news, it should, logically, apply them as strenuously to non-UK news channels such as Fox News, Al Jazeera and Zee TV, which are licensed for transmission within Britain. Apart from the practical difficulties involved of monitoring such a wide variety of channels in a multitude of languages, there is the tricky question of jurisdiction. At present, the ITC has the power and the ability to revoke the licences of all these broadcasters, but alternative web-based transmission mechanisms challenge this authority.

Perhaps more important is the evidence from this survey that there is among Britain’s ethnic minorities and indeed other groups, such as the young, a sense that mainstream broadcast news does not represent them or their interests well, fairly or with insight. It may be that a more opinionated style of broadcast news, originated from well outside the UK broadcasting mainstream, is helpful in the overall news mix, so long as consumers are aware what they are getting and which services conform to impartiality rules and which do not. The time has come when a range of experimentation should be encouraged.

However, the clear primary thrust of the evidence we have gathered is that there is also very strong public support for the existing regime of broadcasting impartiality, which points to a cautious approach. The most sensible course is to create an opening for OFCOM to recommend to the Secretary of State variation in the impartiality rules, where the channels involved are of minority interest and

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<sup>96</sup> Tambini, D and Cowling, J (eds), *New News: impartial broadcasting in the digital age*. London, IPPR, 2002.

where they do not threaten the central, impartial reputation of mainstream UK television news. The principle should be both to regulate and to encourage broadcasters to innovate.

**Recommendation five:** In the interests of achieving greater diversity of television news, to serve a wider range of audience interests, OFCOM could use its freedom to interpret the principle of 'due impartiality' and might be given the power to recommend to the Secretary of State the terms on which particular television and radio services might be authorised to depart from standard rules and codes on issues such as impartiality. Any channel granted such exemption would still be required to conform to any general requirement of British law, such as statutes forbidding incitement to racial hatred, or to secure the protection of children.

The Communications Bill is rather silent upon the subject of the internet, fearful that any move might be seen as intending to pursue regulation of internet content. There is certainly no case to be made for applying content regulation of the type deployed in broadcasting to the world wide web as a whole, even if this were possible. However, the internet is a medium which will no doubt benefit over time if users are able to show discrimination over the types of information they receive, screening out what they consider distasteful or unreliable.

In the first place, the Bill should make it clear that OFCOM's powers to regulate public service broadcasters also govern those broadcasters' internet activities. OFCOM might also be required to take a close interest in the public interest aspects of the internet, giving consideration to ideas such as kite-marking sites, search engines and filtering systems, in order to respond to sustained public demand for reassurance about standards on the internet. It should, however, also be made clear that those who want a wholly unregulated experience of the internet subject only to the constraints of the criminal law are entitled to have that.

**Recommendation six:** The Communications Bill might evolve in a way which makes it possible for OFCOM to be charged with a responsibility to respond to established public demand for a regulated, public service dimension to internet-based services. This might include kite-marked sites, search engines and filtering systems. OFCOM might also be alert to the possibility of other emerging public service opportunities on the internet and emerging digital communications platforms. Meanwhile, public service broadcasters with internet operations should be required to meet the same standards of impartiality, accuracy and freedom from commercial vested interest online as they do in their broadcast activities.

Although many aspects of this report give grounds for reassurance that the UK 'broadcasting settlement' is accepted and even enthusiastically supported across age, race and class, there is significant discontent among some groups. The sense of disappointment within the black community about the way they are represented and the capacity of broadcasters to respond to their interests and needs is a very serious matter. Although UK broadcasters have made some serious efforts in recent years to galvanise themselves on issues of racial and cultural diversity, they have not yet done enough to persuade Britain's black and Asian population. The newspaper industry faces even greater difficulties.

**Recommendation seven: the news media should redouble their efforts to engage with Britain's ethnic minorities. This is in their own business and institutional self-interest, but it is not currently happening at a convincing pace. This will require new initiatives in digital radio and television from public service broadcasters and a sustained effort in terms of training and staff development. OFCOM could be asked to take responsibility for producing a regular assessment of cultural and ethnic diversity in UK news media.**

In terms of the arguments about political disengagement, the findings of this report suggest that some of the current debate may be misconstrued. Strikingly, there is no evidence that some of the more traditional vehicles for covering politics on British television, such as the BBC's *On the Record*, are in any way losing touch with their established audience. It seems odd to sweep away old and trusted programmes, which are fulfilling their function, before the new has been designed, let alone tried.

It is beyond the scope of this report to suggest programme format ideas to the broadcasters, but they may think it worth noting the scepticism generally expressed towards the 'celebrity sells' formula in news. They certainly ought to note the evidence that building audiences for news and current affairs is a long-term process in which stability and visibility of scheduling is vital. That said, there is undoubtedly a challenge to find new ways of appealing to younger audiences and to specific groups, including ethnic minorities. Well chosen current affairs ventures offer one definite route forward here.

In a world of ambient news, the danger is that too many people will operate on the basis of word of mouth gossip, supplemented by a diet of headlines. Yet, this and other research suggests that people have a genuine interest in issues which affect their lives and that the main television news bulletins offer an unrivalled location for addressing these needs. If people already know the news when they sit down to watch evening news bulletins on television, it is logical to think that they would like something more than repackaged headlines. There are great opportunities here for accessible analysis and well-chosen stories to illustrate themes important in people's lives. Ambient news demands that the mainstream television news bulletin continues to be rethought. Interactive technology will offer an increasing number of ways to achieve greater customisation of the television news experience.

ITV and BBC research draws attention to the idea that viewers generally prefer 'outcomes rather than processes', which is sometimes taken as an indication that political coverage is too concerned with political or administrative manoeuvres. There is something in this argument, but the danger should also be recognised that television cannot always hope to make real life more like itself. Politics does not always have a beginning, a middle and an end.

That said, public distaste for modern politics, with its spin, evasiveness and apparent lack of integrity is palpable in this research, as in many other studies. Parliament faces a huge challenge in responding to this critique, most of which runs well beyond the remit of this report. There are, however, things that Parliament and the political parties can do to improve their standing with the public via the media and this will involve rethinking, for example, the rules which govern broadcasters during election periods, which are too restrictive, and definitions of impartiality which rely too much on party political considerations. Politicians need to accept the media consequences of the fact that winning and

maintaining public support is a continuous process, rather than something concentrated around election periods. It requires a more relaxed form of communication and one which puts the viewer at the centre of the picture, rather than the politician or the broadcaster.

**Recommendation eight.** Broadcasters should note the negative national and regional effects of news rescheduling on ITV in the last three years. OFCOM, like the ITC, will no doubt use its powers to ensure that a range of high quality news programmes continue to be broadcast in peak-time. Stability and visibility of scheduling is an important condition of success.

**Recommendation nine.** Parliament and the political parties should urgently reconsider those respects in which their media behaviour discourages public interest in politics. These include some modern techniques of political communication, the arcane structure of parliamentary affairs, reflected in an equally arcane parliamentary web presence (though parts of the governmental web presence are of high quality). Rules designed to ensure fairness to different political parties may be damagingly tight, especially around elections, and should be reconsidered by Parliament in close collaboration with the broadcasters, the BBC Governors and OFCOM. Any revised arrangements might be agreed by OFCOM and supervised by it.

**Recommendation ten.** There is also a clear public demand for more occasions in which the public is free to interrogate politicians directly. This is a challenge for the broadcasters, but an example of greater openness should be set from the top politically by ensuring that the 2001 election is the last not to feature a proper series of live party leader debates or, better still, debates followed by an opportunity for members of the public to interrogate party leaders. Politicians should beware of thinking that they know better than the broadcasters what will interest people; broadcasters should recognise the importance of their role in ensuring the effective functioning of Britain's democratic procedures and be responsive the Parliamentary view.

The overall thrust of this research exercise has been to establish that broadcast news is now the cornerstone of the UK news media. As such, we must both build upon it, while being confident that it is strong enough for us to be able to take creative and regulatory risks. Nor, however, should we over-rely on television. The Communications Bill is a vital piece of legislation for the future of news in the UK and Parliament has an important role to play in ensuring that OFCOM is able to make the most effective contribution possible to nurturing a healthy infrastructure of news at all levels in the coming years.