

# Reporting the nations and devolved issues on network news:

An analysis of television and online coverage



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# Background

Since 1999, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have had growing responsibilities over huge swathes of social and economic policymaking, most strikingly in health and education. Over the past two years, the coronavirus pandemic has brought devolution to the fore of UK politics. In the early months of the health crisis, Governments across the UK implemented policies designed to protect the public from contracting and spreading COVID-19. At the same time, the UK Government made major economic policy decisions, such as administering the furlough scheme, which was UK-wide but influenced devolved decision making about lockdowns.

The implications of this were spelt out by the Institute of Government in 2020<sup>1</sup>:

*Major public services affected by the pandemic, in particular public health services and education, are the responsibility of the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (...) As a result, an effective response to the public health emergency requires all four Governments both to take action within their own areas of responsibility and to coordinate their actions.*

Broadcasters face challenges in reporting issues that are reserved to the UK Government, but which intersect with policy judgements from the devolved administrations. News providers have had to monitor how all four Governments are responding to the pandemic, scrutinising decision-making while accurately informing people about what health measures - such as wearing face masks - they should be following in different locations.

Television is still the most used platform for news amongst UK adults, closely followed by online news. According to Ofcom's News Consumption Survey, 79% of UK adults claim to use television for news nowadays and 73% use online sources. Figures are similar when looking specifically at the devolved nations<sup>2</sup>. Although audiences have access to national news opt-outs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on BBC, STV, ITV and UTV, network news output continues to be widely watched across the UK. For example, 79% of the adult population in Wales tuned into BBC network news at the start of the pandemic. This peaked at nearly 1.9m of television viewing across one week, a 40% increase at the same point in the previous year<sup>3</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the main objective of this study was to assess how well UK network news providers reported devolved policy issues on television and online. This involved examining television news bulletins broadcast UK wide on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News, as well as the UK news websites on BBC, ITV and Sky News over a four week period in June/July 2021. The study systematically analysed a large body of news output, assessing the extent of coverage about England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and examining how well network television and online news reported which Government was responsible for decision making and explaining policy relevance to other nations of the UK. In doing so, we considered the editorial decisions behind the selection of network news stories by interviewing senior editors from the UK's main broadcasters. Editors, of course, have serious time constraints in their television news

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Government (2020) [What parts of the coronavirus response are the responsibility of the devolved administrations?](https://www.instituteforGovernment.org.uk/explainers/coronavirus-and-devolution) <https://www.instituteforGovernment.org.uk/explainers/coronavirus-and-devolution>

<sup>2</sup> [News consumption in the UK - Ofcom \(2021\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Culture, Welsh language and Communications Committee (2020) <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/g6386/Public%20reports%20pack%20Monday%2013-Jul-2020%2013.00%20Culture%20Welsh%20Language%20and%20Communications%20Committee.pdf?T=10>

bulletins, making it a challenging job to regularly reflect all four nations and ensuring policy decisions made by the devolved governments are clearly communicated for all UK audiences.

The importance of accurately reporting devolved decision making was highlighted in a diary study at Cardiff University with news audiences across the UK and a content analysis of five network television news bulletins in the few first months of the pandemic in 2020<sup>4</sup>. It found that many respondents were confused about which Government had responsibility over the lockdown measures and that reporting did not regularly attribute political responsibility to all four nations. Once the nations began to adopt different lockdown measures, however, the clarity of reporting legislative decisions improved.

This study examines whether the clarity of reporting continued into 2021 and whether audiences had access to news that could help them become well informed about the rules that apply to them. Working in world-leading schools of media, journalism and communication, we are acutely aware of the challenges facing journalists in today's increasingly global, multi-platform, 24-hour news culture<sup>5</sup>. While remaining sensitive to the pressures and constraints journalists operate under, our aim was to constructively contribute to debates that help broadcasters consider how they can better deliver accurate coverage of UK politics and public affairs<sup>6</sup>. Put simply, the study was designed to offer an objective benchmark for assessing the volume and accuracy of UK network news across television and online, as well as exploring the editorial decisions behind the selection and construction of devolved news.

In order to help us make sense of how journalists reported devolved issues on UK network news, we drew on an advisory board made up of Richard Sambrook, a former Head of BBC News, and Jess Sargeant, a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Government with a specialist knowledge of devolution. They helped us assess editorial decisions about the complexity of reporting news to audiences across the four nations.

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<sup>4</sup> Ofcom (2020) [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/200504/media-nations-2020-wales-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/200504/media-nations-2020-wales-report.pdf) - see page 9.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, Justin, Cushion, Stephen and Thomas, James (2005) 'Immediacy, Convenience or Engagement? An analysis of 24-hour news channels in the UK', *Journalism Studies*, 6(4): 461-477

Cushion, Stephen and Sambrook, Richard (2016) (eds.) *The Future of 24-hour News: New Directions, New Challenges?* New York: Peter Lang

<sup>6</sup> Cushion, Stephen (2019) *The Range and Depth of BBC News and Current Affairs: A Content Analysis*. Ofcom

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/174205/bbc-news-review-content-analysis-full-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/174205/bbc-news-review-content-analysis-full-report.pdf)

Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, and Ramsay, Gordon (2010) *Four nations impartiality review follow-up: An analysis of reporting devolution*. London: BBC Trust

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# Executive summary

## Overview

The content analysis study found that UK network news providers have enhanced their coverage of devolved issues compared to previous findings in 2015 and 2016. This was largely as a consequence of Covid-19, which brought devolution to the fore of UK politics. The analysis showed there was more news that was potentially relevant to devolution – approximately 40% of the news agenda - because of a focus on Covid rules made by devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as by the UK Government about England. Interviews with senior news editors revealed that newsrooms have become increasingly conscious of reporting devolved policy differences in network news.

The study identified roughly 60% of news items potentially relevant to devolution that included some form of reference to one or more of the four nations. This meant around 40% of items did not include any signposting about the relevance of devolution, such as stating if a policy related to England only. When a devolved issue was covered, our analysis revealed few items compared Government decisions across the four nations.

So, overall, while the study found more coverage of the devolved institutions, it also identified missed opportunities to explain different Government decisions across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## To what extent are the four nations of the UK reflected in network news reporting?

- All editors acknowledged that the reporting of the four nations of the UK had become far more challenging since the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic as Governments across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had taken different approaches to handling the health crisis.
- Editors explained their news teams were highly conscious of representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in network news stories, as well as coverage of issues relating to the regions of England, and regularly drew on specialist knowledge from colleagues in the nations to ensure accuracy in reporting.
- The vast majority of news items (72.4%) did not feature politicians from Westminster (e.g. MPs, the UK Government etc.) and/or the devolved institutions, or did not involve journalists talking specifically about these politicians and government bodies. However, when a news item did feature a politician or discuss a political story, very little coverage was given to the voices of politicians from the devolved Parliaments and Assembly or issues debated at the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
- The BBC made the most of its larger network of journalists across the nations compared to the other network news broadcasters, by featuring more journalists on location beyond England than other news bulletins, and generally reported more news about devolved issues.

### How regularly are devolved issues reported and signposted in network coverage?

- Given Covid-19 has brought devolution to the fore of UK politics, nearly four in ten news items were potentially relevant to devolution. This was almost five times more coverage about devolution than identified in a previous study in 2016.
- Around six in ten of these items contained some form of signposting about devolution in them. Conversely, around 40% of items that had a devolved angle did not include any signposting about the relevance of devolution.
- All editors agreed that online news provided far more space and time than television reporting to signpost to devolved powers given it doesn't face the same constraints as television news. This was evident from the content analysis which showed online news provided far more clarity than television news about the relevance of devolved issues.
- BBC news reporting, and in particular its online news site, provided far more clarity about the relevance of devolved issues when compared to other network news TV bulletins and online sites.

### How often was the relevance of devolution signposted in network news?

- Just under half of the items that signposted devolution contained explicit references to one or more of the nations. This represents an increase when compared to previous studies.
- The content analysis found that while broadcasters and websites mostly featured references to devolved powers either in the introduction or throughout a package, approximately one in four items only provided signposting for viewers or readers at the very end of an item.
- There was broad acknowledgement that it was challenging at times to accurately label the status of many UK government secretaries of state and ministers given some powers relating to devolved issues are specific to England (e.g. the Secretary of State for Education has responsibility for schools in England only). There was a general agreement among editors that more clarity was needed when UK Government officials appeared in coverage on issues that were devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- When a devolved issue was covered, the vast majority of items (89.7%) did not include either a direct or indirect political source from any of the political bodies from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
- BBC TV news reporting supplied far more references to devolved powers either in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than other network news providers, while BBC online news more explicitly signposted the relevance of devolved issues than television news.
- Online coverage – notably on the BBC – was more likely to include the voices of politicians from the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than television news.

### To what extent do television news headlines signpost the relevance of devolution?

- All editors acknowledged the difficulties of capturing the complexity of devolution within a limited timeframe and the challenge of crafting succinct headlines.
- Overall, the television news headline analysis shows that there was a lack of geographical precision when reporting news potentially relevant to devolution. Around half of the headlines examined mentioned one or more of the UK nations, but the vast majority of these references were to England only. On occasions, the UK was referenced generally when England could have been namechecked specifically.

- The degree of signposting about devolution in television news headlines varied considerably between broadcasters. The BBC News at Ten and Channel 4 News at 7pm conveyed the most clarity in their headlines about stories that referred to matters of devolution.
- When a headline did not contain a reference to a UK nation, the story tended to be about England, with general references to 'the Government' or 'the Prime Minister'. These items did not specify that decisions related to England were not directly relevant to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

# Objectives and Method

## Objectives

The primary aim of this project was to provide a quantitative assessment of the reporting of devolved policy issues on the main TV network news providers (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News) and across their online output (BBC, ITV and Sky News). A content analysis study helped assess how well the main TV network news providers reported devolved policy issues. Alongside this, headlines relevant to devolution were examined, as well as an in-depth examination of three specific stories in order to consider the clarity in which devolved responsibilities were explained to audiences.

Given the complexities and challenges in raising public awareness of complex public policy issues, interviews were also conducted with either the heads of news and current affairs or senior editors from the UK's main public service broadcasters. In doing so the aim was to better understand the editorial practices and selection of reporting news across the four nations, and the challenges associated with covering UK politics in a devolved political system.

The study was designed to be comparative across media platforms (television and online), as well as between news providers. The key questions of the study were:

- To what extent are the four nations of the UK reported?
- To what extent are devolved politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland reported?
- Which devolved issues are reported?
- To what extent are devolved responsibilities communicated in coverage?
- According to senior editors from the UK's main public service broadcasters, what are the complexities and challenges involved in reporting devolved issues in network programming?

## Sample period

The sample dates for the content analysis were:

- Week 1- Monday 14th June – Friday 18th June 2021
- Week 2- Monday 21st June – Friday 25th June 2021
- Week 3 - Monday 28th June – Friday 2nd July 2021
- Week 4 - Monday 5th July – Friday 9th July 2021

The **TV** sample included: BBC News at Ten, Channel 4 News at 7pm, ITV News at 10, Channel 5 at 5pm, Sky News at 10pm.

The **Online** sample included: Top 7 items on the front pages of the BBC News, ITV News, and Sky News websites, which focus on UK stories per day. They were analysed at 1pm each weekday.

This included: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk>, <https://www.itv.com/news> and <https://news.sky.com/uk>.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While Channel 4 and Channel 5 have news websites, they do not produce regular online stories. The Channel News website links to the television news bulletins. The Channel 4 typically select one or two video-based stories per day which are taken from news bulletins which we will also examine. Since Channel 4 produce a small volume of daily

The unit of analysis (e.g. when a story begins and ends) was every *news item* rather than every news story. *News items* refer to specific conventions (e.g. anchor-only, reporter package, a live two way etc.) rather than *stories* (terrorism, health, Brexit, education etc) within a conventional broadcast news programme. This meant that the study was able to unpack particular stories in detail and interpret which sources were used to inform coverage.

Over the four-week study, we examined 1751 news items in total. Television news made up 1331 items in total while online amounted to 420 news items (140 items per website).

Ongoing news reporting about the pandemic was prominent throughout the sample period, including coverage of COVID-19 restrictions across the UK and internationally, and to a lesser extent coverage of the 2020 European football Championship, in particular the run up to, and aftermath of, the games featuring England.

The interviews were carried out with senior news editors from the main UK's public service broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) between 2 and 25 November 2021. This included Ben De Pear (*Editor of Channel 4 News*) Cait Fitzsimmons (*Editor of Channel 5 News*), Nick Phipps, (*Output Editor of Sky News*), Paul Royall, (*BBC Editor of the News at Six and Ten*), and Laura Wilshaw (*Senior Programme Editor of ITV News at Ten*).

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news in video-based formats, we did not analyse these stories because it would be difficult to compare with other news providers' websites.

# Reflecting the four nations of the UK in network news

## Summary of key chapter findings:

All editors acknowledged that the reporting of the four nations of the UK had become far more challenging since the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic as Governments across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had taken different approaches to handling the health crisis.

Editors explained their news teams were highly conscious of representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in network news stories, as well as coverage of issues relating to the regions of England, and regularly drew on specialist knowledge from colleagues in the nations to ensure accuracy in reporting.

The content analysis revealed that the vast majority of news items (72.4%) did not feature politicians from Westminster (e.g. MPs, the UK Government etc.) and/or the devolved institutions, or did not involve journalists talking specifically about these politicians and government bodies. However, when a news item did feature a politician or discuss a political story, very little coverage was given to the voices of politicians from the devolved Parliaments and Assembly or issues debated at the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Network reporters were overwhelmingly based in England, making up almost nine-in-ten items with an identifiable location.

The BBC made the most of its larger network of journalists across the nations compared to the other news broadcasters by featuring more journalists on location beyond England than other news bulletins, and generally reported more news about devolved issues.

However, the editorial selection of news and use of reporters across the nations and regions is not only determined by the resources of each broadcaster, but is also shaped by their news values, stylistic conventions and practices, as well as their audience demographic.

Since Covid-related policies diverged across the UK nations, it was observed that the profile of devolution had also risen with greater public awareness.

For example, Output Editor of Sky News, Nick Phipps thought that:

*...the visibility of the devolved administrations, from a kind of broader UK point of view, has become much more visible...people like Mark Drakeford have become UK national figures during the pandemic in a way that they just simply weren't before the pandemic took place.*

The BBC News Editor of Six and Ten, Paul Royall, believed audiences have become more familiar with devolution since the pandemic began and wanted more coverage from across the nations of the UK, including anchoring the programme from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland:

*...I think that audiences have probably got to know the [devolved] institutions, the leaders, the characters, the differences. So in that respect, going forward, there'll probably be a higher degree of tolerance as well in terms of reflecting those*

*differences. We're just about to embark actually, as part of our contribution to the BBCs across the UK approach...we're doing the Six and Ten o'clock news from each of the nations...*

All editors also stated how important it was for broadcasters to reflect the whole of the UK in their editorial selection of nightly news. They explained their teams were highly conscious of representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in network programming, as well as the regions of England. Moreover, there was an editorial recognition of the devolved political landscape in the UK and newsrooms needed to be reminded of that during the pandemic. As Channel 4 News Editor, Ben De Pear, explained:

*...we had strong editorial guidelines that were repeated in emails on a fortnightly basis that, when we are talking about the Covid pandemic, we need to understand that each major nation, the devolved nations of Britain, has different restrictions and guidelines at any one time.*

But it was also pointed out by all editors that their daily planning meetings involved feedback from their colleagues across the nations and regions of the UK about story selection. Interviews also revealed that it was often specialist correspondents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland across different broadcasters that regularly drew attention to emerging stories and advised on the accuracy of coverage when specific policy issues needed to be attributed to one of the four governments of the UK.

The Output Editor of Sky News, described the influence of senior journalists shaping coverage:

*...we have...our Scotland and Northern Ireland correspondents for more than 20 years, that they are never shy in coming forward to make it clear when a particular issue that we're talking about has a different take on their patch or that we need to be clear, absolutely be clear, that this is going in a different direction perhaps in the Westminster narrative to the way it's going in Cardiff or in Edinburgh. So, even though perhaps there isn't that kind of formalised structure, these are still discussions that take place on a story-by-story basis.*

Within daily planning meetings, newsrooms routinely debated the selection of stories according to the style of each evening programme, the perceived news value of stories, the resources available to cover different parts of the UK as well as a need to reflect a wide range of subjects – including international issues – for audiences. For example, audiences in different parts of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can view national and regional news programming from the BBC, ITV, STV and UTV respectively whereas Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News produce UK-wide news bulletins. This was pointed out by Laura Wilshaw, Senior Programme Editor of ITV News at Ten:

*Given that, earlier on in the day there is half an hour of news dedicated at six o'clock to all the nations and regions anyway, they will have their own news. I don't feel that for a whole quarter of the programme I have to give equal time to all four nations when there may be one story that covers all of them, and that's all I want to do in terms of UK politics for that day. Because the whole programme doesn't want to be 25 minutes of politics, you want some politics, I want some human stories, I want some international stories, I want a nice, light 'and finally' for the end of the programme.*

The vast majority of news items (72.4%) did not feature politicians from Westminster (e.g. MPs, the UK Government etc.) and/or the devolved institutions, or did not involve journalists talking specifically about these politicians and government bodies. However, when a news item did feature a politician or discuss a political story, very little coverage was given to the voices of politicians from the devolved Parliaments and Assembly or issues debated at the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Comparatively speaking, BBC television and online news provided greater prominence of the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than other broadcasters or other websites. Overall, though, this was still a marginal proportion of all coverage.

**Table 4.1: The proportion of politically focused network television and online news items about either Westminster politics, devolved politics (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), or both Westminster and devolved politics, or none of these (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Westminster</b>	14.2% (39)	22.4% (54)	23.0% (60)	23.9% (73)	20.9% (52)	33.6% (47)	27.1% (38)	37.1% (52)	23.7% (415)
<b>Devolved</b>	3.3% (9)	2.5% (6)	1.5% (4)	1.6% (5)	3.6% (9)	5.0% (7)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	2.4% (42)
<b>Both</b>	2.9% (8)	1.7% (4)	0.4% (1)	2.0% (6)	/	1.4% (2)	2.1% (3)	2.1% (3)	1.5% (27)
<b>NONE of the above</b>	79.6% - (219)	73.4% (177)	75.1% (196)	72.5% (221)	75.5% (188)	60.0% (84)	70.0% (98)	60.0% (84)	72.4% (1267)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (275)	100.0% (241)	100.0% (261)	100.0% (305)	100.0% (249)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (1751)

*N= 1751 = all items in sample.*

Excluding foreign news, the analysis shows UK television network bulletins primarily focused on news from England, most strikingly on ITV News at Ten, where it made up just under three quarters of items (see Table 4.2). ITV News Online and Sky News Online had a similar level of coverage focused on England specifically – over three in four items – rather than on Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

**Table 4.2: The proportion of network television and online news items about one or more of the four nations (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	SKY TV	Ch4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	SKY Web	Total
<b>England</b>	57.6 % (91)	74.1% (106)	60.9 % (81)	68.5 % (113)	64.9% (109)	63.4 % (64)	73.4 % (58)	75.0 % (72)	66.5% (694)
<b>Westminster</b>	12.7 % (20)	8.4% (12)	19.5 % (26)	15.2 % (25)	14.3% (24)	8.9% (9)	10.1 % (8)	9.4% (9)	12.8% (132)
<b>Scotland</b>	3.2% (5)	5.6% (8)	7.5% (10)	4.2% (7)	9.5% (16)	6.9% (7)	/	/	5.1% (54)
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	6.3% (10)	3.5% (5)	2.3% (3)	3.6% (6)	1.2% (2)	5.9% (6)	1.3% (1)	3.1% (3)	3.5% (36)
<b>Wales</b>	2.5% (4)	1.4% (2)	0.8% (1)	1.8% (3)	3.0% (5)	3.0% (3)	/	/	1.7% (18)
<b>Combination of two or more nations within UK</b>	17.7 % (28)	7.0% (10)	9.0% (12)	6.7% (11)	7.1% (12)	11.9 % (12)	15.2 % (12)	15.2 % (12)	10.5% (109)
<b>Total</b>	100.0 % (158)	100.0 % (143)	100.0 % (133)	100.0 % (165)	100.0% (168)	100.0 % (101)	100.0 % (79)	100.0 % (96)	100.0% (1043)

*N = 1043 = the number of items that were about one of the four nations or a combination of the nations (excluding anything that was generic and about the whole of the UK, or anything that was about somewhere beyond the UK)*

News centred on what was happening within Westminster institutions (12.8%) was higher than news about either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland across all bulletins and online sites.

Of all television news bulletins, BBC News at Ten featured the most coverage of the three devolved nations, with three in 10 items – 29.7% – about either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or a combination of one or more of the four nations.

In all items with a focus on the UK nations, over half of these (56.9%) had a reporter in an identifiable location (see Table 4.3). Network reporters were overwhelmingly based in England (including from Westminster), making up almost nine in 10 – 88.5% – of all items with a domestic focus. When a journalist was reporting from Westminster, 80.5% of these items had some relevance to devolution (e.g. it was about an issue that could have been explored from a devolved perspective). Of these, 74.2% of items related to Covid. When a journalist reported from England, 37.1% of items had some relevance to devolution. Many items about England were non-political items such as covering England football team's progress in the European football championship or a crime story in an English city or town. When a journalist reported from

England about devolved or potentially devolved issues, 61.1% of items were COVID-related. Sky News at Ten featured the most journalists from Westminster, accounting for 17.7% of all items, compared to 16.3% on Channel 5 News at 5, 14.9% on Channel 4 News at 7, 9.9% on ITV News at Ten and 8.4% on BBC News at Ten. Of the roughly one in ten items reported from the devolved nations, there were differences between broadcasters in how often they appeared, with Scotland featuring the most across all bulletins. On ITV News at Ten, there were no reporters from Wales, while none featured from Northern Ireland on Channel 5 News at 5.

**Table 4.3: The proportion of network television items with a reporter in either Westminster, England, Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	SKY TV	Ch4 TV	Ch.5 TV	Total
<b>England</b>	80.2% (105)	79.3% (88)	71.7% (81)	73.6% (89)	70.2% (73)	75.2% (436)
<b>Westminster</b>	8.4% (11)	9.9% (11)	17.7% (20)	14.9% (18)	16.3% (17)	13.3% (77)
<b>Scotland</b>	6.1% (8)	7.2% (8)	8.0% (9)	6.6% (8)	10.6% (11)	7.6% (44)
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	3.8% (5)	3.6% (4)	1.8% (2)	3.3% (4)	/	2.6% (15)
<b>Wales</b>	1.5% (2)	/	0.9% (1)	1.7% (2)	2.9% (3)	1.4% (8)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (131)	100.0% (111)	100.0% (113)	100.0% (121)	100.0% (104)	100.0% (580)

*N=580 = Number of items across the whole sample (not just in items relevant to devolution) where it featured a reporter located in one of the four nations.*

The proportion of items featuring reporters on location across the UK in 2021 was broadly in line with our past studies of network news<sup>8</sup>, with England and Westminster overwhelmingly the focal point (approximately 90% of all items). However, there was less reporting proportionally from Westminster on network television, especially on the BBC (for example, on the BBC News at Ten 21.4% of reporters in the UK were based in Westminster in our 2016 study, compared to 8.4% in 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, Justin, Cushion, Stephen, Groves, Chris, Bennett, Lucy, Reardon, Sally, Wilkins, Emma and Williams, Rebecca (2008) *Four Nations Impartiality Review: An analysis of reporting devolution*. London: BBC Trust.  
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Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, Richard, Sambrook, Kilby, Allaina (2016b) *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up 2015: An Analysis of Reporting Devolution*. London: BBC Trust.

It is important to interpret these findings within the context of the journalistic resources available to different news providers. The BBC clearly has the most resources across the nations and regions of the UK, enabling them to more easily report on location. This was acknowledged by the BBC News at Ten editor who agreed that *“We’re obviously well served and well-resourced around the UK. We’ve got excellent editors and correspondents around the UK”*. He also said that this representation of the UK was closely monitored because the BBC News bulletins *“measure our own coverage in terms of geographical reach and different aspects of diversity and so we get a regular download of where our geographical footprint is.”*

Channel 5, by contrast, operates with a far smaller budget and has more limited journalistic resources than the other major UK broadcasters.

But it is not just a question of resources that shapes editorial decisions about reporting from the nations. The ITV News at Ten Editor pointed out that its programme style was mainly studio-based in contrast to the BBC News at Ten, which often featured a split-screen with journalists from across the UK. She explained that:

*The format is different to other programmes, in that our pieces tend to be longer, much more in-depth, we do more international journalism on News at 10, and the style means that our lives are delivered in the studio with our experts. The idea of News at 10 is that it is an expert take on the day because we think, by ten, that most people will have heard much of the news already, and so the analysis of our specialist editors is really the home for News at 10.*

Likewise, the Sky News Output Editor acknowledged they had fewer regional news networks than BBC and ITV, which meant it was harder to reflect the whole of the UK when compared to other broadcasters. He also contrasted BBC News at Ten’s routine approach of covering the nations with Sky News’s more fluid style of coverage:

*...the most important thing from my point of view, in a simplified way, making it clear to someone whether this [a story] applies to them or not [in the UK]. What I wouldn’t say, and I see this I guess on particular key nights, especially on the BBC’s Ten, what we wouldn’t say is tonight it’s really important that we do a minute 30 report from Cardiff, a minute 30 report from Edinburgh and a minute 30 report from Belfast, which is almost, and this is what this means in Northern Ireland and this is what this means in Scotland.*

Meanwhile, the Editor of Channel 4 stated that Channel 4 *“must reflect each nation and region, while we must balance that with the fact that the majority of the population live in England”*. In other words, while network news editors were conscious of addressing UK audiences, there was also an editorial recognition shaping coverage that the vast majority of viewers were from England, followed by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Overall, the interviews with editors revealed that it is important to interpret the balance of stories covered across the UK nations as well as the journalists reporting from different regions of England, and across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, according to the resources of a broadcaster, their news values, audience demographic and stylistic conventions and practices.

# Reporting and labelling devolved issues in network news

## Summary of key chapter findings:

Given Covid-19 has brought devolution to the fore of UK politics, nearly four in ten news items were potentially relevant to devolution. This was almost five times more coverage about devolution than identified in a previous study in 2016.

News specifically about devolved politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made up only a fraction of the overall coverage (1.4%). Many of these devolved political items centred on party politics in Northern Ireland and the leadership of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) which was a live topic at the time.

There was some form of signposting about devolution in around six in ten of the items which were relevant to one or more of the nations within the UK. Conversely, around 40% of items did not include any signposting about the relevance of devolution.

BBC news reporting, and in particular its online news site, provided far more clarity about the relevance of devolved issues when compared to commercial TV bulletins and online sites.

All editors agreed online news provided far more space and time to signpost devolved powers than television reporting. This was evident by the content analysis which showed online news provided far more clarity about the relevance of devolved issues than television news.

While some editors expressed reservations about the use of on-screen graphics to convey the relevance of devolution, there was a general acknowledgement that adding more strap lines may help raise audience understanding given the limited time and space available on TV bulletins.

When categorising the main topic of each news item, Table 5.0 reveals that, when taken together, items specifically about COVID-19 related issues, such as vaccine/cases, the economy or travel, restrictions and education, made up a third (30.6%) of all items over the four-week study.

For Sky News at Ten, Channel 5 News at 5, and BBC News at Ten, COVID-19 related news represented around one third of all news items (33.0%, 33.3% and 31.2% respectively) compared to around one quarter on the other channels (24.3% on Channel 4 News at 7 and 23.2% on ITV News at Ten).

For online news, under a half of news items were about the pandemic on Sky News – 44.3% - compared to 34.3% on ITV News and 29.3% on BBC News.

Given the dominance of COVID-19 related topics within our sample, a large number of these items were potentially relevant to devolution because they centred on the reporting of ongoing restrictions and updates on vaccine levels (which included areas of devolved responsibilities).

Given the focus on the pandemic, items about what was happening at Westminster institutions (e.g. House of Commons, Number 10 Downing Street) Westminster politics did not dominate the

news agenda to same degree compared to past studies<sup>9</sup> Overall in 2021, items focused on Westminster represented 4.9% across all media examined, which was broadly similar across news bulletins and online sites. In our 2015 and 2016 studies of television and radio news, items about Westminster made up 25.0% and 18.1% respectively.

News specifically about devolved politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made up a fraction of coverage overall.

**Table 5.0: Percentage of topics covered in network television and online news items by category (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	SKY TV	Ch4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	SKY Web	Total
<b>COVID – vaccine /cases</b>	14.9% (41)	4.1% (10)	16.1% (42)	10.2% (31)	12.0% (30)	7.1% (10)	10.7% (15)	14.3% (21)	11.4% (199)
<b>COVID – Restrictions</b>	10.5% (29)	8.7% (21)	10.0% (26)	7.9% (24)	10.8% (27)	13.6% (19)	13.6% (19)	15.7% (24)	10.7% (187)
<b>COVID – Economy /travel</b>	4.7% (13)	9.1% (22)	6.1% (16)	4.3% (13)	8.0% (20)	8.6% (12)	9.3% (13)	10.7% (15)	7.1% (124)
<b>COVID – Education</b>	1.1% (3)	1.2% (3)	0.8% (2)	2.0% (6)	2.4% (6)	/	0.7% (1)	1.4% (2)	1.3% (23)
<b>ALL COVID-RELATED NEWS</b>	31.2% (86)	23.2% (56)	33.0% (86)	24.3% (74)	33.3% (83)	29.3% (41)	34.3% (48)	44.3% (62)	30.6% (536)
<b>Sport including Euro 2020</b>	25.8% (71)	27.4% (66)	13.0% (34)	12.5% (38)	19.3% (48)	6.4% (9)	15.7% (22)	10.7% (15)	17.3% (304)
<b>Crime / Judiciary/ Legal</b>	9.8% (27)	8.7% (22)	13.8% (36)	14.4% (44)	11.6% (29)	22.9% (32)	11.4% (16)	12.1% (17)	12.7% (222)
<b>Foreign Affairs/ Trade</b>	7.3% (20)	7.1% (17)	8.8% (23)	11.5% (35)	1.2% (3)	1.4% (2)	2.9% (4)	2.1% (3)	6.1% (107)
<b>Westminster Politics</b>	4.7% (13)	4.1% (10)	5.7% (15)	4.9% (15)	4.4% (11)	5.7% (8)	5.0% (7)	4.3% (6)	4.9% (85)

<sup>9</sup> Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, and Ramsay, Gordon (2010) *Four nations impartiality review follow-up: An analysis of reporting devolution*. London: BBC Trust  
 Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, Sambrook Richard (2016a) *2016 Nations Impartiality Review: A snapshot picture*. London: BBC Trust  
 Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, Richard, Sambrook, Kilby, Allaina (2016b) *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up 2015: An Analysis of Reporting Devolution*. London: BBC Trust

<b>Other</b>	4.4% (12)	5.0% (12)	3.1% (8)	5.6% (17)	3.6% (9)	4.3% (6)	5.7% (8)	3.6% (5)	4.4% (77)
<b>Economy/ business/ jobs/ finance/ consumer</b>	2.5% (7)	5.8% (14)	5.0% (13)	2.0% (6)	1.6% (4)	7.1% (10)	3.6% (5)	2.9% (4)	3.6% (63)
<b>NHS/Health (not COVID related)</b>	2.2% (6)	1.2% (3)	3.8% (10)	2.6% (8)	5.2% (13)	4.3% (6)	5.0% (7)	6.4% (9)	3.5% (62)
<b>Environment / Energy</b>	1.5% (4)	2.5% (6)	2.3% (6)	9.5% (29)	1.2% (3)	/	1.4% (2)	0.7% (1)	2.9% (51)
<b>Celebrity / Entertainmen t</b>	0.7% (2)	2.1% (5)	1.5% (4)	2.0% (6)	2.8% (7)	2.1% (3)	5.7% (8)	3.6% (5)	2.3% (40)
<b>Accidents/ Tragedies</b>	0.7% (2)	1.7% (4)	3.1% (8)	2.3% (7)	1.6% (4)	1.4% (2)	2.9% (4)	2.1% (3)	1.9% (34)
<b>Royalty</b>	1.5% (4)	2.5% (6)	2.3% (6)	0.3% (1)	3.2% (8)	2.1% (3)	2.1% (3)	2.1% (3)	1.9% (34)
<b>UK/Terror</b>	1.8% (5)	1.2% (3)	2.3% (6)	2.3% (7)	1.6% (4)	2.1% (3)	1.4% (2)	2.1% (3)	1.9% (33)
<b>Devolved Politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland</b>	2.2% (6)	2.5% (6)	0.8% (2)	1.3% (4)	0.4% (1)	2.9% (4)	/	1.4% (2)	1.4% (25)
<b>Housing</b>	0.7% (2)	2.5% (6)	/	1.6% (5)	0.8% (2)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	1.0% (19)
<b>Welfare/ social / benefits</b>	0.7% (2)	0.8% (2)	0.4% (1)	1.0% (3)	1.6% (4)	1.4% (2)	/	/	0.8% (14)
<b>Human Interest</b>	0.4% (1)	0.4% (1)	/	/	2.4% (6)	1.4% (2)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (12)
<b>Education (not COVID related)</b>	0.7% (2)	0.4% (1)	0.4% (1)	0.3% (1)	0.8% (2)	1.4% (2)	/	1.4% (2)	0.6% (11)
<b>Brexit/EU</b>	0.4% (1)	0.4% (1)	0.4% (1)	0.7% (2)	1.2% (3)	0.7% (2)	0.7% (2)	/	0.6% (2)

	(1)	(1)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(1)		(10)
<b>Transport / Travel (not COVID related)</b>	/	0.4% (1)	0.4% (1)	0.3% (1)	1.6% (4)	0.7% (1)	/	0.7% (1)	0.5% (9)
<b>Social Affairs / Human Rights</b>	0.7% (2)	/	/	0.7% (2)	0.4% (1)	1.4% (2)	0.7% (1)	/	0.5% (8)
<b>TOTAL</b>	100.0% (275)	100.0% (241)	100.0% (261)	100.0% (305)	100.0% (249)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (1751)

Many of the devolved political items centred on party politics in Northern Ireland and the leadership of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) which was a live topic at the time.

Overall, BBC coverage of devolved political issues was higher when compared to the other broadcasters (on television news it accounted for 2.2% and in online news, it made up 2.9% of all items).

Of the 1,751 items examined, we identified 678 items (38.7%) that were directly relevant or potentially relevant to devolution, with 1,073 items (61.3%) largely irrelevant to devolution (see Table 5.1). So, for example, items mostly focused on issues such as sport, foreign affairs, celebrities, and general business coverage were classified as being irrelevant to devolution.

**Table 5.1: The proportion of network television and online news items either relevant or irrelevant to devolution (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Relevant to devolution</b>	38.5% (106)	30.3% (73)	41.0% (107)	27.4% (114)	43.0% (107)	42.9% (60)	32.9% (46)	46.4% (65)	38.7% (678)
<b>Irrelevant to devolution</b>	61.5% (169)	69.7% (168)	59.0% (154)	62.6% (191)	57.0% (142)	57.1% (80)	67.1% (94)	53.6% (75)	61.3% (1073)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (275)	100.0% (241)	100.0% (261)	100.0% (305)	100.0% (249)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (140)	100.0% (1751)

Base: N=1751= all items in the study (whether relevant to devolution or not).

There were far more items in our sample of news relevant to devolution in 2021 than in previous studies because of the pandemic and the fact the devolved nations had powers to make policy decisions about managing COVID-19. In our study of network news coverage in 2015 and 2016, news relevant to devolution made up 13.5% and 7.9% respectively. But in 2021 news relevant to devolution accounted for 38.7% of all items. We now focus on the 678 items in the 2021 study

that were either about devolved issues or potentially relevant to devolution, excluding the 1,073 items that were considered largely irrelevant to devolution<sup>10</sup>.

Table 5.2 shows the proportion of items that were relevant to devolution with some form of signposting to one or more of the UK nations. So, for example, in items where the UK Government announced extending restrictions in England, we assessed whether there was any signposting such as mentioning England or a geographical reference to the nation, such as “Public Health England”. If England (or a geographical signifier) was not included in an item, this was classified as not providing any signposting. We also categorised the type of signposting in three ways. First, if a nation was mentioned (or geographical signifier) once or more by a journalist, this was classified as journalistic reference to devolution. Second, if there was *only* a visual on-screen reference to (a) nation(s) this was classed as providing on-screen only signposting. Third, if *only* an external source made reference to (a) nation(s) this was classified as source only signposting.

Overall, around six in ten news items about devolved issues or potentially relevant to devolution included signposting about one or more UK nations.

On television news, the BBC News at Ten, provided the most clarity with two thirds of its coverage providing some degree of signposting to devolution. ITV News at Ten and Channel 4 News at 7 both included a reference to a UK nation in 56.2% and 56.1% of items respectively, compared to 53.3% on Channel 5 News at 5 and 42.0% on Sky News at Ten.

**Table 5.2: The proportion of network television and online news items with either different signposting to devolution or no signposting (by volume; N in brackets).**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Yes - journalist</b>	52.8% (56)	42.5% (31)	20.6% (22)	43.9% (50)	39.3% (42)	83.3% (50)	71.9% (33)	70.8% (46)	48.7% (330)
<b>Yes - only on-screen</b>	8.5% (9)	9.6% (7)	12.1% (13)	5.3% (6)	8.4% (9)	1.7% (1)	2.2% (1)	4.6% (3)	7.2% (49)
<b>Yes - only source</b>	4.7% (5)	4.1% (3)	9.3% (10)	7.0% (8)	5.6% (6)	/	/	4.6% (3)	5.2% (35)
<b>Yes total signposting</b>	66.0% (70)	56.2% (41)	42.0% (45)	56.1% (64)	53.3% (57)	85.0% (51)	73.9% (34)	80.0% (52)	61.1% (414)
<b>No signposting</b>	34.0% (36)	43.8% (32)	58.0% (62)	43.9% (50)	46.7% (50)	15.0% (9)	26.1% (12)	20.0% (13)	38.9% (264)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (106)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (114)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (60)	100.0% (46)	100.0% (65)	100.0% (678)

<sup>10</sup> **Research note:** For individual news providers, we acknowledge this represents a small sample of news items, especially for online sites. We continue to present the findings proportionally by percentages in order to compare and contrast patterns of coverage fairly across broadcasters and online outlets, but caution should be taken given the small numbers examined.

Base: N=678 = number of items within the whole sample that were deemed to be relevant to, or potentially relevant to devolution by virtue of their subject matter being considered a devolved issue for Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Online news media provided more signposting than television news, with 85.0% of BBC News Online items supplying a reference to one or more UK nations, followed by 80.0% on Sky News Online and 73.9% on ITV News Online.

When asked if it was easier to signpost devolved powers in online coverage compared to television news, all editors believed that the medium afforded far more time and space. According to the Output Editor of Sky News, for example:

*...the truth about online is there's just so much more real estate..., people can have a choice because you can give them a hyperlink just to go through to if you want to know what the rules are where you are, then click here. But also I guess the grammar just feels slightly different. In the end TV is a very linear format compared to online content....*

Similarly, BBC News Editor of Six and Ten emphasised the brevity of TV news when compared to online news, and how that can inform the degree of context and explanation of news reporting:

*TV news is all about compression and stripping stuff out to its bare essentials, whilst at the same time having enough in to reflect all the editorial things you need to do. Clearly in an online text piece, while they have their word limits and everything else, you've got greater scope to add a bit more in or put in a little text box or signpost a deeper explanation of something. TV news is all about stripping back. What is the actual absolute heart of this story? What do people need to know so they can fully understand it and have the detail they need and engage with it?... And this is always the challenge for the TV news bulletins. If you get them right, if you can get that mix of engagement but also depth and information at the same time, they're brilliant things because they hit big mainstream audiences... They probably wouldn't sit there and read the website for half an hour. Some might but a lot of them wouldn't.*

The Editor of Channel 4 News explained more succinctly the difference between online and TV news: "you can say more [on television]...every time you're writing a headline or putting something on the news, you're trying, in essence, to make it as short as possible. Whereas an online article has no limit." But there was an appreciation that television news conventions would need to be more innovative in order to accommodate more context and explanation in routine coverage, as the Editor of ITV News at Ten, explained:

*If you think about a two-minute piece of work, there's only so many words you can get in it when there are three interviews. So if we are considering pointing things in other directions, everything takes time. And that's not to say we shouldn't do it, but we have to think of clever ways of doing it...*

In addition to the content analysis identifying more signposting about devolution in online than television news, the study examined how information about political powers was communicated, such as directly by journalists or indirectly by sources, or even visually on-screen with strap lines and graphics.

Journalists themselves rather than on-screen graphics or external sources signaled the relevance of devolution in the vast majority of online items. On television news, between one and two items

out of ten included devolved references supplied by on-screen graphics or by an external source, rather than a journalist verbally signposting the relevance to one or more of the nations.

Journalists on BBC News at Ten more regularly supplied some form of signposting about devolution – in over half of its items – compared to other television news bulletins. On Sky News at Ten, for example, the signposting of devolution was communicated by journalists in two in ten items.

The different ways of signposting devolution across broadcasters – either visually or verbally – was well illustrated on 9 July 2021 when all five bulletins reported a UK Government policy proposal that would make the NHS COVID-19 app less sensitive to reduce the number of people being “pinged” (see example below). The app was only available in England and Wales. This was specified clearly by the BBC and somewhat obliquely by other broadcasts, with references to “Downing Street”, “Number 10” or “the Government”.

**The BBC News at Ten** item specified in the introduction that the NHS app at the centre of the story was for people in England and Wales, and this was illustrated by an on-screen graphic. The item also broke down statistics for each of the four nations:

**Anchor:** Coronavirus infections in the UK have risen to their highest level for five months. The Office for National Statistics says about one in 160 people had the virus last week. That's a 50 per cent increase on the week before. The surge in infections has led to a large number of people being told to isolate by the NHS COVID tracing app used in England and Wales. Tonight, the BBC has learned that the app is to be modified so that it sends out fewer alerts.

**Reporter:** (...) 26 million people have downloaded the NHS COVID app, although it's unclear how many have it switched on (...) tonight a source at the COVID app team told the BBC they'd been told to adjust its sensitivity so that it sends out fewer alerts.

**Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary:** As our restrictions change, of course the app needs to change in line. Things like relaxing of the one-metre-plus rule, for example, on the 19th of July, might well lead to a review of the way the app itself needs to function.

**Reporter:** But Labour says the sensitivity of the app shouldn't be weakened.

**Keir Starmer, Labour Leader:** This feels like taking the batteries out of the smoke detector and that is never a good idea. That is an important protection. I'm equally worried by the stories of people deleting the app altogether. (BBC News at Ten, 9 July 2021).

The Reporter went on to detail the numbers around Covid infections and a series on-screen graphics were shown for each nation as they were discussed. For example:

In Scotland (graphics – text and map highlighted) one in 100 had COVID



In Wales (graphics – text and map highlighted) it was one in 340 and in Northern Ireland (graphics – text and map highlighted) one in 300...

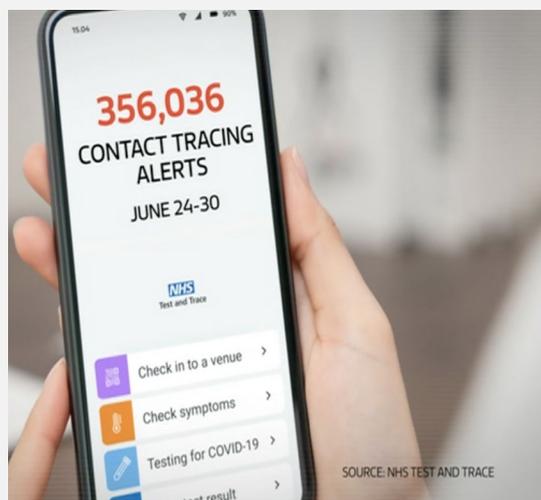


**The ITV News at Ten** item noted the number of app alerts in England, but it also made a reference to one in 160 infections without specifying the nation this applied to when it was an England-only figure.

**Anchor:** To politics now and Downing Street is tonight urging people not to stop using the NHS test and trace app, saying it remains an important tool against the spread of COVID. But ministers say the possibility of tweaking the sensitivity of the app is being considered after the numbers of those being told to self-isolate surged by more than 60 per cent. Infections continue to rise sharply, though. More than 35,700 new COVID cases in the UK just today.

**Reporter:** (...) The NHS app alerts those who have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive. It sent out over 356,000 in England in the last week of June up 62 per cent on the previous week. NHS Track and Trace also identified over 280,000 people who had to isolate. The Government admits, with rules about to change, it might need to tweak the app...

**On-screen graphics:** 356,036 Contact Tracing Alerts, June 24-30



**Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary:** Of course the app will be kept under constant review to make sure it's providing useful information. Not over-pinging people in other words. We're not there yet and so, certainly keep the app. It's a useful additional weapon in our armoury against coronavirus.

**Reporter:** (...) One in 160 of us now has the virus, up from one in 250 the previous week. Many more will contract it in the coming weeks, The fear is if nothing is done soon people will simply start turning the app off (ITV News at Ten, 9 July 2021).

**The Sky News at Ten** item included general references to the Government, NHS COVID-19 app, track-and-trace app and rule changes on July 19, plus graphics and a shot of QR code leaflet referring to NHS COVID-19 app. There was no UK location identified when the app or “July 19” were referred to in the item. The item did not state the official title, which is “NHS COVID-19 app” and that it can only be downloaded in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own app (and the health service is called something different e.g. NHS Scotland), while the rule changes on July 19 – so-called ‘Freedom Day’ – apply to England-only. In the item, a figure of 26 million downloads was quoted but it was not mentioned that this related only to England and Wales.

**Anchor:** Changing the performance of the NHS COVID app would be like removing the batteries from a smoke alarm, Sir Keir Starmer said today. Labour’s leader was speaking after Ministers confirmed the Government may reduce the app’s sensitivity. It’s been downloaded nearly 26 million times and alerts users if someone they’ve been close to subsequently develops COVID.

**Reporter:** As infections rise so do the number of people being asked to isolate. It’s forced the Government to reassess how its NHS COVID app works (...)

**Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary:** It will keep the sensitivity of it under review to align with the new recommendations that come in, guidelines that come in on the 19th of July. So, we’ll keep continuing to do that.

**Reporter:** The Prime Minister says people will no longer be made to check into venues from July the 19th prompting some to fear the app could be scrapped altogether.

**Keir Starmer, Labour Leader:** I’m really concerned what I’m hearing about changes to the track-and-trace app. This feels like taking the batteries out of the smoke detector and that is never a good idea (Sky News at Ten, 9 July 2021).

**Channel 4 News at 7** briefly referenced Scotland in relation to COVID-19 infections but Northern Ireland was not acknowledged. The item was framed generally about changes to the NHS app without stating they were only relevant to England and Wales. This was not specified in the report although there were references to Downing Street, Ministers, Whitehall, Government and the Department of Health.

**Anchor:** Now Downing Street is asking people not to ignore or delete the COVID app if it tells you to self-isolate, insisting it is still an important tool in the fight against coronavirus. But ministers have conceded they may have to make the app less sensitive amid concern about the increasing numbers of people getting pinged. Across the UK COVID infections rose by 50 per cent in the last week, up in all age groups and every region of England as well as Scotland and Wales. The latest 24-hour Government figures show there have been another 35,700 new cases in the UK. The highest since January 22. A further 29 people are reported to have died with COVID. Just under 100,000 had their first dose of vaccine, while 175,000 got their second dose.

**Reporter:** You mentioned the huge jump in cases there and there are concerns in Whitehall about the knock-on effect of that, the number of people who are going to have to self-isolate after being pinged by the NHS app. In fact, 60 per cent more people were pinged this week compared to last week but Number 10 are being unequivocal on this, they say, don't delete the app even after restrictions end.

**Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary:** After the 19th of July people won't need to adjust their sets, as they used to say, you can just keep the app on your phone. It will, in the background, adjust to, and we'll review it, to the rules that are applicable at any given time.

**Reporter:** Well, the Transport Secretary was alluding to Government plans to try to desensitise the app. Potentially to try to make it so that fewer people get caught in its net and that idea was anathema to Labour. They said it was like taking the batteries out of a smoke alarm. There's also the question of, of course, people deleting it on their own accounts. I spoke to one Government advisor today who told me there's internal data circulating in the Department of Health suggesting people are doing just that. Eight to 11 per cent have downloaded and then deleted the app and so if that continues to rise any arguments about tweaking the app are purely academic (Channel 4 News at 7, 9 July 2021)

**Channel 5 News at 5** referenced the Government's changes related to England on July 19 but did not mention the different use of NHS apps between the UK nations.

**Anchor:** The Government could soon reduce the sensitivity of the NHS app that alerts people if they've been in close contact with someone who's tested positive for COVID. With cases soaring more and more people are being pinged, forcing them to miss work or scrap holidays through self-isolation. But as our political editor, [name], reports, critics say it's wrong to take away another tool that can tackle the pandemic.

Short clip from official animated video explaining the NHS COVID-19 app: "The NHS COVID-19 app is a vital part in the fight against coronavirus."

**Reporter:** That may be true, but many now also fear getting pinged and told to isolate as we head back towards life like this [video of people in restaurant] with almost all restrictions going in England in less than a fortnight, cases will go up and so will the alerts. So the Government is signalling it might tweak the app.

**Grant Shapps, Transport Secretary:** As the situation develops and the science develops and, in particular, double vaccination and we get through the fourth stage of the unlock and the advice changes or the rules change about distancing as well, of course the app will be kept under constant review to make sure it's providing useful information, not over-pinging people.

**Reporter:** For the leader of the opposition, that's like taking the batteries out of a smoke detector. He says the app is not the problem, it's the decision to get rid of so many restrictions all at once.

**Keir Starmer, Labour Leader:** If the consequences of the Prime Minister's decision is that people delete the app, or the app is weakened, track and trace is weakened, then that's a pretty good indicator that the Prime Minister's decision isn't a very good one.

**Reporter:** The rules will change, allowing those fully vaccinated to avoid self-isolation if contacted but not before August the 16th (...) the contact tracing app is still seen as an important tool not least to head off more severe restrictions (Channel 5 News at 5, 9 July 2021).

Overall, in comparing and contrasting how the NHS COVID-19 app was reported on 9 July 2021, the relevance to England and Wales was stated clearly in BBC coverage, whereas other news providers did not provide the same level of clarity, with either specific signposting to England or vague references such as "the Government".

The study also examined whether broadcasters visually signposted the relevance of devolution, rather than relying on a journalist or a source to attribute which Government was responsible for policy decisions.

The use of on-screen references made up 7.2% of signposting about devolution, with Sky News (12.1%) providing the most visual labels to either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland

The Output Editor of Sky News considered on-screen graphics to be significant part of communicating information, reinforcing what is said verbally by anchors and reporters in order to raise public knowledge. He explained how the Sky News editorial sought to inform viewers visually:

*What we would quite often do on a policy story is that our text producers, who are the people who write the straps at the bottom of the screen, they would build*

*what we call a stack of them on that particular story and they would use two or three of the straps as a way of running through some of the kind of information that, for whatever reason, hasn't been featured in the main...I think complementary is the main way I would see those...what they do is they provide levels of depth. So there's the kind of spoken report which is one level of depth but then we can add a bit more in terms of the straps that we add. If we use side panels which are the things that come in during a live event where we can add context about who's speaking or whoever it would be.*

The Editor of BBC News at Six and Ten agreed screen strap lines added more informative depth to coverage and revealed their greater use had been part of a recent redesign of the bulletin. He said the use of strap lines were

*...a good way of getting information across and so the pandemic has naturally taken us to doing more of that, whether it's the data we show every day or stuff on screen to illustrate national differences or whatever. Then secondly, there was a practical thing which is when we had a design reboot, we started putting straps on the headlines at the top of the programme as well. So that was another way of just conveying a bit more of the essence of the story and the pandemic is an information rich issue and so it lends itself to all of that.*

Other editors expressed a bit more caution with the use of on-screen graphics. For example, the Editor of Channel 5 News, was a little sceptical in how on-screen graphics could be used in routine reporting, but was open to the idea of using strap lines to signpost the relevance of devolution. In covering the nations in a post-devolved world, she said there had been an

*...evolution of thought in terms of how we're approaching this stuff, and the weight and importance that people are giving to it,... I think it may be that we get to a point where actually you've got a little tag that pops up that just says, policy in England, or something just to enhance that storytelling. So I wouldn't ever rule it out.*

Meanwhile, the Editor of Channel 4 News, said that “We've always avoided the ribbon on Channel 4 News unless we really had to because our programme seeks to be a programme of record rather than one which is informing people in real time”. But, he also acknowledged, “we did use it more than we've ever used it before” during the pandemic to convey the relevance of devolved issues.

Overall, the interviews revealed some reservations about the greater use of on-screen graphic in routine television news reporting. But there was also an acknowledgement that it would be useful in helping audiences understand the relevance of devolved issues given the limited time and space available on TV bulletins.

# Signposting the relevance of devolution in network news

## Summary of key chapter findings:

Just under half of the items that contained some signposting about devolution contained explicit references to one or more of the nations. This represents an increase when compared to previous studies. BBC news reporting supplied far more references to devolved powers either in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than commercial media, while online news more explicitly signposted the relevance of devolved issues than television news.

The interviews with editors revealed that how television news bulletins made reference to UK Government Ministers and powers when reporting devolved issues was a live debating point internally within newsrooms. There was broad acknowledgement that it was challenging at times to accurately label the status of many UK Government secretaries of state and ministers given some powers relating to devolved issues are specific to England (e.g. the Secretary of State for Education has responsibility for schools in England only)..

Beyond the specific challenges of how to label UK Government officials and Ministers from the devolved institutions, then, overall, the content analysis found that while broadcasters and online sites mostly featured references to devolved powers either in the introduction or throughout a package, approximately one in four items only provided signposting for viewers or readers at the very end of an item.

There was a general agreement among editors that more clarity was needed when UK Government officials appeared in coverage on issues that were devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

When a devolved issue was covered, the vast majority of news items (89.7%) did not include either a direct or indirect political source from political bodies in either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Once again, online coverage – notably on the BBC – was more likely to include the voices of politicians from the devolved institutions than television news.

BBC reporting referenced the relevance of devolved powers far more often than other news providers, with commercial online news mentioning Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland more than television news

In order to further explore how online and television news signposted devolved issues or item potentially relevant to devolution in network news, the study assessed whether a reference was either implicit only or if it included an explicit reference (see Table 6.0). “Implicit” refers to items about England which were referenced with some form of geographical signifier of England but did not contain an explicit reference to one of the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland). “Explicit” refers to items that namechecked one of the devolved nations in some form. By classifying it items featured either implicit and explicit references, it helped assess *the degree of clarity* in making devolution and the devolved nations and powers more visible to audiences.

Six in ten items about devolved issues or potentially relevant to devolution (61.0%) included either an implicit or explicit reference to devolved power across both television and online coverage

BBC reporting supplied far more references to either Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than commercial media, with 85.0% of online news and two thirds (66.1%) of television news coverage providing some degree of clarity about the relevance of devolved powers.

About a third of items relevant to devolution (32.4%) had *only* an implicit reference while under three in ten (28.6%) featured an explicit reference (in most cases this also included an implicit reference too). This also meant just under four in ten items contained no signposting about devolution in items that could have been included some reference to either Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, or combination of these nations.

**Table 6.0: The proportion of network television and online news items with either no, implicit or explicit references to devolution (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Explicit</b>	38.7% (41)	20.5% (15)	18.7% (20)	28.1% (32)	19.6% (21)	53.3% (32)	28.3% (13)	30.8% (20)	28.6% (194)
<b>Implicit</b>	27.4% (29)	35.6% (26)	23.4% (25)	28.1% (32)	33.6% (36)	31.7% (19)	45.7% (21)	49.2% (32)	32.4% (220)
<b>None</b>	34.0% (36)	43.8% (32)	57.9% (62)	43.9% (50)	46.7% (50)	15.0% (9)	26.1% (12)	20.0% (13)	38.9% (264)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (106)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (114)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (60)	100.0% (46)	100.0% (65)	100.0% (678)

Base: N=678 = number of items within the whole sample that were deemed to be relevant to, or potentially relevant to devolution by virtue of their subject matter being considered a devolved issue for Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Compared to the past studies we conducted in 2015 and 2016<sup>11</sup>, there has been an increase in explicit references to the devolved powers across the UK. For example, of the 665 BBC items relevant to devolution in 2015, 10.1% contained at least one explicit reference to a devolved power. Of the 152 BBC news items relevant to devolution in 2016, 9.9% an explicit reference. This compares to 38.7% of BBC news items containing an explicit reference in 2021.

Editors were asked if it was necessary to state “in England” for news items where the policy announced related to England only. All agreed it was in order to alert viewers to the English relevance. But the Editor of BBC News at Six and Ten went further stating that England alone was not sufficient and believed a reference to the devolved nations was also necessary:

*...let's say today Sajid Javid announced you've got to start wearing face masks everywhere again in England, so clearly it's a big move, it's a big U-turn, you would absolutely expect it to be England in the headline, England in the introduction, England obviously in the piece but also then you would expect a sort*

<sup>11</sup> Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, Sambrook Richard (2016a) *2016 Nations Impartiality Review: A snapshot picture*. London: BBC Trust.

Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, Richard, Sambrook, Kilby, Allaina (2016b) *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up 2015: An Analysis of Reporting Devolution*. London: BBC Trust.

*of reference to the other nations as well in terms of that differs from or that's now in line with what's happening in Scotland or whatever.*

He also suggested that any shortcomings in coverage about devolution were not about journalistic expertise but may relate to reporters being pre-occupied by major UK Government announcements. In doing so, the Editor of BBC News at Six and Ten acknowledged that any slippage in not referencing England was not due to a lack of knowledge about devolution among BBC reporters, but journalists focussing on fast moving events at Westminster, which relate to changing covid restrictions in England.

*... programme editors, producers, editors in London should...be across and understand the differences [in powers across the four nations] as well and utterly understand what is England only announcements or decision and what actually reflects or pertains right around the UK. I would say there is an occasional practical thing which is that, obviously if you're in a newsroom in London and you're being swamped by a big UK Government driven announcement, it can slip through sometimes, so that's only relevant to England. But actually that's more borne out of the weight of the announcement rather than ignorance of journalists.*

The Editor of Channel 5 News also stressed it was important to reference the other devolved nations even when a policy story related to England only.

*...if we're doing a piece that's specifically about England, then we will always make sure we mention the other nations, whether that's within the package report or within the live, there will be a reference to that. Again it's another opportunity for people to spot that bit of the story. I suppose there are two parts to that. One is the clarity thing I go to but there is also the connection. A lot of this has just been about illustrating the ways that the UK – I'm thinking about Covid here – has gone through a pandemic. So although the new rules that are coming into place in England don't apply in Scotland, but a person in Scotland would be fascinated to see that someone in Leicester has been under continuous lockdown since X. So then you have the human connection to the story.*

The Editor of ITV News at Ten, suggested adding additional context to other nations was perhaps only necessary when it was a long rather than a short news item:

*...if you're stating that something is only relevant to one part of the four nations, I think there's probably a fairly good assumption it's not relevant to the other parts, because if you're not stating it at all, then perhaps all four nations might assume it applies to them. If you're stating it just for one, then I think you're probably doing that on purpose to show that. I'm not sure that an intro that is only 25 seconds long anyway to tell a story can say, this is just for England, therefore it is not relevant to the other three nations. To me, that's cumbersome and unnecessary when we've made the point.*

Likewise, Sky News Output Editor suggested that the need for signposting England and other nations in items related to England only might only been needed if the story was a new or significant policy announcement.

*...as long as it's been made clear once, then I would view that as being adequate. I think you obviously view things always on an individual basis if it's a particular*

*issue which is so clearly something that we are reporting because maybe it's something that one of the nations is doing ahead. I'm thinking especially during Covid of how, on a number of occasions, Scotland seemed to be one step ahead and there was obviously the whole UK political argument about whether that was forcing Johnson to then move but when I remember the reporting of those stories in this time last year, autumn 2020, we were being very explicit. Often it was the top line that Scotland had moved first again. So I suppose in that kind of context, when it's an absolutely central part of the story, in a sense part of the reason you're doing it, then you'd be saying it would be repeated because it would be just a central thrust. Whereas at other points if you're doing it more on a kind of this is interesting because in Northern Ireland, this is the situation, then it would be once you've said it, then you'd just want to hear whether it's about the social distancing rules or numbers of people who can meet, you can tell that story by just telling the story through the people and what they're doing without having to say, by the way this is in Northern Ireland, we've already said that in the introduction. So we've kind of almost fulfilled that.*

He went on to add that

*...I think it's more about it's not feeling always duty bound to set out explicitly this is Wales, this is Northern Ireland, this is Scotland, this is England, it's more to make the point where if there's a difference or if this doesn't apply. If this only applies in England, then we have to make it clear it only applies there.*

Overall, there was some subtle editorial differences in how often explicit references to the devolved nations was needed in stories relating to England only, but there was also an acknowledgement that this was dependent on the importance of the policy issue at that time.

As well as interpreting how devolved powers were communicated, the study examined when they were mentioned during a news item. This was categorised by whether an implicit or explicit reference (or both) featured at the very beginning of an item, at the very end, or in-between. As Table 6.1 shows, just under a third of items – 32.0% – made reference to powers outside the beginning or end of an item, while roughly a quarter did in the introduction and middle part of the item.

**Table 6.1: The proportion of network and television news items with signposting about devolution by where they appear in the item (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Main only</b>	37.1% (26)	33.3% (14)	42.2% (19)	32.8% (21)	38.6% (22)	15.7% (8)	14.7% (5)	34.6% (18)	32.0% (133)
<b>Intro + main</b>	24.2% (17)	38.1% (16)	17.8% (8)	29.7% (19)	22.8% (13)	17.6% (9)	20.6% (7)	30.8% (16)	25.3% (105)
<b>Intro, main + end</b>	10.0% (7)	9.5% (4)	11.1% (5)	9.4% (6)	10.5% (6)	49.0% (25)	26.5% (9)	17.3% (9)	17.1% (71)
<b>Introduction</b>	17.1% (12)	14.3% (6)	15.5% (7)	18.8% (12)	22.8% (13)	15.7% (8)	11.8% (4)	11.5% (6)	16.4% (68)
<b>End only</b>	4.3% (3)	4.8% (2)	4.4% (2)	4.7% (3)	1.8% (1)	/	14.7% (5)	3.8% (2)	4.3% (18)
<b>Main + end</b>	2.9% (2)	/	8.9% (4)	3.1% (2)	1.8% (1)	2.0% (1)	8.8% (3)	/	3.1% (13)
<b>Intro + end</b>	4.3% (3)	/	/	1.6% (1)	1.8% (1)	/	2.9% (1)	1.9% (1)	1.7% (7)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (70)	100.0% (42)	100.0% (45)	100.0% (64)	100.0% (57)	100.0% (51)	100.0% (34)	100.0% (52)	100.0% (415)

*N=415 = items within the news relevant to devolution subsample where signposting was present. This represented 61.2% of the subsample of items relevant to devolution (N = 678).*

Overall, online items more regularly included a reference to devolved powers in the introduction, end and middle of it when compared to television news. This was most evident on BBC online news. On television, almost three quarters of ITV News at Ten – 71.4% – referenced powers in either the introduction and main part of the item, rather than at the very end, compared to 61.3% on BBC News at Ten and Channel 4 News at 7, 61.4% on Channel 5 News at 5 and 60.0% on Sky News at Ten. Nevertheless, all editors agreed it was needed in the opening part of a news item, including the introduction by the news anchor and by a reporter if it was an edited package.

On 30 June 2021, for example, all broadcasters – with the exception of Sky News – featured items about the scrapping of the school bubbles policy in England, with Channel 4 News at 7, Channel 5 News at 5 and BBC News at Ten items presenting short (40-seconds) anchor-only pieces, while the ITV News at Ten item was a longer (more than 2 minutes) reporter package. Our analysis showed BBC, ITV and Channel 5 clearly signposted England throughout an item, including in the introduction, while Channel 4 did not mention England despite referencing the figure of 375,000 children self-isolating, which was England-only data.

**Anchor:** The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has said school bubbles could be scrapped from July the 19th to reduce the number of children being sent home. There has been rising concern over the large numbers of pupils being made to isolate if another child in their bubble tests positive for COVID 19. Recent data shows 375,000 children in state education were out of school last week as a result of the virus (**Channel 4 News at 7, 30 June 2021**).

**Anchor:** The school bubble system could be scrapped in England on the 19th of July when COVID restrictions are expected to be lifted. Rising numbers of pupils are being sent home to isolate and the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, says he wants changes as soon as possible. Official figures showed 375,000 children did not attend class for COVID-related reasons in England last week (**Channel 5 News at 5, 30 June 2021**).

**Anchor:** Today, the Education Secretary for England, Gavin Williamson, says he wants the school bubble system to be removed as soon as possible as soaring numbers of pupils are being sent home to self-isolate. The change could happen alongside the next step of unlocking which is due to happen on the 19th of July in England, meaning that pupils returning to school in September would not be in bubbles (**BBC News at Ten, 30 June 2021**).

**Anchor:** With so many school children self-isolating at home the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, promised them and their parents that the system of school bubbles in England will end as soon as possible, probably on the 19th of July when all restrictions are due to end. Mr Williamson told MPs children should get the same freedoms as older generations especially when they had put up with so much to protect them.

**Reporter:** In recent weeks the numbers of children out of school because of COVID has been on the rise. On June 10, 90,000 pupils did not attend state schools in England because of COVID-related reasons. That number more than doubled the following week to close to a quarter of a million and by June the 24th, 375,000 students were at home because of COVID. Today, the Education Secretary said this wasn't acceptable and said he wants to see the end of the bubble system.

**On-screen graphics:** Pupil absence due to COVID-19, source: Department for Education data for England

**Education Secretary in the House of Commons:** What I want to see is these restrictions including bubbles removed as quickly as possible along with wider restrictions in society. We expect to be able to confirm plans to lift restrictions and bubbles as part of step four.

**Reporter:** But that won't happen until July 19th at the earliest (**ITV News at Ten, 30 June 2021**).

This brief comparison of how items were framed across four broadcasters helps to reveal the contrasting clarity of coverage about how *the relevance of a COVID-19 policy* to English schools was communicated. (This issue is further explored in one of our case studies in Section 10.0). For example, with the exception of the BBC, all broadcasters referred to the UK minister as the “Education Secretary”. The BBC News at Ten, however, made reference to “the Education Secretary for England” (emphasis added). However, the formal title in the UK Government is the Secretary of State for Education not the Education Secretary for England<sup>1213</sup>.

The issue of how news bulletins should label UK Government Ministers was discussed in interviews with editors. The BBC News at Six and Ten Editor acknowledged that there had been some internal editorial debate about how some UK Government Ministers should be described:

*...it's not the simplest thing to step through because it wouldn't be correct to call Sajid Javid... well, it kind of would and it wouldn't. If you called him England's Health Secretary, he's the UK Government Health Secretary but health is devolved...I think if you feel the need, then I think you can talk about the UK Government Health Secretary. We came up with a formulation and that is broadly one because we were getting some references to England's Health Secretary which is not necessarily incorrect but isn't fully accurate in terms of the remit of that role.*

Similarly, the Editor of Channel 4 News admitted his team had grappled with this issue of labelling UK Government Ministers during the pandemic:

*...when you are talking about a national issue, and I would say that Covid has exposed this unlike any other, you remind yourself that the Secretary of Health in the UK Cabinet is not the Secretary of Health for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. We certainly went on a steep learning curve during Covid because we wouldn't normally be reporting a national health issue like that because the health issues are normally more regionally based. So you might have a big pressure during an A&E crisis in the winter and you would see that regionally, it would kind of be a national news story but it might be worse in Newcastle than it is in Glasgow but better in Cardiff than it is in Bristol.*

Cait Fitzsimmons, Editor of Channel 5 News, explained the challenges behind reporting the roles of Ministers across the UK, and believed more clarity could be added in television news coverage:

*...if you're talking to a Scottish politician then it's about a Scottish issue, but when you're talking to the UK Government it's not always clear, and whether or not we adjust our name supers for job titles, to actually make it clear that their policy areas cover this particular nation or areas. It's about the balance of complexity on a super and clarity on a super and we haven't quite managed*

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that UK Internal Market Act 2020 gave the UK ministers powers to spend money directly “supporting educational and training activities and exchanges within the United Kingdom” and on infrastructure including educational facilities (part 6). It is possible then that a UK Secretary of State for Education could be talking about investment in education across the UK.

<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting that UK Government Ministers often represent the UK Government generally as well just their department. So, for example, if the Secretary of State for Education was asked to defend the UK Government's Brexit policy it might be confusing or audiences if television news if he/she was labelled the Secretary of State for England in this context.

*that...But, as I say, for me, if it's a devolved story, you mention it in the openers, you mention it in the intro and you mention it in the piece. It should be in every bit of the reporting on that story that we do. Obviously in nibs and openers once is fine. In a package you might want it a couple of times, definitely on the graphic, that stuff. But then, yes, do we add into that on the name super, Health Secretary for England & Wales. We're not there yet but that's definitely something that I think is probably a sensible consideration and if we don't get to it, I'm sure someone else will soon. I can't imagine that that's not going to be something that comes.*

The Editor of ITV News agreed there could be more clarity in network coverage of decisions made by UK Government Ministers, rather than the devolved administrations. She acknowledged that:

*...we do have a tendency to just say the Government for everything. I think we're better at doing it the other way around. So if it's very specific to the devolved governments, then we are obviously very specific to that...the pandemic did bring into sharp focus for us how different the devolved nations were in dealing with it, and we're much more conscious to be clear during the pandemic over health issues, and I would like to think that would stay.*

In reflecting on the use of language when labelling UK Ministers, the Output Editor of Sky News, said:

*Do I ever write that Sajid Javid, the UK Health Secretary? No. I don't and why don't I do that? Because that would immediately give a kind of global ungrounded feel to what we do, which is not what we do. In the end we're a UK based broadcaster and that's not in a sense in a political sense, that's just in a kind of that's our primary audience that we're talking to in the UK and Ireland.*

However, he did go on to explain that the degree of clarity when labelling UK Ministers was:

*...all about the context of the story really. To use the Sajid Javid example, if it's something that Sajid Javid is talking about, then it's relating to health in terms of the competencies of the UK Government...waiting lists being a good example. If it's ever not there [referencing England], it's through an error of omission rather than intention. Waiting lists in England, waiting lists in Wales...Covid figures over the months, then we're very clear whether it's a UK level...but Northern Ireland's data didn't come in today so that's not included, or whatever it might be.*

The interviews with editors revealed that how television news bulletins made reference to UK Government Ministers and powers when reported devolved issues was a live debating point internally within newsrooms. There was a general agreement that more clarity was needed when the UK Government was referenced in coverage on issues that were devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Beyond the specific challenges of how to label UK Government officials and Ministers in the devolved administrations, then, overall, the content analysis found that while broadcasters and online sites mostly featured references to devolved powers either in the introduction or throughout a package, approximately one in four items only provided signposting for viewers or readers at the very end of an item.

Most news relevant to devolution did not contain a comparison between one or more of the nations

To further examine how broadcasters and online sites comparatively reported devolved issues, Table 6.2 shows whether an item included a comparison with one or more of the UK nations (England, Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland). Needless to say, it would not be expected that every item would have comparative coverage, but the differences in when nations were compared across television news and online reporting was striking.

**Table 6.2: The proportion of network television and online news items that included a comparison between two or more of the four nations (by volume; N in brackets)**

	BBC TV	ITV	Sky	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC	ITV	Sky	Total
		TV	TV			Web	Web	Web	
<b>Comparison</b>	21.7% (23)	8.2% (6)	11.2% (12)	14.9% (17)	8.4% (9)	40.0% (24)	26.1% (12)	23.1% (15)	17.4% (118)
<b>No comparison</b>	78.3% (83)	91.8% (67)	88.8% (95)	85.1% (97)	91.6% (98)	60.0% (36)	73.9% (34)	76.9% (50)	82.6% (560)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (106)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (114)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (60)	100.0% (46)	100.0% (65)	100.0% (678)

*N=678 = items relevant to devolution.*

Once again, online sites featured more comparative references to the nations than broadcasters, with 40.0% of BBC Online items, 26.1% of ITV Online items and 23.1% of Sky Online items including one or more. For the broadcasters, just over a fifth – 21.7% – of BBC items included a comparison between either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, compared to 14.9% on Channel 4, 11.2% on Sky News, 8.4% on Channel 5 and 8.2% on ITV.

Overall, the BBC provided the most comparative coverage of the nations and devolved issues. This was illustrated in a BBC News at Ten item that – following coverage of the Prime Minister’s decision to lift all restrictions in England – visually and verbally compared Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’s approaches:

**Anchor:** Well the Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will set out their own timetables for lifting restrictions later this month. Scotland currently has the highest COVID rates in Europe, according to the World Health Organization, and is expected to loosen some restrictions on the 19th of July.

**On-screen banner:** Coronavirus Scotland aims to lift restrictions on 9th August.

**Anchor:** Ministers in Edinburgh hope the last major legal limits including social distancing can be removed on the ninth of August, but no decision has yet been taken on whether masks will still be required on public transport and in shops.

**On-screen banner:** Coronavirus Wales to review restrictions next week.

In Wales, the Government will review the restrictions and outline any further lifting next week. The country's health minister said today that Wales was going to have to learn to live with Coronavirus, and they were weighing up the risks of catching COVID against lockdown effects on mental health and the economy.

**On-screen banner:** Coronavirus Live music resumes in Northern Ireland.

And some restrictions are being eased in Northern Ireland today with the return of live music and an increase in the number of households able to gather in a private garden. It's understood further relaxations will be discussed by the executive this week (BBC News at Ten, 5 July 2021).

Finally, the study examined degree to which coverage featured party-political sources from the devolved institutions of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (see Table 6.3). This was classified as sources making a direct or indirect contribution. An "indirect source" refers to a journalist referencing what a politician says. A "direct source" refers to a politician either appearing on screen speaking (for TV news) or being quoted within quotation marks (online news). Of course, we would not expect politicians from the devolved institutions to appear or be referenced in every item relevant to devolution. But the extent to which they were and the comparative differences between news provides helps provide one measure of how much devolved politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is made visible for network news audiences.

**Table 6.3: The proportion of network television and online news items with either direct or indirect sourcing of politicians from the devolved institutions (by volume; N in brackets)**

Sources	BBC TV	ITV TV	Sky TV	Ch.4 TV	Ch.5 TV	BBC Web	ITV Web	Sky Web	Total
<b>Direct + indirect</b>	1.9% (2)	2.7% (2)	0.9% (1)	3.5% (4)	1.9% (2)	13.3% (8)	2.2% (1)	3.1% (2)	3.2% (22)
<b>Direct but NO indirect</b>	1.9% (2)	2.7% (2)	0.9% (1)	1.8% (2)	3.7% (4)	8.3% (5)	/	3.1% (2)	2.7% (18)
<b>Indirect only</b>	9.4% (10)	5.5% (4)	2.8% (3)	3.5% (4)	1.9% (2)	5.0% (3)	6.5% (3)	1.5% (1)	4.4% (30)
<b>None</b>	86.8% (92)	89.0% (65)	95.3% (102)	91.2% (104)	92.5% (99)	73.3% (44)	91.3% (42)	92.3% (60)	89.7% (608)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (106)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (114)	100.0% (107)	100.0% (60)	100.0% (46)	100.0% (65)	100.0% (678)

*N=678 = items relevant to devolution*

Table 6.3 above details that the vast majority of news items (89.7%) did not include either a direct or indirect political source from political bodies in either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Once again, we found online coverage – notably on the BBC – was more likely to include the voices of politicians from the devolved institutions than television news.

Across all 678 items that were relevant to devolution, we found 87 politicians from the devolved institutions were indirectly quoted. The leaders of the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland made up the largest share of sources. Between them, Arlene Foster (Former First Minister of Northern Ireland) was quoted 12 times (13.8%), Nicola Sturgeon (First Minister of Scotland), was quoted 16 times (18.4%), and Mark Drakeford (First Minister of Wales) was quoted 5 times (5.7%). In total, they accounted for 37.9% of all indirect sources. Senior Northern Ireland politician Jeffrey Donaldson was quoted 9 times (10.3%), Edwin Poots 13 times (14.9%) and Paul Givan 12 times (13.8%). These were also prominent actors across the sample because of debates within the Democratic Unionist Party about its future leadership. No other politician from any party was indirectly mentioned more than four times across the four-week sample.

In terms of direct appearances on screen, we found 57 politicians from the devolved institutions. Ms Sturgeon appeared 14 times (24.6%), Ms Foster appeared 4 times (7.0%), and Mr Poots 6 times (10.5%). No other political actor (including Mark Drakeford) featured directly on-screen more than three times across the sample.

# Signposting the relevance of devolution for news items in television headlines

## Summary of key chapter findings:

All editors acknowledged the difficulties of capturing the complexity of devolution within a limited timeframe and that crafting succinct headlines is even more challenging.

Overall, around half of the headlines examined mentioned one or more of the UK nations but the vast majority of these references were to England only. Just under half did not feature any geographical reference. On occasions, the UK was referenced generally without any namecheck to England specifically.

The degree of signposting about devolution in television news headlines varied considerably between broadcasters with the BBC News at Ten and Channel 4 at 7pm conveying the most clarity in its headlines about the relevance of devolution.

When a headline did not contain a reference to a UK nation, the story tended to be about England, with general references to “the Government” or the “Prime Minister” that did not specify decisions related to England were not directly relevant to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Overall, the headline analysis indicates there were many opportunities for broadcasters to signpost headlines with more geographical precision.

Given their prominence at the beginning of each television bulletin, the study analysed all television news headlines that were considered to be potentially relevant to devolution over the four-week sample period. In this study headlines were defined as *the top stories highlighted by the news anchor at the beginning of each news bulletin*. We assessed the degree of signposting in headlines by examining whether broadcasters stated if an item was relevant to one or more of the four UK nations, comparing the language and visual presentation of coverage.

Similar to the content analysis, we focused on the clarity of headlines in network news television bulletins by examining whether they signalled *the relevance of a story to audiences across all four nations*. In doing so, it considered how broadcasters communicated which of the four Governments of the UK was responsible for making policy decisions in devolved areas, mostly related to the pandemic.

As previously established, all editors agreed there needed to be some signposting in routine domestic reporting in order for network audiences to understand if the issue was relevant to England only, or Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or more than one of the UK nations. But they also acknowledged the challenges of capturing the complexity of devolution within a limited timeframe.

The study examined all television news bulletins headlines over the four-week sample period – 486 in total – and assessed whether they *could* have been made relevant to either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or any combination of the four. In doing so, a subsample of 98 headlines between the five bulletins – BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Channel 4 at 7pm, Channel 5 at 5pm and Sky News at 10pm – was generated. The study then examined each headline according to whether it mentioned one or more of the four nations, if the UK or Britain was generally referenced only, or if there was no geographical signposting. There were 20

headlines considered to be relevant to devolution on the BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten and Channel 5 at 5pm On Sky News, 25 headlines were identified as being relevant to devolution and 13 for Channel 4 News at 7.

In assessing how much signposting was provided within a headline, four aspects were examined within it: what the anchor said, what was visually displayed on screen (e.g., the large banner), what was visually displayed at the bottom (the rolling banner), and what was said by possible guests or sources (e.g., Boris Johnson). Topics were wide ranging, from the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions to school absences, economic repercussions of the lockdown and travel to and from the UK.

Overall, just under half of the headlines examined mentioned one or more of the UK nations – 46.9% – but the vast majority of these references were to England only. Just under half – 48.0% – did not feature any geographical reference, leaving 5.1% that only generally mentioned the UK or Britain only (see Table 7.0)<sup>14</sup>.

**Table 7.0: The degree of signposting in UK network television news headlines**

Type of signposting	BBC	ITV	Ch. 4	Ch 5	Sky News	Total
England, Scotland, Wales and/or NI mentioned	75.0% (15)	5.0% (1)	76.9% (10)	45.0% (9)	44.0% (11)	46.9% (46)
UK/Britain mentioned only	5.0% (1)	/	/	10.0% (2)	8.0% (2)	5.1% (5)
No mention of either UK/Britain or one of four nations	20.0% (4)	95.0% (19)	23.1% (3)	45.0% (9)	48.0% (12)	48.0% (47)
<b>Total</b>	100.0% (20)	100.0% (20)	100.0% (13)	100.0% (20)	100.0% (25)	100.0% (98)

However, there were major differences in the levels of signposting in headlines between television news bulletins. The BBC News at Ten and Channel 4 at 7pm conveyed the most clarity in its headlines about the relevance of devolution.

When a headline did not contain a reference to a UK nation, the story tended to be about England, but this was often not made explicit

Take, for example, this BBC News at Ten headline about lifting COVID-19 restrictions in England:

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<sup>14</sup> **Research note:** For individual news providers, we acknowledge this represents a small sample of news items, especially for online sites. We continue to present the findings proportionally by percentages in order to compare and contrast patterns of coverage fairly across broadcasters and online outlets, but caution should be taken given the small numbers examined.

**Anchor:** The final stage of easing COVID restrictions in England is delayed until the 19th of July. By that time 3/4 of all adults in the UK will have been offered two coronavirus vaccinations, making the lifting of restrictions less risky. Boris Johnson said that at some point people would have to learn to live with the virus, but right now it was best to be cautious.

**Boris Johnson:** Now is the time to ease off the accelerator, because by being cautious now we have the chance in the next four weeks to save many thousands of lives by vaccinating millions more people (BBC News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

In headlines without a reference to a UK nation, they often included general references to “the Government” or the “Prime Minister” and did not specify decisions related to England were not directly relevant to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

For instance, on the same day the BBC News at Ten namechecked England (see example above), ITV News at Ten and Channel 4 News at 7 did not:

**Anchor:** It was a case of freedom delayed by a month, but there was plenty of good news too. The vaccines appear to work exceptionally well against the new variant indeed against all known variants.

**Boris Johnson:** Now is the time to ease off the accelerator. Because, by being cautious now, we have the chance in the next four weeks to save many 1000s of lives

**Anchor:** But as for foreign travel this summer [a reporter’s] view tonight: Forget it. No chance (ITV News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

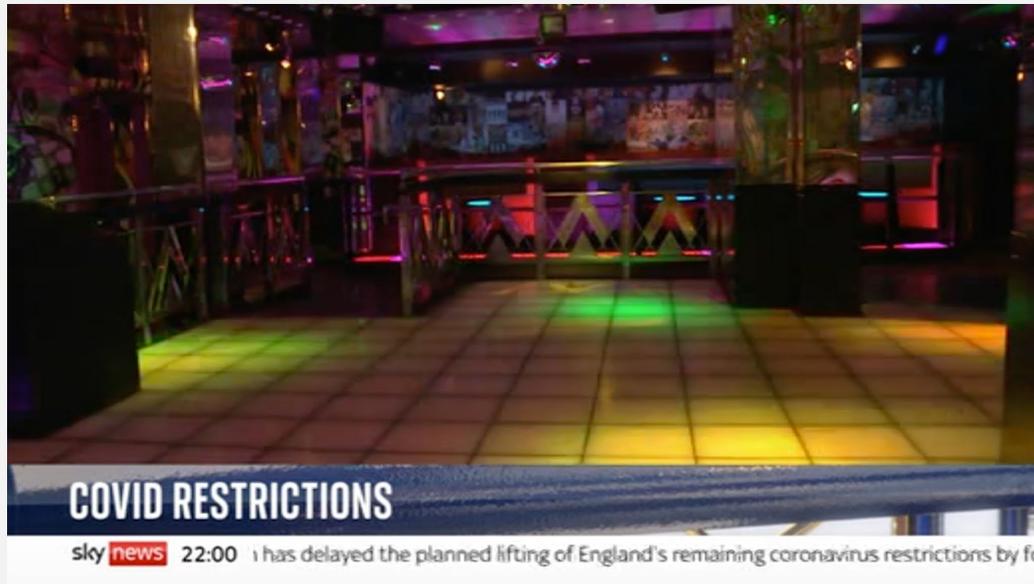
**Anchor:** Good evening from Downing Street where within the last hour the Prime Minister has admitted he is losing the race against the virus. He’s moving the lockdown finishing line a month down the track and sprinting faster with the vaccine rollout. The June the 21st date had assumed a totemic significance for many in the country, and in his own party. The data was having none of it. So, 15 months after he first reluctantly deprived us of our liberties, Boris Johnson has been forced to act again, saying, 1000s more risk dying. He made some concessions, lifting restrictions on weddings and wakes. But Conservative MPs say they’ll rebel when there’s a Commons vote (Channel 4 News, 14 June 2021).

BBC and, Sky News especially used on-screen banners to signpost the relevance of devolution in their headlines

Overall, broadcasters communicated the relevance of domestic stories differently, either via the anchor stating one or more of the UK nations (mostly England), or via a visual reference on-screen, or via no geographical signposting in the headlines.

For example, while a Sky News anchor did not mention England in the headline on June 14 2021, an on-screen rolling banner namechecked England.

**On-screen banner:** Prime Minister Boris Johnson has delayed the planned lifting of England's remaining coronavirus restrictions by four weeks until 19 July (Sky News at Ten, 14 June 2021)



As a rolling news channel (rather than a terrestrial news bulletin), Sky News at Ten was the only broadcaster that regularly displayed rolling, on-screen banners. These banners were often much more detailed and informative than a headline or an introduction to a package. Indeed, when a UK nation was mentioned on Sky News, three quarters of the time it was left to a small on-screen rolling banner that referenced either England, Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland, rather than it being verbally communicated by the anchor. It is also worth noting that the Sky rolling banners had much smaller text than the larger banners featured on other bulletins.

The BBC News at Ten was the only bulletin where the on-screen headline (a large banner, rather than Sky News's rolling on-screen banners) regularly mentioned a UK nation (England). In over eight in ten headlines when a UK nation was mentioned on the BBC it was because the anchor stated it, but in two headlines both the banner and the anchor specified England. For example:

**Anchor:** Learning to live with COVID — the Prime Minister says he hopes to lift almost all of England’s restrictions on July the 19th. Wearing face coverings would become voluntary, social distancing would end, nightclubs would reopen — a final decision will be taken next week.

**Boris Johnson:** But if we can't reopen our society in the next few weeks, when we will be helped by the arrival of summer and by the school holidays, then we must ask ourselves, when will we be able to return to normal.

**On-screen banner:** England Covid restrictions (BBC News at Ten, 5 July 2021).



In this instance, the combined visual and verbal signposting of a nation meant the relevance of the English only restrictions were clearly communicated to all network audiences. We found only two headlines (both on the BBC News at Ten) when the anchor pointed out differences between England and some of the devolved nations. For example:

**Anchor:** Everyone over 18 in England will be able to book their first COVID jab by the end of this week. It's already the case in Wales and Northern Ireland (BBC News at Ten, 15 June 2021).

By contrast, the ITV headline on the same day mentioned England only.

**Anchor:** All over 18s to be offered a vaccine in England by the end of this week (ITV News at Ten, 15 June 2021).

Meanwhile, Channel 5’s anchor did not reference England or the devolved nations when reporting the same story, nor did Sky News at Ten’s headline.

**Anchor:** Also, a new vaccine promise. All adults over 18 to be offered the jab by the end of this week. Ministers say that pledge means the roadmap won't be delayed again (Channel 5 News at 5, 15 June 2021).

**Anchor:** 30 million people now fully jabbed, the race to make sure COVID restrictions, really can end in July (Sky News at Ten, 15 June 2021).

However, Sky News visually communicated the relevance in its rolling banner:

**On-screen rolling banners:** Prime Minister Boris Johnson has delayed the planned lifting of England's remaining coronavirus restrictions by four weeks until 19 July ... NHS England says it expects to invite everyone aged 18 and above for their first coronavirus jab by the end of this week... the Government says more than 30 million people in the UK have now been vaccinated with two doses of a COVID vaccine... (Sky News at Ten, 15 June 2021)



Once again, there were contrasting levels of details supplied in headlines (or on-screen banners) between broadcasters about a UK Government decision affecting England.

For instance:

**Anchor:** A rise in COVID cases and hospital admissions, the Prime Minister refuses to rule out more lockdowns in what could be a rough winter, and things aren't looking any better for those looking to go abroad, either.

**Boris Johnson:** There will be hassle, there will be delays I'm afraid because the priority has got to be to keep the country safe (Channel 5 News at 5, 21 June 2021).

**Anchor:** Self-isolation and school bubbles are set to be scrapped as lockdown rules continue to be ditched. It means children can still go to class and workers head to work. But amidst the euphoria, what are the risks, politically, for the Government and medically, for us?

**Vox pop:** It's too much, too soon for the general population. And for those of us that feel vulnerable it's just going to push us back into our homes (ITV News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

Similarly, in another ITV News headline about the UK Government's lifting of COVID restrictions in England, no geographical reference was mentioned but a UK Government Minister stated "our country" which may not be clear to audiences across the UK if it is relevant or not to them.

**Anchor:** Meanwhile, on the first day in the new job the new Health Secretary was bullish. No going back - Sajid Javid's bold claim that restrictions must end next month.

**Sajid Javid:** For me, 19th July, is not only the end of the line, but the start of an exciting new journey for our country (ITV News at Ten, 28 June 2021).

Finally, we also identified a few items that framed coverage around the UK or Britain. For example, Channel 5's coverage of the travel light system:

**Anchor:** British holiday makers get a much-needed boost as more countries are added to the green travel list (Channel 5 News at 5, 25 June 2021).

It is also worth noting that using the term 'British' excludes Northern Ireland.

# Comparative case studies about reporting devolution

Three stories over the sample period were chosen to examine reporting in more depth. This included the coverage of international travel rules for people across the UK agreed by the four nations (case study 1), the reporting of so-called ‘Freedom Day’, which involved the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions in England (case study 2) as well as UK Government guidance to schools about COVID-19 rules in England (case study 3). The appendix includes more detailed comparative analysis, but below provides a briefer summary of each case study. Across the three case studies, the qualitative findings were broadly consistent with the quantitative data, such as the use of more explicit references in online news compared to television news, and more regular labelling of devolved powers on BBC news compared to commercial media (see Table 8.0 for example).

## Case study 1: Reporting international travel

Throughout June and July 2021 the rules surrounding international travel from the UK was a newsworthy topic. This involved a traffic light system of travel, with rules conveyed according to some countries being labelled “red” (requiring a period of quarantine on arrival to the UK), “amber” (requiring quarantine if not fully vaccinated) or “green” (requiring no quarantine). This was a coordinated UK approach, but importantly it involved devolved decision-making with all four Governments of the UK agreeing to the traffic light system rather than the UK Government taking a decision in a reserved area for the whole of the UK. While, in practice, all four nations broadly adopted the same approach, it remained a matter for Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to legislate while the UK Government was responsible for England only. This is because rules on quarantining when returning from international travel were made under public health legislation, which is the responsibility of the devolved governments. Our analysis explores the degree to which this context was supplied in coverage over the sample period.

### Summary of key findings

- Overall, there were few instances where it was explicitly spelt out that the rules about international travel were decided by all four nations and that the traffic light system was a coordinated approach.
- Most items stated the relevance to England, but often overlooked the devolved nations or made general references to the UK. Since the approach to international travel was largely similar across the UK, regularly adding a caveat about the attribution of powers across the four nations may have been viewed as editorially unnecessary. But, in doing so, it limited the opportunities to make devolution visible for audiences and may have led to them thinking it was solely a UK Government decision made independently of the three other nations.
- Some items conflated the UK generally with England, potentially leaving audiences confused about the political accountability of decisions made about international travel in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Many items did not mention England or even the UK but drew on the UK Prime Minister and/or UK Government ministers to explain changes in international travel.

## There were limited references to the involvement of all four nations

Overall, we found very few instances where it was explicitly spelt out that the rules about international travel were decided by all four nations and that the traffic light system was a co-ordinated approach. Even when they did, most of the time this was brief and at the very end of an item. So, for example, a BBC News web item explicitly pointed this out in an update on the foreign travel traffic light system, but towards the end of the item it was stated that:

The UK Government's traffic light system applies to England, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland able to make their own rules. However, the rules are broadly the same and previous changes to the lists have been adopted by all four nations (BBC News Online, 24 June 2021).

When changes were made to England's quarantine system, following an anchor introduction to up-and-coming changes to international travel restrictions which applied to people living in England, a BBC television news reporter explicitly pointed out the different testing requirements needed across the UK when returning to either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

... Today's announcement is the most significant change to international travel seen this year. From the 19th of July, anyone fully vaccinated doesn't need to quarantine when they travel from an amber list country to England, but they will still need to take a test before they travel, and another PCR test on arrival. .... For now, this is only open to those jabbed in the UK. Northern Ireland has said it will do the same from the 26th of July, a week later, Scotland and Wales are yet to announce whether they'll adopt the policy (BBC News at Ten, 8 July 2021).

On ITV News at Ten, a live two-way provided a caveat about the UK Government having to agree with the devolved bodies about reaching a decision on new UK foreign rules. Although political bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were not explicitly mentioned, the references to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast alluded to devolved decision making across the UK:

It looks pretty likely I have to say. The Government is going to hold a meeting later this week, where they're going to discuss this plan with the devolved administration. So it does have to be signed off by Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, but the plan that's in front of them, should they decide to go for it, could be in place by, I'm told, July or August (ITV News at News, 22 June 2021).

Meanwhile, a Channel 4 News reporter clarified that the rules about international travel were not an exclusively a UK Government decision by referring to "the nations" and Northern Ireland specifically:

... We thought it (the Government) would add the countries that would be in addition to the green list hours ago but it is still likely to come tonight, we hope, but perhaps it is stuck in a holding pattern! What I can tell you is that Northern Ireland has released an updated list. Remember, the nations imposed travel restrictions separately but clearly there is a lot of common ground.... Also Northern Ireland has slightly stolen the marge on the passport vaccination front, announcing theirs will hopefully be live on July 19 (Channel 4 News at 7pm, 21 June 2021).

A few days later Channel 4 referenced Northern Ireland again at the beginning of the news item, alluding to - rather than explicitly pointing out - that UK Government's revised traffic light system may be for England only given the four nations can implement different rules.

The Government's announcement has finally landed and it's very similar to what we heard from Northern Ireland. Ibiza, Majorca, Madeira, much of the Caribbean is on the green list. That means that travellers coming from there do not have to quarantine... (Channel 4 News, 24 June 2021).

In a Sky News television news item, the anchor made reference to the "four nations" rather than the UK Government *singularly* making a decision about international travel. But there was also a reference to British travel makers, which technically does not include people from Northern Ireland.

All four nations of the UK have tonight liberalized the restrictions on travel and the Prime Minister says there'll be a further loosening later in the summer. Several countries have been added to the green list, and those who've been vaccinated twice could soon be spared quarantine on return from amber list countries. While in Europe British travel makers can now not travel to Malta, Madeira and Spain's Balearic Islands, such as Ibiza without quarantining on their return... The changes come into effect on Wednesday (Sky News, 24 June 2021).

Finally, we identified three items – on Channel 5, Sky News television and an ITV news online – that referred to a series of public protests about the traffic light system in England and some of the devolved nations, but the reporting did not explicitly connect any decision to the Governments of either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

## **Many news items in this case study namechecked the UK Government's decision being relevant to England which was, at the very least, an implicit reference to devolution**

Channel 4 News, for example, stated "England" before mentioning decisions about travel restrictions:

**Anchor:** Now, the Government has defended its decision to delay the final lifting of England's Lockdown as new figures show more than 16,000 daily COVID cases were reported in the UK today. Around 60% of adults have now had both doses of the vaccine. And the travel industry is urging the Government to relax restrictions on international travel in time for the summer season – warning that thousands more jobs will be at risk (Channel 4 News at 7pm, 23 June 2021).

On Sky News and ITV television news, a few items connected the UK Government's decision about international travel in England with the lifting of all restrictions on July 19:

Anchor: The Prime Minister has struck an optimistic tone on the prospects of July the 19th, being the day COVID restrictions in England can be lifted - saying it was 'looking good'. But Boris Johnson played down suggestions that the rules on foreign holidays could be relaxed, warning that this will be a difficult year for travel (Sky News, 21 June 2021).

**Anchor:** While we now expect COVID restrictions in England to be lifted in July, fingers crossed, one thing we're still very uncertain about is international travel (ITV News, 16 June 2021).

A Sky News online item specifically mentioned England when reporting on the implications of putting India on the red list:

It is possible that putting India on the red list earlier might have prevented the widely anticipated delay to easing England's coronavirus lockdown that is set to be announced later, a Minister has said (Sky News online 14 June, 2021).

At times, it was left for external sources – rather than journalists – to state the relevance to England only.

Grant Shapps said double-jabbed people who travel to these countries won't need to self-isolate for 10 days on their return back to England (ITV News, 8 July 2021).

Meanwhile, Sky News drew on a media outlet to reference the relevance of England:

The Health Secretary's comments come after The Times reported that Ministers are set to announce a change to England's travel restrictions as soon as Thursday (Sky News online 22 June, 2021).

In a few items Sky News also used an infographic to alert viewers to the relevance to England rather than in the main text of an online item. For example, the graphic below *COVID-19 Traffic Light: What you should do when you return to England from these countries* (Sky News Online, 25 June 2021). In this example the small print under "Source" specified that "travel restrictions may differ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland".

Main restrictions:

- **Red list:** Pre-departure test, hotel-quarantine for 10 days plus PCR test on day 2 and 8.
- **Rest of the world:** Day 2 test for **fully vaccinated** travellers. Pre-departure test, quarantine for 10 days, and test on day 2 and 8 for **unvaccinated people**.

You do not need to take a COVID-19 test or quarantine on arrival in England if you are travelling within the **Common Travel Area**



SOURCE: Department for Transport and Department of Health and Social Care • Countries in the Common Travel Area: the UK, Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Travel restrictions may differ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Regions in some nations may have been put into a different category than the rest of the country.  
Data updated at 09:01 11 October 2021

Several other Sky News items initially centred coverage on the UK's travel rules, but at the very end of some reports England was specifically referenced. For example, a Sky News online item headlined: *"Malta, Balearic and Caribbean islands added to UK travel green list from today"*. It began by framing the story about the UK, but the final sentence referred to rules in England: *"The next travel review will take place before the planned final easing of coronavirus restrictions in England on 19 July"* (Sky News Online 30 June, 2021).

Across television and online, there were instances of reporting international travel which made references to a *singular UK Government* decision, excluding the role of the devolved nations. As outlined above, sometimes this singular reference to Government was accompanied by specific references to the devolved nations or England. But in much of the coverage we identified little signposting and general references to the UK or Britons, with the UK Government and Boris Johnson often the sole protagonists in the story.

So, for example, a Channel 5 news item focused on the Prime Minister's personal travel plans over the summer. The anchor reported that the Prime Minister was not ruling out taking a foreign holiday over the summer, that there was an opportunity to ease travel restrictions for the fully vaccinated and that the Government would soon be making an announcement. A follow up reporter later added:

The summer is beckoning, and today we had the strongest hint yet that destinations like these could be unlocked for anyone who has had two vaccinations. It came from the top. But this isn't just up to the British. Chancellor Merkel from Germany wants all EU countries to quarantine arrivals from the UK (Channel 5 News, 24 June 2021).

The term British in this item is used interchangeably with the UK. Britain technically excludes people from Northern Ireland and it may have left audiences thinking the rules were decided by the UK Prime Minister than for all four nations of the UK. Likewise, when a Channel 5 anchor said to the reporter that were "*some encouraging noises but are we going to see any changes to the travel restrictions any time soon?*", the response was that "*Tomorrow we are due to get an update on the Government's traffic light system for the different countries*" (Channel 5 News, 23 June 2021). One Government decision is referred to in this example rather than referencing the role of the devolved Governments.

Similarly, when a Sky News anchor asked a reporter if "*the Government has gone further allowing travel to some popular destinations*" (24 June 2021) it again led the discussion to exclusively focus on the Prime Minister and UK Government. Likewise, in a Sky News item that day there were no references to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, but passages that focused solely on the UK Government's role and its traffic light system:

Boris Johnson has indicated that a relaxation of travel rules for those who have had two doses of a coronavirus vaccine is on the horizon. .... Transport Secretary Grant Shapps will also "outline the next steps for international travel", a hint that there may be more said about travel for those who have been fully vaccinated... Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News on Tuesday that quarantine-free travel to amber list countries for people who have had two jabs is "absolutely something" the Government is "working on" (Sky News, 24 June 2021).

While the BBC more regularly signposted the involvement of the devolved nations in the UK's travel arrangements than commercial media, there were a couple of online items that centred any decision about international travel being at an exclusively UK Governmental level. For example:

The Government's expansion of the UK's green travel list does not go far enough, industry leaders have warned... Transport Secretary Grant Shapps also said the Government plans to drop quarantine for fully vaccinated people returning from amber list countries "later in the summer"... Among the places being added to the UK's green list is Malta, .... The Department for Transport said the plan to allow fully vaccinated people to arrive from amber list countries without having to quarantine will take place in phases, starting with UK residents (BBC News online, 25 June 2021).

A BBC News at Ten example the traffic light system was also interpreted as a singular Government decision when it stated "*...so this is the longest green list we've seen since the Government introduced these traffic light measures ... The Government knows that they've got plenty of questions to sort out with that before they're allowed to introduce it. So, potentially, a small step in the right direction for the industry, but maybe a bit of a shaky one.*" (24 June 2021). By characterising the traffic light system as being UK-driven and only referencing a singular Government, the powers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were overlooked in some BBC News items.

There were many items that had no UK geographical label about the relevance of travelling aboard. For example, in a lengthy ITV television news package on 24 June 2021 involving a series of vox pops at Manchester airport, there was no mention of any specific national Governmental role, although the UK's Transport Secretary (with responsibility for England) news featured. In the subsequent live two-way that followed, the anchor asked the reporter to talk viewers "*through some of the politics around it*", but again, the response did not include any of the devolved nations. Similarly, a live two-way discussion with a Channel 4 News reporter explored various UK Government decisions, including options about international travel, without providing the caveat of it potentially relating to England only, or that an agreement with the devolved administrations was necessary. These examples are all detailed in full in the annex.

## Case Study 2: Reporting 'Freedom Day' in England

The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced in February 2021 that all COVID-19 restrictions in England would be lifted on June 21, which became widely known as 'Freedom Day', although during our study's sample period it was delayed until July 19. Importantly, the UK Government's announcement was a policy plan relevant to England only, with the other devolved administrations setting out their own plans for easing restrictions at a different pace. This case study not only examined the degree to which television news bulletins and online sites explained the relevance of 'Freedom Day' to England, but also signalled the different exit strategies from the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Summary of key findings

The key findings from this case study were:

- In most of the coverage, on both television news and online, it was pointed out that 'Freedom Day' related to England only. But the clarity of geographical signposting was, at times, different across broadcasters and online sites, with contrasting ways of presenting verbal and visual information in order to convey the relevance to England only.
- Several BBC news items – and a few across the commercial news providers – stated the direct relevance to England and decided to explore the different COVID-19 plans in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. While often only brief references, they clearly communicated that the UK Government's decision was applicable to England, while contrasting the sometimes-subtle policy different responses with the devolved administrations. In doing so, they alerted audiences to the powers of the devolved Governments and the accountability for these decisions rested with them, rather than the UK Government.
- Finally, we identified some coverage about the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions across commercial media where references were made to England in the introduction to items, but not repeated in later live coverage between reporters and anchors.

### Clarity of geographical signposting varied across broadcasters

On television and online, the BBC provided more signposting about the Prime Minister's easing of restrictions being relevant to England than commercial media, while also spelling out differences with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, a BBC News anchor clearly stated England in the opening introduction and, after a reporter package, explicitly referred to the policy being specific to England and pointing out the plans of the devolved nations:

**Anchor:** The COVID restrictions in England will not be fully lifted until the 19th of July. Boris Johnson said that the four-week delay was to allow more people to be vaccinated, given the sharp rise in the number of new cases of the Delta variant. The Chief Medical Officer for England, Chris Whitty, said that the NHS would run into trouble if all the restrictions were eased on the 21st of June which was what was originally intended. Many businesses, especially in the hospitality industry are warning of serious consequences for jobs because of the delay. So, the restrictions in England will stay until July the 19th, though there will be a review in two weeks' time. But the limit of 30 people attending weddings and funerals, well that will be lifted immediately. And residents in care homes will no longer have to quarantine for 14 days when they return from a visit outside (...)

**Anchor:** Just to underline today's announcement applied to England. In Scotland, all areas are set to move to level zero restrictions on the 28th of June, meaning that bigger groups can gather in cafes, in pubs and restaurants. A decision on easing restrictions in Wales is expected this Friday. And limits on indoor gatherings in Northern Ireland are scheduled to be relaxed on the 21st of June...

In a follow up live two-way, a BBC reporter also added a caveat:

**Reporter:** You referred to the other nations in the UK, and we will hear more in the coming days about their plans, but I think we are still in a moment where our leaders are going to be asking all of us to be patient and still to take this seriously and take good care (BBC News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

Just over a week later another a BBC news item about the easing of restrictions of England clearly compared the devolved nations' policy strategies, including on-screen banners that labelled planned changes in each nation. The example below is for Northern Ireland, and similar banners were used for Scotland and Wales:

**Anchor:** Well, the Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will set out their own timetables for lifting restrictions later this month. Scotland currently has the highest COVID rates in Europe, according to the World Health Organization, and is expected to loosen some restrictions on the 19th of July...

**On-screen Banner:** Coronavirus Live music resumes in Northern Ireland



And some restrictions are being eased in Northern Ireland today with the return of live music and an increase in the number of households able to gather in a private garden. It's understood further relaxations will be discussed by the executive this week (BBC News at Ten, 5 July 2021).

Following a report about the lifting of England's restrictions, this item clearly signalled – both visually and verbally – the explicit policy decisions between England and the devolved administrations. There were other items on BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 television news that were specifically about the lifting of restrictions in one of the devolved nations, but they did not compare approaches across nations.

Across commercial media, a few online items – on ITV and Sky News – connected 'Freedom Day' with England, as well as signalling some differences with the devolved nations. One ITV News headline, for example, read: "Boris Johnson to confirm 'England's June 21 'Freedom Day' delay with 6pm announcement" (ITV News, 14 June 2021). Throughout the opening paragraphs of this item England was mentioned, with a link provided that read: "What are the next steps in lifting lockdown in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?". The article that opened through the link then provided details about each of the four nations COVID strategies.

A Sky News live blog of the day's news acknowledged that England's road map was different to some of the devolved nations. However, it required audiences to either click through to relevant hyperlinks or live blogs for more information about devolved differences with England and an explanation for contrasting policy choices.

Wales has joined both England and Scotland in delaying plans to ease lockdown restrictions due to fears of the impact of the variant on hospital admissions.

Scientific advisers believe a four-week delay in easing rules will be enough time to determine whether vaccinations have broken the link between getting ill and hospitalisation.

But Mr Drakeford insisted the delay will not be extended indefinitely "in search of perfection" from scientists if their findings are inconclusive. You can read more on the four-week delay in Wales here (Sky News Online, 18 June 2021).

## England is regularly stated in coverage relating to ‘Freedom Day’

Most news items reported in the context of ‘Freedom Day’ referenced England when reporting the UK Government’s announcement that it would lift all restrictions. Both the anchor and reporter in several BBC News at Ten items, for example, prominently stated “in England” in their contributions:

**Anchor:** There is no reason for the current COVID restrictions in England to last beyond the 19th of July, according to the new Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, who said today that people would have to learn to live with Coronavirus in the longer term (...)

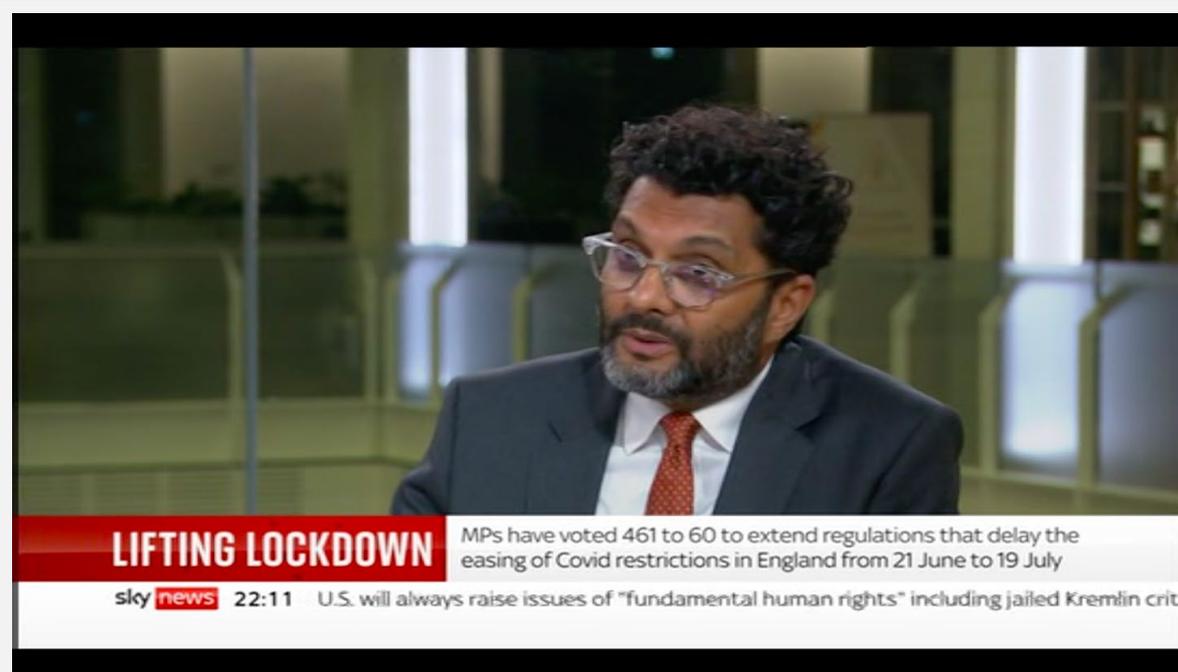
**Reporter:** (...) The cases continue to rise though and switching Health Secretary in a pandemic is far from ideal. Even if it's a return to Government for a familiar face. Sajid Javid has already been the Home Secretary, and the Chancellor. Now, as Health Secretary, he's also giving heavy hints that the Ministers are on course to lift the remaining restrictions in England, in three weeks (...) (BBC News at Ten, 28 June 2021).

Similarly, ITV News’ anchor and reporter made clear the Prime Minister’s plans to lift restrictions were relevant to England, including referencing Public Health England:

**Anchor:** Good evening. Let's not beat around the bush. We were all really, really looking forward to COVID restrictions being lifted in England, at least on the 21st of June, so called Freedom Day. Well. No more. The rapid spread of the Delta Variant first found in India means one of the Prime Minister's four tests for easing lockdown has been failed. And so, June, the 21st becomes July the 19th. What's a month between friends? But he did insist that really would be the end of all restrictions, unless of course another variant turns out. He said the four-week delay came down to a choice between potentially 1000s of deaths or giving the NHS more time to fully vaccinate those more at risk. So far, just a bit gloomy but there was some spectacularly good news too. Public Health England said that the vaccines worked extremely well against the variant when it comes to preventing serious illness.

**Reporter:** The long slog isn't over yet, the roadmap will now take a different route, as the Delta variant has persuaded the Prime Minister to delay reopening to get more vaccinations done (...) The concern is that in Northwest England infections are doubling every week and hospitalisations are ramping up. If that's repeated England wide, there is a problem (...) Although the Prime Minister is delaying the lifting of restrictions in England until the 19th of July, he's open to lifting them on the fifth, if the data suddenly improves... (ITV News at Ten, 14 June 2021)

By contrast, in some Channel 4 items it was left to just the anchor to state the relevance to England. At times, however, some television news items visually displayed the relevance to England only. For example, it was left to a Sky News on-screen banner to point out that "the delay to the easing of Covid restrictions in England":



**On-screen banner:** MPs have voted 461 to 60 to extend regulations that delay the easing of Covid restrictions in England from 21 June to 19 July

In one ITV News item an anchor explained the relevance to England only, while an on-screen banner was also used to reinforce to viewers that the restrictions were relevant to England.

**Anchor:** Good evening. He had said it would be about the data and not the date. But as the Prime Minister set out how he was planning to lift almost all the COVID restrictions in England on July the 19th, he acknowledged that by then the data might be showing 50,000 cases of COVID a day and he said if we can't reopen in the next few weeks, then when?...

**On-screen graphic** (one of four similar graphics shown): What's changing in England from July 19th? ...



(ITV News at Ten, 5 July 2021)

In online news, we found some items mentioning England in the headline as well as in the opening paragraph. For example:

**Headline:** Covid: England 'set fair' for July 19 lockdown easing says Boris Johnson.

What next for easing of lockdown in England - and Sajid Javid's new job? ITV News Political Correspondent Daniel Hewitt has the details. England is "set fair" for easing lockdown restrictions on July 19, the prime minister has said, ahead of a statement by new Health Secretary Sajid Javid in the Commons on whether easing can be brought forward (ITV News Online, 28 June 2021).

At times, however, England was not prominently displayed in the headline, such as in this Sky News item:

**Headline:** COVID-19: Boris Johnson set to delay lockdown easing by four weeks - as fears expressed about 'devastating' Freedom Day postponement

Boris Johnson is set to announce a delay of four weeks in lifting lockdown restrictions in England, as fears are expressed about the "devastating" impact the postponement of Freedom Day will have on businesses (...) But the delay means that despite the success of the vaccination programme so far there will only be minor adjustments to the current lockdown rules in England.

Speaking to Sky News ahead of the PM's announcement, Health Minister Edward Argar hinted that restrictions on weddings in England will be relaxed (Sky News Online, 14 June 2021).

While England featured in this online item, it was not communicated in the headline.

## **In commercial media items, there was unclear signposting about the lifting of England's COVID restrictions**

Across the commercial television news bulletins, we found several items where the UK Government's decision about the lifting of restrictions in England specifically was not acknowledged, or was discussed implicitly. Instead, there were general references to the UK and the Prime Minister. In one Channel 4 interview with a professor advising both the UK Government and the Scottish Government, the anchor hinted at there being different powers across the UK, but the item did not explain the different approaches taken by the devolved administrations.

**Anchor:** Earlier I spoke to Professor Steve Reicher, behavioural scientist at the University of St Andrews. He has advised both the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments on their response to the coronavirus crisis. I started by asking him if he felt the 19th of July is the right moment to drop all restrictions...

After the opening exchange, the anchor then asked the expert a follow up question and the focus was on singular Government, which was the UK Government rather than the Scottish Government that was also lifting restrictions – at this point in time – on July 19, but to different degrees.

**Anchor:** But then, in your view, when would the right time be to ease restrictions?

**Expert:** It has always been true that there have been two ways, in a sense, to get out of this. One is to get immunity through vaccination and the other is to get immunity through infection. What the Government seem to be saying is infections don't really matter, therefore we don't have to wait for the vaccination, and so we can let immunity by infection take over (Channel 4 News at 7, 5 July 2021).

There were also a couple of items where England was namechecked clearly by an anchor introduction earlier in a bulletin, but in later exchanges with reporters, this was not acknowledged.

Take, for example, the following ITV News anchor introduction where the 'we' and 'our' was used to address audiences in England, rather than the rest of the UK.

**Anchor:** Let's put some of that to [the reporter] Look, I guess what businesses wanna know, and frankly what pretty much everyone watching this programme is gonna wanna know is, you know, whenever we get to this day in mid-July which Prime Minister didn't seem to quite be able to remember halfway through his thing, but whenever it is, is that it, are we going to be able to get back to normal? Are we going to be able to travel for example, you know, in the summer afterwards, August say or not? (ITV News at Ten, 14 June 2021)

Likewise, despite a Channel 5 news anchor previously stating the lifting of restrictions related to England earlier in the bulletin, there were later exchanges with reporters that did not communicate that the Prime Minister's decision was relevant to England only.

**Anchor:** The Health Secretary is speaking to MPs now. We're expecting that confirmation very soon (...)

**Reporter:** Yes, I think it was always a very long shot that there could be any kind of early exit from restrictions on July the 5th. The Prime Minister's basically said it won't happen, that we'll have to wait till July, the 19th at the earliest. And we're expecting Sajid Javid to confirm that in his first statement as Health Secretary. But I think the other thing to bear in mind in this, the significance of Sajid Javid his appointment to that job is that within Government there's a tug of war between those who are much more on the side of saying look we have to bear down on the infections, protect the NHS and those who say yes but what about opening up the economy? Sajid Javid is perceived very much as being on the side of those who want to open up more quickly and therefore I think maybe it's shifting the centre of gravity of the argument inside the Government more towards opening up, making July the 19th or the more likely (Channel 5 News at 5, 28 June 2021)

Without either the anchor or reporter reminding viewers of the relevance to England, it would be easy to assume that the decisions about relaxing restrictions could be applicable to everyone in the UK rather than just England.

In a similar vein, some online items did not include in the headline or main body of an article any specific reference to the Prime Minister's decisions being applicable to England. For instance, in an ITV News online item England was not mentioned in the opening passages, but there were references to NHS England and Public Health England at the very end of it:

**Headline:** COVID lockdown restrictions will not end before July 19, Boris Johnson suggests

It is unlikely the easing of lockdown restrictions will come before the "terminus" date of July 19, the Prime Minister has suggested amid calls for an earlier reopening.

The lifting of coronavirus measures has been delayed from June 21 to July 19, was announced last week due to concerns over the spread of the Delta variant.

When asked if easing could be brought forward, Boris Johnson pointed to the rise of the Delta variant, which is causing an increase in hospitalisations and ICU admissions...

Four in five adults have now received their first vaccination, according to NHS England figures – with three in five having both.

Public Health England's COVID-19 director Dr Susan Hopkins said on Sunday she hoped all people over 40 could get their vaccine before the full easing of lockdown restrictions planned for July 19.

NHS England chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said: "It is fantastic to see so many young people coming forward to play their part, protecting themselves, their friends and their family – nearly nine million people in their twenties and thirties have now had their first dose" (ITV News Online, 21 June 2021).

## Case study 3: Reporting COVID regulations in English schools

Throughout June and July 2021 there was ongoing coverage of possible changes to COVID-19 regulations in schools across England. These were decisions made by the UK Government about educational policies in England, which were separate from decisions being made in schools across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In this case study we explore the degree of clarity supplied by television news bulletins and websites about the relevance of these changes for network audiences. While schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland break up at the end of June, schools in England and Wales break up for the summer in mid-late July. This meant the infection rates might have been a more topical issue in some of the UK nations.

### Summary of key findings

The key findings from this case study can be summarised in three ways:

- First, with the exception of a few BBC News items, journalists did not explicitly point out that changes to schools and colleges related to England only and not Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Second, reporting often implicitly communicated the irrelevance of items by stating educational changes related to England, without mentioning the other UK nations. Sometimes this was heavily referenced by anchors, reporters and on-screen graphics and/or banners, but on other occasions it was left to an anchor with sometimes vague graphical information.
- Third, several items had no UK geographical signposting within the item, meaning the relevance to England and irrelevance to the other nations was not communicated.

In summary, across most news providers much of the coverage made reference to a specific UK nation – overwhelmingly England – without unpacking its relevance to schools and political decisions in the other three nations.

Without any geographical reference to England or English schools, audiences in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may have assumed the changes related to their respective nations. Once again, additional audience research would be required to establish levels of understanding around devolved policy issues in the nations, and to explore how much signposting is needed to ensure clear communication of these issues within news items.

### Explicit signposting of devolved nations

There were two BBC news items within our case study sample that spelt out both implicitly and explicitly that any changes announced by the UK Government related to England only and that different policy judgements were being made across the devolved nations.

England's schools will find out later how the Government plans to relax rules that have led to large numbers of pupils being sent home if a single child has a positive COVID test.

At a Downing Street press conference on Monday, Boris Johnson confirmed he intended to scrap the laws on mask wearing and social distancing in the final stage of England's COVID lockdown roadmap on 19 July. The date will be confirmed on 12 July after a review of the latest data

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are in charge of their own coronavirus rules. The Scottish Government has said it may continue to require masks in certain settings even after 9 August, when it is hoped the final curbs will end. Ahead of a review on 15 July in Wales, Ministers said people would need to learn to live with COVID. Rules in Northern Ireland have just eased, with another review due on 8 July (BBC News online, 16 July 2021).

**Reporter:** Meanwhile COVID rules are also to be relaxed in England schools with the present system of sending home bubbles after a positive case set to be scrapped at the end of term. After that, children will only have to isolate if they test positive. New figures show that pupil absence in England due to COVID has hit a new high since all students return to school in March of this year. More than 640,000 pupils in England were not in school due to COVID last week, although under 10% of those, 62,000, had confirmed or suspected COVID

In the follow-up reporter package, the reporter then clarified the relevance of devolution at the end of the item:

**Reporter:** Changes to the COVID rules in Scottish and Welsh schools are under review. In Northern Ireland. Secondary pupils will continue to be offered two lateral flow tests a week. The Government hopes in September, schools in England will return to normality, but the dilemma of keeping schools safe whilst minimizing disruption, means there are no easy answers (BBC News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

With the exception of BBC coverage examples, the reporting of changing COVID-19 rules in English schools did not explicitly signal to audiences that it was not relevant to decisions being made in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

### **Implicit signposting of devolution by stating 'in England'**

Most coverage examined across all television bulletins and online news sites w about changes to schools in England included an implicit reference to devolution by namechecking England. In a couple of items, Channel 5 News clearly signposted England in the anchor introduction and the follow-up reporter package.

**Anchor:** One of the biggest areas left unaddressed yesterday was education. Today, the Education Secretary announced exactly what would be changing for schools in England, probably from the 19th of July...

**Reporter:** The mood music is changing for schools in England after so much COVID disruption. There are 426 pupils here at Hartford Manor primary, but recently 89 of them were all having to isolate at the same time. Asked those who know, like the head boy and girl, it's no fun being stuck at home (Channel 5 News at 5, 6 July 2021).

The item above also reinforced the signposting of devolution with an on-screen graphic during the anchor introduction stating "COVID RULES IN ENGLAND'S SCHOOLS". "Last week 623,000 pupils missed schools. Source: Department for Education":



Several other ITV and Channel 5 examples within this case study made reference to England with reinforcing onscreen graphics stating the relevance to England only.

On-screen graphics referencing England state schools were also sometimes included adding further reinforcement, such as this example from ITV News at Ten:

**On-screen banner:** COVID pupil absence. Thursday 24 June 5.1% absent 375,000 pupils 336,000 self-isolation. Source: department for education England only. (ITV News at Ten, 29 June 2021)

As discussed earlier in Section 8, online news articles often included more signposting than television news. For example, an ITV online news item (6 July 2021) contained a section entitled "Lockdown rules in England: What's changing from July 19" towards the end of the article which specifically mentioned the English rules. There was also a link that asked the question 'What's happening in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland' despite this not being discussed explicitly in the body of the main item. When the link relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland was clicked it revealed a new section that provided explicit signposting to devolved powers.

Meanwhile, in one item a Sky News reporter did not specifically connect the changes related to the UK Government's decision about English schools but did mention England in the package when explaining the amount of school children who were absent due to COVID-19 rules.

**Reporter:** Quiet corridors and unused lockers. Our children continue to count the cost of this pandemic. This week, Alcester grammar school in the **West Midlands** told a third of pupils, over 300 in total, not to come in after a handful tested positive...Teachers say at least in lockdown they could plan online lessons. In some ways, this is more disruptive. This empty classroom would normally be hosting a year nine biology lesson, but the teacher is self isolating, as is the whole year of 155 students because of a mini outbreak of seven cases. Across **England** 375,000 children are not in classrooms like this because of COVID-19, and only a fraction of them actually have the virus...The Government says it will decide in the next few weeks whether to roll out this programme for the autumn term (Sky News, 29 June 2021).

Similarly, a Channel 4 item mentioned England in the opening introduction and package but did not spell out the fact that the politicians featured in it mostly had responsibility for decisions in England:

**Anchor:** Now, as if education hadn't been disrupted enough during the pandemic, there's been another sharp increase in the number of pupils in England being sent home from school because of COVID. Ministers have suggested that the current rules, which mean whole bubbles of pupils have to self-isolate if there is one case, might be changed by the autumn. But, in the meantime, families are having to cope with yet more disruption, as our North of England correspondent...reports. (Channel 4, 29 June 2021)

While the reporter explained that 375,000 were off school in the last week in England, the on-screen graphic did not and referenced the Department of Education.

**Graphic:** 375,000 Children absent...130,000 more than the week before 15,000 Confirmed COVID cases 279,000 Self isolating.....*Source Dept. of Education*

In an interview that Channel 4 News conducted with a health expert, the introduction made specific reference to the Scottish Government, because the guest was an advisor to that specific administration. Despite this, the interview did not compare and contrast the approach in Scotland with England, or other devolved nations. At one point, Scottish schools were specifically mentioned by the expert, but the interview ended without any follow up about comparative Governmental decisions between the four nations.

## No geographical signposting

Finally, several items identified within this case study contained no geographical references or devolution signposting, with examples across all the broadcasters.

For example, while the follow-up report to this introduction (see below) briefly referenced England when talking about pupil absence in schools, the anchor did not mention that the UK Government's announcement about COVID measures related to schools in England only. Several charts made reference to the Department of Education, but not to England, or any other nations. The anchor referred to on-screen data from the Department for Education, but did not make any

reference to England, while a rolling banner appeared without any geographical signposting either.

**Anchor:** The Education Secretary says he's planning to relax COVID measures in schools, after it was revealed that one in 20 pupils are currently isolating. Under the existing rules students must quarantine if just one of their classmates test positive, but that has led to a dramatic rise in classes and year groups being sent home. Figures released by the Department of Education show the number of children missing school because of COVID is rising dramatically. They show that more than 375,000 pupils, about one in 20, were out of school for COVID-related reasons, up by more than 130,000 in a week.

(Sky News at Ten, 29 June 2021)

The accompanying on-screen rolling banner during the item did not contain any England references either.



Similarly, a Sky News anchor outlined some general context for school children isolating, as did a reporter before a brief sound bite from the Secretary of State for Education. But at no point was it stated that his decisions related to schools in England only. The accompanying on-screen rolling banner did not provide any geographical signposting either: *"Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has announced bubbles, social distancing and mask-wearing will end in schools as part of step four of roadmap and students will only need to self-isolate if they test positive"* (Sky News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

**Anchor:** There were 28,000 confirmed cases of COVID 19 amongst school children last Thursday, but more than half a million were self-isolating as a result. The extent of the impact of COVID restrictions on education is one of the reasons the Government is moving to scrap school bubbles and all self-isolation for under 18s.

**Reporter:** Over 600,000 children are out of school due to COVID, but only 4% of them have the virus. That's why bubbles are going...

**Gavin Williamson (Secretary of State for Education):** Keeping children in consistent groups was essential to control the spread of the virus when our population was less vaccinated. We recognize that the system of bubbles and isolation is causing disruption to many children's education. That is why we'll be ending bubbles and transferring contact tracing to the NHS test and trace system (Sky News, 6 July 2021).

Likewise, in an interview between the anchor and a guest on Channel 4 news on 28 June 2021, there was a general discussion of COVID measures at schools, with a reference to the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson. But at no point during the lengthy exchange was it mentioned that he had responsibility for schools in England, with powers about COVID school measures devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was a reference to the country in the opening introduction to the item, but it was not made clear if that referred to the UK or to England specifically.

While the focus of attention was on English school policies, there was no geographical reference to England. For audiences to understand the relevance of the interview on network news, it would have been helpful to acknowledge this public health advice may be different across the four nations of the UK.

All of the items represent missed opportunities to add clarity and include any signposting to devolved issues.