

The Range and Depth of BBC News and Current Affairs: A Content Analysis Summary Report



School of Journalism,
Media and Culture

Ysgol Newyddiaduraeth,
y Cyfryngau a Diwylliant

Author

Professor Stephen Cushion

Research Team

Dr Marina Morani

Jason Roberts

Andy Nelmes

Arron Cullen

Lizzy Willmington

Claire Thurlow

1.0 Context

From the expertise of its journalists interpreting fast-moving events to the sources used to inform complex issues and stories, enhancing audience knowledge about what is happening in the world is a key part of the BBC's public service remit. As the BBC's Royal Charter puts it, "the BBC should provide duly accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming to build people's understanding of all parts of the United Kingdom and of the wider world". In doing so, it continues, the BBC "should offer a range and depth of analysis and content not widely available from other United Kingdom news providers, using the highest calibre presenters and journalists, and championing freedom of expression".¹

However, as the news ecology has transformed over recent years, connecting with audiences and raising public understanding of complex issues have become more challenging journalistic goals. The ways in which people consume and engage with media is in flux as more people turn to new online and social media platforms for news and information. Broadcasting is no longer the monopoly news provider as media consumption becomes a more fluid and fragmented experience. Moreover, in the digital age the number of television and radio channels has increased, giving people an unprecedented choice of information sources. While this opens up opportunities for journalists to practise journalism in new and innovative ways, it also puts pressure on them to interpret fast-changing issues and events, potentially compromising the accuracy and impartiality of news reporting.

Given this increasingly crowded and competitive media marketplace, concerns have understandably been raised about the range and depth of programming available in today's news ecology. The BBC – the UK's main public service broadcaster – is often the focus of these concerns, not just because its journalism is funded by a public licence fee, but because it is, according to Ofcom, "expected to provide high-quality, creative content that is distinctive across all its output and services; and that includes news and current affairs across all platforms".² While all UK broadcasters have a legal obligation to deliver duly accurate and impartial journalism, the BBC receives the most scrutiny because it has to be accountable to its licence fee payers and is by far the most widely consumed information source in the UK.

By conducting a systematic content analysis of BBC and commercial news and current affairs across TV, radio and online, our project was designed to provide an evidence-based assessment of the *range* and *depth* of journalism across different platforms and news providers. In doing so, we also contributed to Ofcom's review about how audiences perceive and understand news and current affairs programming.³ Our content analysis, in this respect, can be used to help explore people's knowledge of events and issues in order to find ways of

¹ Quotes taken from the BBC's Public Charter available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/577829/57964_CM_9365_Charter_Accessible.pdf

² Ofcom Terms of Reference: News and Current Affairs Review, March 2019;

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/139905/bbc-news-review-terms-of-reference.pdf

³ Ofcom Terms of Reference: News and Current Affairs Review, March 2019

raising public understanding of complex subject matter, from the details of Brexit negotiations to debates about education, health, and politics and public affairs more generally.

Working in a world-leading school of journalism, we are acutely aware of the challenges that journalists face in today's multi-platform, 24-hour news culture. While remaining sensitive to the pressures and constraints under which journalists operate, we recognise the need for the BBC to deliver distinctive and high-quality journalism in an increasingly crowded news and information marketplace. Our aim was to provide an objective benchmark for assessing the range and depth of analysis in the BBC's news and current affairs across all platforms, as well as examining how this compares with other UK news providers. In order to supplement the content analysis study, interviews were conducted with either heads of news and current affairs or senior editors from the UK's main public service broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5). These organisations all have different licence obligations in the provision of news which are regulated by Ofcom but are subject to the same requirements under the Ofcom Broadcasting Code for due impartiality and due accuracy.

1.1 Brief summary of key findings

We found that almost all BBC news outlets featured a relatively hard news agenda over the three-week sample. This included reporting a high proportion of news about politics, such as the Conservative leadership contest and Brexit, as well as international affairs. On the evening television news bulletins, only Channel 4 had a harder news agenda than the BBC News at Ten. Compared to sites such as the Daily Mail, Sun and Mirror, BBC online featured more hard news topics about politics and international affairs. Similarly, the BBC News app had a harder news agenda than news apps on ITV and Sky News.

Overall, across BBC broadcast, online and news apps, a broadly consistent editorial diet of hard news topics was reported. But on closer inspection the range of topics reported varied both across BBC outlets, and in comparison with other relevant commercial news providers. For example, international news made up over a quarter of airtime on the BBC News at Ten, but just 1.4% of BBC *Five Live Breakfast*. Channel 4 reported the highest proportion of international news – 30.9% of its airtime – across all television news bulletins. When international news was examined more closely, most BBC outlets reported hard news topics (protests in Hong Kong, for example), whereas across many broadcast and online commercial providers there was a greater focus on celebrity and entertainment stories.

On most BBC and commercial outlets, the Conservative leadership contest was the most reported specific topic. Of the BBC outlets examined, only Radio 1's *Newsbeat* did not extensively report the race to be the next Prime Minister. Routine topics such as health, education and crime did not feature substantively in BBC news agendas. For example, on Channel 5 news these topics combined made up 27.5% of its airtime compared to 7.5% of airtime on the BBC *News at Ten*. Another topic on the margins of the agenda was news about climate change. As a proportion of time spent reporting climate change over the three-week

sample, the topic made up a tiny fraction of coverage across all BBC news outlets as well as on commercial media.

In the one-year study of current affairs, we found some differences in topic selection between BBC and commercial programming. Health, above all, was biggest focus of *Panorama* and *Tonight*, whereas *Dispatches* focused on health and crime in equal measure. On these programmes current affairs output was generally focused on UK domestic issues. Radio 4's *Analysis*, in contrast, was a more internationally-driven current affairs programme. We examined all programmes about education and health in the UK and found that many programmes, on both BBC and commercial media, did not regularly explain the relevance of these topics to the devolved nations.

This analysis of social policy was reinforced by a case study which examined all news about health and education in the three-week sample. While all news outlets could have reported the devolved relevance of health and education more clearly, BBC News outlets took up this opportunity more regularly. When devolved signposting was present – across BBC and commercial news – it was often based on implicit references, such as ‘in England’, which did not explicitly spell out nation-based differences to audiences.

When we examined the comparative use of hyperlinks in BBC and commercial online media, we identified that many outlets, including the BBC news homepage, used internal links heavily, but used external links to a much lesser extent. We therefore carried out an additional one-week study of 12 BBC local, national and international specialised sites on politics, health and science, and this confirmed a predominant use of internal hyperlinks. We established that the BBC's internal hyperlinking differed from that of many commercial providers because the links in its online and news apps were to ‘explainers’ or more analytical forms of news, providing background and context to events and issues.

Our analysis of the BBC's depth of coverage across four case studies revealed that both in its coverage of the Conservative party leadership contest and the day on which the government announced its target to cut carbon emissions to almost zero by 2050, many BBC outlets reported a comparatively high level of policy information and supplied useful background and context to these issues. In reporting the 2050 target, the BBC coverage stood out (along with Channel 4) for challenging the government's plans and dissecting aspects of its policy. Likewise, during the election of the next Conservative leader, most BBC news outlets focused on the policy positions of the candidates rather than their personalities or campaigning tactics. Although most news coverage of Brexit was ‘policy-lite’, when substantive information was reported about the no-deal or future trade agreements, it was primarily by BBC outlets.

However, we also identified areas where the range and depth of BBC reporting could have been enhanced. During the Conservative leadership contest, for example, there were occasions when candidates were given brief soundbites without any challenge to their assertions. Channel 4 News, in contrast, challenged Conservative candidates' positions robustly. In their coverage of Brexit generally, the focus across all news outlets was on partisan, domestic concerns, with journalists often responding to internal UK political events

and issues. Only the BBC outlets directly sourced the EU, and when they did, they used only five sources to represent the 27 member states. The range and depth of Brexit coverage would have been enhanced had it more regularly counterbalanced the claims of UK politicians with comments from EU or member state officials.

Taken together, our findings reveal that, over the sample period, most BBC outlets featured a harder news agenda, and supplied a higher level of policy information and analysis than many commercial news providers. But our study raised a number of important questions that require more research and analysis about the range and depth of BBC reporting. What is the range of political actors that appear in output outside of election time? How far should coverage of political, economic and social affairs be about events rather than policy issues? How regularly does the BBC appropriately challenge claims by politicians in its routine coverage? How far should it use external hyperlinks in online reporting? To what extent do audiences understand the relevance of UK social policy reporting to the devolved nations when BBC reporters make only implicit references to nations?

In raising these and many other questions, we hope our study constructively contributes to debates about the range and depth of BBC and commercial news reporting.

1.2 Overview of sample

In total, 3056 news items were examined across a wide range of television channels, radio stations, online outlets and news apps. This included 1170 television, 1061 radio, 600 online and 225 news app items over a three-week sample period in June 2019. Given the size and scope of online and news apps news across media outlets in our sample, we examined only the top five topics each day. In our analysis of 825 items in online and news apps, 3579 internal and external hyperlinks were examined across 11 outlets. In a follow-up study we assessed an additional 932 hyperlinks across 12 BBC News Online sites. For current affairs, 139 programmes were examined between 25 June 2018 and 21 June 2019. Since current affairs output is generally produced on a weekly basis, the sample period of the content analysis was extended to one year.

Overall, most of our analysis of news used data from a three-week sample period in June 2019. While this represents a relatively small snapshot in time, the content analysis did include a large range of news output across a number of media outlets that can be compared and contrasted. We also analysed the depth of BBC and commercial news in four case studies. Our findings can be interpreted as illustrative but also exploratory, raising questions that require further research and analysis.

1.3 Comparative analysis of the range of news

The comparative range of reporting on BBC outlets and by other news providers was examined by assessing the type of news agenda pursued over a three-week sample period. By comparing the editorial selection of news at one point in time, we gained insights into the range of topics covered, across broadcast, online and news apps. This involved comparing the levels of hard and soft news reported by different outlets, the specific topics reported and the degree of international news. We also explored the current affairs topics covered over a

one-year period, and looked more closely at the comparative use of hyperlinks in online news coverage over a four-week period.

1.4 Hard and soft news

In order to paint a broad quantitative picture of the news agenda across BBC and commercial media, we categorised news according to whether it reflected a hard or soft topic. We drew on conventional definitions of these categories of news, well-established in academic literature. Broadly speaking, topics such as politics, international news, education and health were categorised as hard news, while crime, celebrity/entertainment, the royal family, sport and weather were coded as soft news.⁴ In doing this, we were not judging the relative editorial value of these topics. Since the number of discrete topics spanned more than 30 categories, we used the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ labels to provide a broad overview of the news agenda across different media outlets.

Our findings revealed that while the editorial selection of news was broadly similar across TV channels, it did vary on radio, online and news apps from competing outlets. The BBC, however, pursued a consistently hard news agenda across its broadcast and online platforms, with the exception of Radio 1’s *Newsbeat*.

The evening UK national bulletins on BBC, ITV and Channels 4 and 5 had a relatively hard news agenda; all programmes spent more than 79.6% of their airtime reporting hard news topics. Channel 4, at 93.5%, and the BBC *News at Ten*, at 85.7%, supplied the hardest news agendas. *Newsnight*, the BBC’s late-night current affairs programme, featured hard news topics in 99.2% of its airtime. While Radio’s 4 *Today’s* and *News at One’s* hard news agendas made up roughly 90% of their output, the corresponding proportion of time for Radio 5 Live *Breakfast’s* and Radio 1’s *Newsbeat* was 70.1% and 55.1% respectively.

The most striking disparity in editorial agendas was across online news outlets. The BBC, The Guardian and the Huffington Post featured hard news topics in more than 80% of their output. The Daily Mail, The Sun and the Mirror pursued a more tabloid news agenda (reporting more celebrity and entertainment stories, for example) than either the BBC, digital native outlets or traditional broadsheet papers. The BBC News app had a harder news agenda than its commercial news app competitors: 81.3% of its items focused on hard news, compared to ITV’s 73.3% and Sky News’ 65.3%.

1.5 News topics

During the sample period, the D-Day celebrations, President Trump’s state visit and the electoral race to be the next Prime Minister overshadowed much of the news agenda. This influenced how UK politics generally, and Brexit specifically, was editorially framed by news providers. Our findings about news topics, in this respect, should be interpreted in the light of the events that occurred during the sample period.

⁴ We drew on conventional definitions of these categories of news, well-established in academic literature. A fuller discussion of our methodology can be found in section 3.0.

International affairs was the largest topic category reported on all television news programmes apart from *Channel 5 News*. It made up 30.9% of airtime on *Channel 4 News*, 26.0% on *BBC News at Ten* and 25.1% on *ITV News at Ten*. Channel 5 spent just 6.7% of its total news agenda covering this category. International affairs made up 14.1% and 9.7% of airtime on Sky News and the BBC News Channel respectively, and *Newsnight* spent 8.5% of its airtime reporting international news topics.

Again with the exception of Channel 5, the specific topic most reported during the sample period was the Conservative leadership contest, making up nearly half of *Newsnight's* airtime (47.2% on *Newsnight*, 18.3% on *BBC News at Ten*, 20.4% on *ITV*, and 20.3% on Channel 4). Roughly a third of the agenda on the BBC News Channel and on Sky News focused on the Conservative party leader elections.

The 75th D-Day anniversary and Donald Trump's visit to the UK and Europe in the first week of the sample period made up 10-20% of airtime across all television programmes. This may have had an impact on the proportion of time spent reporting routine topics such as health, education and crime, which did not feature substantively in the news agenda. However, on *Channel 5 News* these topics combined made up 27.5% of its airtime. By comparison, health, education and crime together accounted for 7.5% of airtime on the *BBC News at Ten*.

International news was not as widely reported on BBC radio as on UK television news generally. This was strikingly the case on *5 Live Breakfast*, where international news made up 1.2% of total airtime. Once again, the Conservative Party leadership was the most prominent specific topic across radio outlets, accounting for 22.3% on *Today* and 29.8% on *World at One*. Only *Newsbeat* did not extensively report the contest to be the next Prime Minister.

As the D-Day celebrations and Donald Trump's state visit overshadowed the agenda in week 1, these high-profile stories may have had an impact on other news stories about politics and social policy, which did not feature prominently on BBC radio. Coverage of housing, education and transport, for example, accounted for 5.4% of *Today's* total news airtime, whereas items about art, history and heritage made up a combined share of 6.0%. *Newsbeat* differed from other BBC radio outlets by placing a greater editorial emphasis on crime, health and celebrity/entertainment stories, whereas *Radio 5 Live Breakfast* focused more on sport and UK issues. Radio 4's news agenda, in this respect, differed from the news topics reported on Radio 1 and Radio 5 Live.

The total share of airtime about international news was between 3.5% and 11.4% on commercial radio stations, with the Conservative party leadership the most-reported topic across all channels. Items about celebrity and entertainment featured more substantively on Heart, Capital and talkRADIO than on BBC outlets (with the exception of *Newsbeat*).

For online news, across the eight outlets examined, the proportion of international news was mixed. International affairs comprised an 18.6% share of news topics, whereas on BuzzFeed it represented over half of all news items (56.0%) and on the Huffington Post just 9.3%. Once again, the Conservative party leadership contest was the most-reported topic across most online outlets, accounting for 17.3% of items on BBC sites, with only The Telegraph at 21.3% and the Huffington Post at 18.7% reporting it more often. The Sun, Mirror and Daily

Mail featured entertainment and celebrity items in 24.0%, 17.3% and 14.7% of their respective total news agendas, whereas the BBC had just one item about these topics.

The news apps reported international news affairs prominently, accounting for a third of Sky News items (34.7%) while ITV's share was 22.7% and the BBC's 20%. The volume of Conservative party leadership items was broadly similar across the news apps (between 14.7% and 18.7%) along with general news about UK politics. There was little difference between the UK news agendas of the three news apps, although the level of health reporting (9.1%) of the BBC's coverage was much higher than on Sky or ITV, which reported this topic only once each.

News about climate change barely registered across most media over the three-week sample period. Only on the day of the government announcement to reduce emissions to almost zero by 2050 did the issue of climate change cut through the news cycle and feature prominently on the flagship broadcast BBC News programmes and some commercial radio stations.

1.6 International news topics

We examined the international news topics separately to assess what kinds of international news items were covered by different outlets. Coverage of war and conflict made up 39.8% of BBC *News at Ten*'s international news airtime, compared to 26.6% for ITV *News at Ten* and 23.4% for Channel 4. For Channel 5 it was 28.3%, although international news accounted for just 6% of its total airtime. While Sky News Channel spent half its international news airtime on war and conflict stories, the BBC News Channel dedicated 32.4% to this topic. Across the media sample as a whole, many war and conflict items focused on the diplomatic tensions between the US and Iran, after commercial oil tankers were attacked in the Middle East, along with the ongoing civil unrest in Sudan, which featured prominently on the BBC's *News at Ten*.

Coverage of social affairs and human rights, which during the sample period largely centred on protests against new extradition laws in Hong Kong, made up almost a quarter of international news airtime on the BBC *News at Ten* and *Channel 4 News* – 23.4% on both bulletins – while for ITV *News at Ten* it was 6.3%. For the BBC News Channel it was 17.1%, Sky News Channel 20.9%, and for *Newsnight* 42.6%. International politics, primarily about Donald Trump and US politics, made up 8.7% of international news airtime on the BBC *News at Ten*, 16.7% on *Channel 4 News* and 25.9% on ITV *News at Ten*. On the BBC News Channel it accounted for 11.4% and on Sky News 6.4%.

War and conflict issues dominated the international news agenda on *Today* and *World at One*, at 24.9% and 31.9% respectively, specifically the US/Iran dispute and Sudan's civil unrest. *Newsbeat* spent more time on reporting topics about technology, celebrities and entertainment than on covering war and conflict; these topics made up more than half its international news topic airtime. Radio 5 Live did not feature much international news. Within international news topics, celebrity and entertainment stories made up 22.6% of Capital's agenda, while on Heart these amounted to more than two-thirds of its total airtime.

This included stories such as Taylor Swift's starring in a music video (Capital, 7 June 2019) and a US magazine naming Rihanna as the richest female musician (Heart, 5 June 2019).

Just over a quarter of BBC News Online items (28.6%) were about war and conflict, with tensions between the US and Iran the central focus. Coverage of the Hong Kong protests represented the next largest category of international news for the BBC, the Guardian and the Telegraph. While celebrity and entertainment made up 7.1% of the BBC's international news coverage, for The Daily Mail, The Sun, the Mirror and BuzzFeed it represented 21.4%, 15.4%, 21.7% and 14.3% respectively.

On the news apps, war and conflict amounted to a third of items on the BBC, 29.4% on ITV and 19.2% on Sky News. Items about social affairs and human rights category – which were largely focussed on the protests in Hong Kong – accounted to 20.0% of BBC News items compared to 17.6% on ITV and 15.4% on Sky News. The BBC had one item about celebrity and entertainment stories while ITV had none, while on Sky News these topics made up a fifth of its international news agenda.

1.7 Current affairs

Current affairs programmes were examined over one year (from June 2018 to June 2019). We examined the BBC's *Panorama* and *Analysis*, as well as ITV's *Tonight* and Channel 4's *Dispatches*. We included *Analysis* to represent a flagship BBC Radio 4 current affairs programme, although its format and the style of its journalism is different from other television programmes in the sample.

A third of *Panorama* episodes (33.3%) centred on health or NHS events or issues, while on ITV's *Tonight* the figure was 28.9. Channel 4's *Dispatches* featured health and crime in equal proportion (14.8%) but focused most prominently on housing (which made up 18% of all the topics it examined over the year) with episodes about the Grenfell Tower fire, property costs and homelessness.

The BBC's *Analysis* was by far the most internationally-focused current affairs programme. Half of its agenda dealt with topics beyond the UK. In contrast, five (11.9%) of the *Panorama* programmes were international in scope, while *Dispatches* featured four episodes (14.8% of its current affairs coverage) about international affairs. *Tonight* dealt with one international topic in an episode entitled 'Trump & Britain: love or loathing?'

With the exception of BBC *Analysis*, current affairs programming was overwhelmingly focused on UK issues in the one-year study, with health and education featuring prominently.

We then examined all programmes involving health and education more closely in order to explore how these issues were reported for audiences in a devolved UK. While many of the programmes explored these topics from a general UK perspective, we identified a number of episodes that could have been relevant to devolution. We found it striking that many episodes featured *no reference to any devolved powers* about health and education despite over 20 years of devolution.

Overall, 60% of current affairs programmes about UK health and education did *not* include any devolved signposting, either in the opening credits or in the first five minutes of the episode. BBC programmes, however, did include a reference to devolved powers in more than half of episodes (50% for *Analysis* and 58.5% for *Panorama*) whereas only a quarter did on Channel 4's *Dispatches* and one in ten on ITV's *Tonight*.

We broke down which nation was the primary focus of all current affairs programmes about health and education. After all, since devolution in 1999 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have control over their own health and education policy making. We found that England was by far the most-referenced nation, with *Panorama* mentioning Scotland once and England and Wales once. Where a devolved reference was made, there was some limited signposting in the opening introduction in *Analysis*, *Dispatches* and *Tonight*, but none in six of the eight *Panorama* episodes. *Panorama* also relied entirely on implicit references to the devolved nations, as did *Tonight* and *Dispatches*, with only the BBC's *Analysis* making explicit references to the devolved nations' powers.

1.8 Hyperlinks

As part of our analysis of online news and news apps, we examined the proportion of internal and external hyperlinks that media organisations used in their coverage, while also assessing the source and format of every link.

BBC News Online included the highest proportion of items with a hyperlink (97.3%) followed by the Guardian at 96.0%, the Mirror at 92.0% and the Telegraph at 90.7%. The site with the lowest proportion of hyperlinks (66.7%) was the Daily Mail, while the Huffington Post and The Sun had 74.7% and 76.0% respectively. For news apps, ITV featured the highest proportion of items with a hyperlink (97.3%) while the BBC had 90.7% and Sky News 81.3%.

The Huffington Post and BuzzFeed included the highest proportion of external hyperlinks – 52.9% and 73.1% respectively – whereas legacy media outlets used a far greater level of internal links. On BBC News Online, 84.8% of hyperlinks were internal, a similar proportion to the Daily Mail, the Sun, the Guardian and the Mirror. This reliance on internal sources was also evident in news apps, with 12.8%, 16.9% and 21.7% of all hyperlinks external on ITV, BBC and Sky News respectively.

For BBC News Online, 41.1% of external hyperlinks connected to Twitter, with 19.6% to business organisations, 12.5% to UK newspapers and 10.7% to international media. The remaining external hyperlinks were sources to sites such as other social media, academic journals, UK legal and political bodies, and international legal and political bodies. Other outlets, such as the Mirror and the Daily Mail, made more use of sources from external media organisations. In total, external media sources made up 83.8% and 84.2% of their share of external hyperlinks, along with sources such as Twitter, social media and business organisations. The BBC News app followed a hyperlinking pattern similar to its online news service, ITV connected to one external media source, whereas Sky connected to none. On

ITV, 91.9% of external hyperlinks were to Twitter, while the Sky news app connected to Twitter and to business organisations.

More than half the BBC's online news and news app internal hyperlinks (approximately 55%) were to its own archive of conventional news reportage items, rather than its analysis pieces, live reporting, columns/feature article, news profile pages or other features. Several other commercial outlets linked to a greater extent to their own conventional news reportage items, or to news profiles of individuals and organisations. For example, 81.1% of the Sun's and 72.3% of BuzzFeed's internal hyperlinks were to their own conventional news reporting, while for the Sky News app and the ITV app the proportions were 87% and 77.7% respectively. The BBC's internal hyperlinking differed from that of many commercial providers: both its online and news apps connected to 'explainers' or more analytical forms of news, providing background and context to events and issues.

As we had identified that the BBC News homepage (like most other online news providers) used internal links heavily but used fewer external links, we developed a follow-up study to systematically analyse a greater range of BBC News websites. In total, 932 hyperlinks were examined across 12 BBC News websites. Our main aim was to compare the proportion of internal and external hyperlinks used across different BBC news sites – local, national and international – as well as more specialised sites, from politics to health and science.

In the three-week sample of BBC and commercial media online sites, we found that 84.8% of all hyperlinks were internal and 15.2% were external. Our follow-up study found a similar pattern of hyperlink use (82.2% internal and 17.8% external) across BBC News Online sites. But there were major differences in hyperlink connections across BBC News websites. As an example, while internal links on the websites for the South East of Wales, and Glasgow and the West of Scotland, comprised 96.9% and 80.2% respectively of the sites' total hyperlinks, on Devon Online they amounted to 34.6%. For the Devon Online site, that meant that 65.4% of its hyperlinks were to external sources, far higher than on all other BBC news websites. The science pages relied most on external material, at 29.5% of total hyperlinks.

Of all external hyperlinks in the follow study of BBC News websites, 60.8% led to the sites of business organisations and Twitter profiles. Of the rest, there was some variation depending on the content of the site. On UK politics, for example, links to newspapers made up 42.9% of sources, whereas on the health and science web pages academic sources made up 25% and 17.5% respectively.

We found that links to external news sites for news, opinion pieces/blogs and features/columns were relatively low across almost all BBC News sites. In other words, BBC News Online used more of its own archive when providing links for news, opinion and features.

Finally, we examined the positioning of hyperlinks – whether they were at the top, middle or bottom of a web page in a news item. We considered the positioning of hyperlinks to explore where they are typically included within a news item. This could reveal where editors think readers are more likely to click on hyperlinks, such as at the top of a news item. We found that the positioning of hyperlinks was generally higher up the page in science and health

news items, which may indicate the importance of the sources informing the content of these pages. But when comparing the regional, national and international BBC News sites, we uncovered no consistent pattern in how hyperlinks were positioned.

1.9 Comparative analysis of the depth of news

In order to examine the comparative depth of coverage, we selected four case studies on a range of topics. This included the reporting of the Conservative leadership contest, Brexit, health and education policy in a devolved UK context, and the government's 2050 zero emissions target. This analysis was both quantitative and qualitative in scope, and involved making comparative judgements about the use of sources and the degree to which these were critically assessed by reporters, as well as the level of context and analysis offered by different news providers.

1.10 Case 1 study: The Conservative leadership contest

During the sample period, the Conservative party was in the process of selecting a new leader to replace Theresa May who resigned on 24 May 2019. Given the significance of this event and the level of coverage it received, we decided to more carefully compare the depth of reporting about the Conservative party leadership across news outlets. We assessed the degree of policy information and analysis about the candidates' positions, as well as the sources used to inform coverage. In doing so, we analysed policy-related claims made by Conservative candidates and considered the degree to which their promises and pledges were challenged by journalists or left uncontested within a news item.

All news providers spent more time reporting on policy issues than on the contenders' campaigns. Only Channel 5 News featured more airtime about the campaign than the policy positions of the candidates. Of all the BBC outlets, Radio 5 *Live Breakfast* and *Newsnight* focused most heavily on process, in particular the voting procedures of the Conservative leadership contest, as well as the character of the candidates and their electoral positioning. However, *Newsnight*, together with the BBC News Channel and Channel 4, contained the highest proportion of policy information about the candidates. In the analysis of policy positions, where journalists did not just supply factual information but scrutinised the context and background of candidates, *Newsnight* also stood out for its forensic analysis, as did *World at One*. On television news bulletins, Channel 4 contained the most detailed analysis of the contenders' positions – 37.3% of its airtime was on this topic – compared to 28.8% on *ITV News at Ten* and 24.8% on *BBC News at Ten*. Channel 5 reported this topic just three times, providing some policy analysis in each item.

When we examined the sources used to inform coverage, we found that the majority were Conservative candidates, MPs and party members. BBC outlets featured a wider range of contenders than commercial television news services, but also more than several radio outlets and its own online service. For example, BBC News Online featured 71 sources in the nine items we examined over the sample period (a ratio of nearly eight sources per item).

However, although the BBC featured a wide range of Conservative contenders, with some detailed analysis of their policy proposals, at times journalists did not always supply a great deal of context, analysis or background about these positions. Candidates were often given brief soundbites on the BBC without any challenge to their assertions. Put another way, BBC outlets widely covered the Conservative leadership, but, at times, they did not always *uncover* the claims and counter-claims of the candidates' competing policy positions. We observed that Channel 4 News challenged Conservative candidates' positions most robustly, notably in live interviews, compared to other outlets examined in the sample.

1.11 Case study 2: Brexit

As Brexit has been the most prominent UK news story since the 2016 EU referendum campaign, this case study paid special attention to the depth of Brexit reporting during the three-week sample. We examined the level of policy information and policy analysis provided across different news outlets and platforms, the main topics addressed, the sources used to inform coverage, as well as the geographic perspective through which Brexit was primarily reported.

Since ongoing Brexit negotiations stalled during the Conservative leadership contest, we found that specific stories about Brexit were pushed to the margins of news agendas. As a consequence, across all outlets we found few items that reported a substantive level of policy information and analysis on issues such as ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU, future trade deals or a no-deal scenario. Those that did came from BBC outlets, including BBC News Online, its news app, *Newsnight* and *Today*.

When examining coverage more closely, the reporting of Brexit was largely informed by what UK politicians said and did. Only a few BBC outlets directly sourced the EU, and when they did, it was from a narrow cast of five sources representing the EU's 27 member states. While at times, anchors and reporters counterbalanced UK party political perspectives by referencing the EU's position, these were not generally substantive or sustained positions within a news item.

Overall, we found that the reporting of Brexit – on both the BBC and commercial media – was largely framed by partisan, domestic concerns, with journalists often responding to internal UK political events and issues. Since our focus was on UK news media, understanding Brexit almost exclusively through the lens of UK politicians and parties might appear editorially justified. But it meant audiences were mostly reliant on understanding the EU's motives according to UK politicians and journalists, rather than hearing from both sides of the negotiations. More regularly *counter-balancing* the claims of UK politicians with EU or member state officials might, in this respect, have enhanced the range and depth of Brexit coverage.

1.12 Case study 3: Health and education in a devolved UK

Since 1999 Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have had policy responsibilities from the UK parliament devolved to them in key areas such as health and education. Our case study

examined the extent to which different news providers *signposted the devolved relevance* of all health and education items during the main three-week sample period.

In all health and education news items, we found that more than half of all BBC news items (51.2%) contained no devolved signposting, whereas on commercial media outlets nearly two-thirds did not. BBC News Online and the BBC News Channel signposted the devolved relevance of social policy items more often than other news providers. ITV's *News at Ten* provided devolved signposting in more than two-thirds of its items, compared to half the items on *BBC News at Ten*, just over a third on Channel 5 and less than two in ten on Channel 4.

Since social policy was often about the whole of the UK, we assessed whether it was relevant for items with no devolved signposting to have referenced England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or if devolution was largely irrelevant or peripheral to the topic. In the subset of items about health and education, we identified 45.5% of BBC news items that *could* have made reference to a devolved nation but did not, compared to 58.6% on commercial media. In short, while all news outlets could have reported the devolved relevance of health and education more clearly, BBC News outlets took up this opportunity more regularly.

England was the overwhelming focus of items about health and education, with only the BBC's online service (which in this case study included the BBC News Online homepage and its health and education sites) featuring stories across the four nations. Of the commercial broadcasters, Channel 5 featured the most items beyond England, with five about Scotland. In over nine in ten BBC and commercial media news items, signposting to devolved powers was made up of implicit references, such as 'in England' or 'NHS England'. This meant that the vast majority of news items did not explicitly signpost any devolved powers by referencing the specific nations which are responsible for their own health and education policy.

While devolution may be inferred by mentioning 'England' or 'NHS England', we found that across all signposted items on BBC outlets, just over a quarter did this in the introduction to a news item, with most references being in the main part of the report, compared to a fifth on commercial media. How far audiences pick up on these implicit references to specific nations, either in the introduction or within the story itself, requires further study, but our analysis showed that few items explicitly spelt out the devolved relevance of health and education in the nations of the UK.

1.13 Case study 4: Climate change

Across all outlets in the three-week sample period, as a proportion of all news topics climate change made up a fraction of coverage overall. But the issue of climate change did become a prominent topic on one day of the sample period – when the government announced a net zero emissions target on 12 June 2019. Climate change tends to be reported intermittently, often after a political event or the publication of a report. But when it does make the news agenda journalists have an important role in supplying the necessary background, context and analysis for audiences to understand the subject and the potential impact of any legislative solutions to the problem.

In this case study, we compared how different news providers reported the Government's announcement on 12 June 2019. In doing so, we examined the depth of policy information provided by news providers, the range of sources used to inform coverage, and the degree to which the government's claims were appropriately challenged by journalists. We also analysed how different news providers independently reported the emissions target, which included assessing the range of perspectives they drew on to interpret the credibility of the proposal, and the level of scrutiny it received from journalists and sources.

With limited time in their top-of-the-hour bulletins, most commercial radio news stations largely repeated the government's plan along with a largely critical counterbalancing perspective. ITV was the only television news bulletin to put climate change at the top of the agenda. All television and BBC radio outlets provided relatively detailed information about the government's plans to cut emissions to zero, but there were differences in the selection of sources and how critical they were towards the proposal. On television news, reporter packages across all outlets gave an overview of the government's policy, but varied in their depth of challenge, analysis and context.

While commercial radio supplied limited scrutiny of the proposal, ITV and Channel 4 provided critical coverage by challenging the government's record on meeting targets, highlighting the cost of inaction to climate change, and examining the impact of energy policy within a specific community. Channel 5 provided a brief overview of the government's announcement before going into more depth about a particular change that was needed to achieve the policy. Across most BBC News outlets, the government's proposal to meet a zero-emission target was challenged by journalists. With the exception of Heart and Channel 5, all news providers provided some criticism of the government's plans. However, only the BBC outlets (and no commercial media), raised questions about the government's plan to review and revise its policy after five years if other countries had not met their targets, as well as pointing out that the UK could offset its own emissions by buying international carbon credits.