



The Provision of Current Affairs

Report on: The Current Affairs Audit 2005, Current
Affairs Qualitative Viewer Research and Ofcom's
Symposium on The Future of Current Affairs

Statement

Publication date:

25 July 2006

Contents

Section		Page
1	Executive Summary	2
2	Current Affairs – The Network Content Analysis	6
3	Current Affairs – The Nations and Regions Content Analysis	19
4	Current Affairs – Qualitative Viewer Research	27
5	Symposium on The Future of Current Affairs	32

Section 1

Executive Summary

Overview

- 1.1 As part of its duty to assess the effectiveness of public service delivery on television, Ofcom is conducting a series of bi-annual practitioner symposia. One of the key purposes of these events is to engage practitioners and other informed commentators in in-depth investigations into how well the public service purposes are being achieved by the broadcasters. The outputs of these symposia will also help to inform the future regulation of key genres of public service programming.
- 1.2 The first of these symposia entitled 'The Future of Current Affairs' took place on 28th March 2006 and examined one of Ofcom's key purposes of public service broadcasting: *"to inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas"*.
- 1.3 The goal of this symposium was to reflect on the existing provision of current affairs programming by the public service broadcasters, to examine how current affairs provision may change moving forward towards digital switchover and to consider options for the delivery and regulation of current affairs programming in the future. The scope of the symposium was limited to public service television and did not include current affairs on radio.
- 1.4 The focus of this report is to provide a summary of the symposium itself and synopses of three pieces of original research conducted by Ofcom to inform debate at the event. These were:
 - An audit of the current affairs output on the network public service broadcasters
 - An audit of the current affairs output in the Nations and Regions; and
 - Qualitative research into viewers' attitudes towards current affairs programming

Current Affairs – The Network Content Analysis

- 1.5 The audit of current affairs programming quantified and analysed the network current affairs output of the terrestrial public service broadcasters: BBC One, BBC Two, ITV1, Channel 4 and Five. The audit examined current affairs output over the six month period from 1 July 2005 to 31 December 2005.
- 1.6 Current affairs programming is defined as:

A programme which contains explanation and analysis of current events and ideas, including material dealing with political or industrial controversy or with public policy. Also included are investigative programmes with contemporary significance.
- 1.7 The audit stemmed from the Public Service Broadcasting Review. The goal of this piece of work was to gain an in depth knowledge of the amount, range and breadth of existing current affairs output in order to establish how well the viewer is presently served by current affairs programming on the terrestrial public service broadcasters.

The main thrusts of the audit were an investigation into the volume, range and scheduling of current affairs programming on the network terrestrial broadcasters.

1.8 The key findings of the audit were:

- The broadcasters all reached or exceeded the quotas for current affairs programming
- The volume of current affairs programming on BBC One and ITV1 has increased since 1998
- The volume of current affairs programming played in peak on Channel 4 has increased significantly. 125 hours of current affairs programming were broadcast in peak in 2005 compared to 96 hours in 1998
- Between 1 July 2005 and 31 December 2005 41% of programming returned to Ofcom as 'current affairs' was transmitted in peak time
- 18% of the qualifying output was international programming
- There was a range of current affairs programming covering the following topics: politics, social affairs, economics/business and topical news programmes
- There was also a range of formats. Approximately one quarter of the output consisted of 'filmed narrative' programmes. Other formats were: studio programmes, talk, discussion/debate, interviews and investigative programmes
- Analysis of BARB data indicated that the total yearly hours of current affairs programmes viewed on average per person had increased from 13 hours in 2001 to 17.06 hours in 2005

Current Affairs – the Nations and Regions Content Analysis

1.9 This audit was conducted between 1 July 2005 and 1 December 2005 and focused on the non network output broadcast by ITV1, the BBC (including Gaelic output, some of which is funded by the Gaelic Media Service) and S4C. The audit examined the volume, range and scheduling of non network current affairs programmes.

1.10 The key findings of the nations and regions audit were:

- There was a higher volume of current affairs output in the Nations than the English Regions. The BBC was the largest provider of non network current affairs programming in the Nations whereas ITV was the largest provider in the English Regions
- 65% of non network current affairs was broadcast in peak or near peak in the English regions. In the Nations 46% of the output was broadcast in peak or near peak
- In the Nations politics and coverage of the Welsh Assembly/Scottish Parliament dominated the output
- The range of subject matter was particularly wide in the English regions, with the Nations much less likely to return features or 'fly on the wall' documentary style programmes as current affairs

- In England filmed current affairs was the most common format, accounting for 38% of non network output.

Current Affairs – Qualitative Viewer Research

- 1.11 The goal of this research was to inform Ofcom about viewers' opinions of the current affairs programming supplied by the public service broadcasters. The research was designed by Ofcom colleagues in conjunction with an advisory panel comprising practitioners and other experts in the field of current affairs.
- 1.12 The fieldwork for the research took place in December 2005 and January 2006. Focus groups were conducted in six locations across the UK including each of the Nations and some of the English Regions.
- 1.13 The research aimed to establish how viewers defined current affairs, what their motivations were for watching, what types of programmes they preferred and how new media and technologies were impacting on television current affairs.
- 1.14 The key findings from the research were:
- Initially viewers tended to define current affairs very narrowly. However upon further consideration they widened the definition to include any programmes that are topical or relevant to them
 - Viewers cited a range of reasons for watching current affairs. One primary motivation was having a personal interest in a subject. Another was the desire to appear knowledgeable
 - The focus groups revealed that there was a general interest in political programmes but there was also a frustration with the emphasis on the *process* of politics
 - Viewers expressed a desire for programmes which had a recognisable outcome
 - Viewers looked for programmes that were engaging and entertaining citing undercover investigations as an example
 - Although there was a desire for overall balance within a programme or the wider schedule, some respondents appreciated more opinionated and partial programmes
 - New technologies appear to offer both threats and opportunities to current affairs. Although increased competition would enable viewers to avoid current affairs programmes more easily, new technologies (such as PVRs) would allow them to find and capture current affairs programming of particular interest within the schedule.

The Future of Current Affairs – The Symposium

- 1.15 Ofcom's seminar on 'The Future of Current Affairs' took place on the 28th March 2006. The event was chaired by Roger Bolton (Chairman, Flame TV) and there was an invited audience of current affairs practitioners, stakeholders and academics. The broad agenda of the event was:
- Key note speech – Steve Hewlett

- Presentation of the Network Content Analysis – Stephanie Peat, Ofcom
- Presentation of the Nations and Regions Content Analysis – Katy Boulton, Ofcom
- Presentation of the Qualitative Viewer Research – Alison Preston, Ofcom
- Panel Discussion

1.16 Section 5 summarises the arguments made in the key note speech and the main discussion points raised by the panel and the invitees, with an overall summary of conclusions from the project at items 5.29 and 5.30.

Some conclusions and questions for the future

1.17 The current affairs audits and audience research have raised a number of issues and questions regarding current affairs provision to be considered by Ofcom and the Content Board moving forward:

- The audit revealed that there remains a wide range of current affairs programming. However, in the future it will be important to continue to assess the breadth of current affairs programming in peak, as some sub-genres (e.g. economic and political programming) tend to be broadcast during the day or later in the evening
- After consideration viewers tended to define current affairs programming quite widely citing examples such as *Have I Got News for You* and *Jamie's School Dinners* as programmes that they felt had current affairs values. Ofcom's new genre tracker allows for cross genre programming and therefore will enable such programming to have both a primary classification and a secondary classification. This will more accurately reflect the range of programming with current affairs elements or values
- Post Digital Switchover (DSO) will the current requirements for impartiality remain valid? The issue of impartiality will also be considered in Ofcom's project on the Future of News
- How far can/will ITV's non network current affairs output be sustainable during and after DSO? In terms of plurality - would it be acceptable for the BBC to be the only significant provider of non network current affairs should ITV's contribution become unsustainable in future?
- Post DSO will there be more of an imperative for current affairs/political coverage in the devolved Nations than in the regions?
- Will there be other potential sources of plurality of current affairs and regional/national current affairs in the future? For example via on-line provision or Local TV?
- Is the range of current affairs in the English regions so wide that some output is not true current affairs? Or does this wide range reflect the fact that audiences consider a wide range of programmes to be current affairs?

Section 2

Current Affairs – The Network Content Analysis

- 2.1 This section summarises the key findings of the network current affairs audit, in the following areas:
- a) The **volume** of current affairs programming on the network terrestrial broadcasters
 - b) The **range** of formats and subject matter
 - c) The **scheduling** of current affairs programmes
 - d) The **audience** share

Methodology

- 2.2 A content analysis was conducted of current affairs programming transmitted by the terrestrial public service broadcasters in the six month period from 1 July 2005 to 31 December 2005.
- 2.3 The data utilized for this analysis was sourced either from the broadcasters (volume data supplied by the Public Service Broadcasters in their regular returns to Ofcom), by BARB (audience data) or generated by Ofcom (relating to the scheduling, format and range of programming). This data has been collated and analysed to provide a thorough overview of the amount of current affairs programming broadcast by the terrestrial PSBs during this period as well as an in depth understanding of the scheduling, format and range of subject matter that comprises current affairs programming.
- 2.4 Among the features analysed were:
- The **scheduling** of the programme: chiefly whether it was broadcast in peak or out of peak
 - The **format** of the programme. The genre was divided into the following formats: discussion and debate, interview, filmed narrative, investigative, studio news/politics, and 'blue light' (police/emergency services) programming
 - The **subject** of the programme: whether it dealt with politics, social affairs, international current affairs, economics and business or other parts of the news agenda

Legislative Requirements

- 2.5 The Communications Act 2003 sets out the following requirements for current affairs programming on the public service broadcasters:
- News programmes and current affairs programmes should account for an appropriate proportion of the schedule (as determined by Ofcom)

- The current affairs programmes included in the service should be of high quality and deal with both national and international matters
- The programmes should be scheduled in what appears to Ofcom to be an appropriate manner between peak viewing and other times

Current Affairs Network Quotas

2.6 Current Affairs is one of the few remaining genres in which the public service broadcasters have to fulfill numerical quotas. The average weekly quotas for the terrestrial broadcasters are laid out in the table below:

Broadcaster	Quota - All Time Weekly Averages (Hours: Mins)	Quota - Peak Time Weekly Averages (Hours: Mins)
BBC One/BBC Two	7:00	2:00
ITV1	1:30	0:42
Channel 4	4:00	1:30
Five	2:30	0:12

Purposes and Characteristics of PSB Current Affairs Programming

2.7 Ofcom's Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting (the PSB Review) defined the purposes and characteristics of public service broadcasting. The most relevant of these to the genre of current affairs is:

To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas through programming that is: high quality, original, innovative and challenging

Historical Trends

2.8 As part of the current affairs analysis Ofcom conducted a review of previous research into the genre. Major recent publications in this field include: *New News, Old News* (Ian Hargreaves and James Thomas, October 2002), *A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South: changing trends in British Television: A case study of Drama and Current Affairs* (Steve Barnett and Emily Seymour, 1999) and the analysis and practitioner interviews undertaken for the first phase of Ofcom's PSB Review (in 2004).

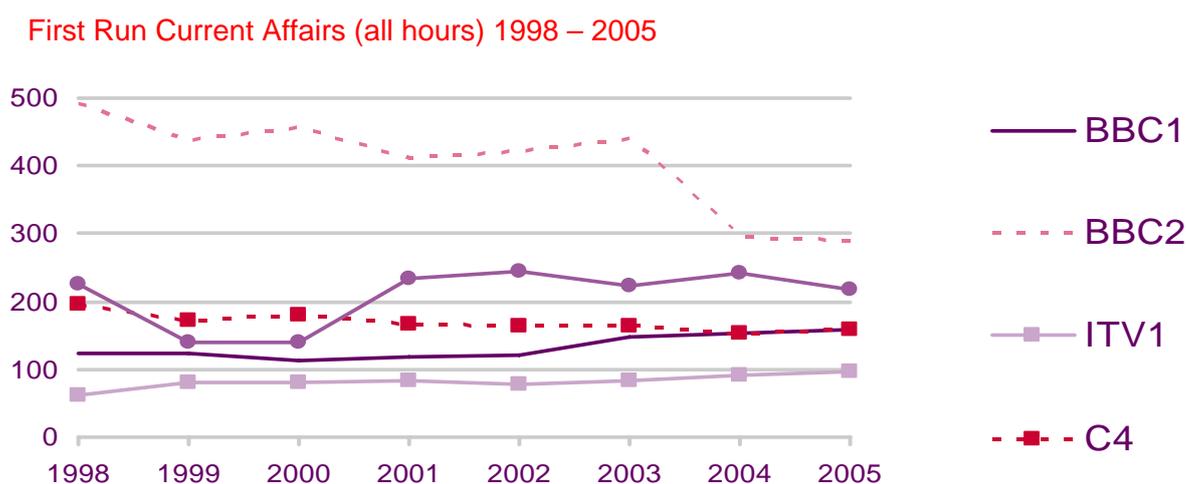
2.9 Two main trends were highlighted by this research: a gradual decline in some types of current affairs programming and a sharp decrease in audiences for current affairs programmes. *New News, Old News* stated that "current affairs seems to have lost its place as regular appointment to view television".

2.10 According to *A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South* current affairs is a genre in "crisis and possibly in terminal decline". In the period assessed by Ofcom's PSB Review (1998-2002) the total output of current affairs across the five main channels rose from 24.4 hours a week to 26.0 hours. However, within peak time (18:00 to 22:30)

there was a decline in volume from 6.4 to 4.8 hours per week, and current affairs programmes were perceived as being pushed to the edges of the schedule. The interview programme conducted for the PSB Review confirmed that programme makers and commissioners felt that the genre was under extreme pressure in the multichannel environment.

- 2.11 Within this context *A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South* highlighted the types of current affairs programming that were viewed to be most under threat - foreign affairs coverage, political programming and economics based current affairs. This research suggested that 'softer' current affairs programming tackling issues such as consumer affairs and crime was increasing at the expense of the 'harder' subject matter traditionally considered to be core current affairs programming.
- 2.12 However, recently a more optimistic picture of current affairs programming has been painted. Most notably by David Lloyd, Professor of Television Journalism at City University whose inaugural lecture heralded 'a return of current affairs' facilitated in part by new digital technology.
- 2.13 One of the goals of the current affairs audit, therefore, was to establish whether these trends were evident in the six months analysed.

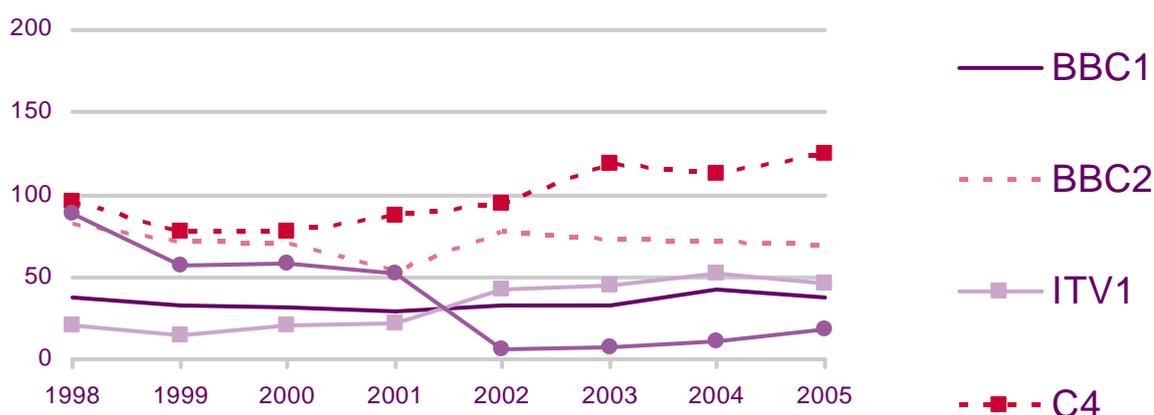
Volume of Current Affairs



Source: Ofcom – data provided by Broadcasters

- 2.14 Analysis of the output of current affairs from 1998 – 2005 indicates that:
- There has been an increase in the volume of current affairs programming on BBC One and ITV1
 - Since 2001 the amount of current affairs output has remained fairly stable on Channel 4 and Five
 - The decrease in the volume of current affairs programming on BBC Two is accounted for by the reclassification of some output as news or politics

First Run Current Affairs (peak hours) 1998 - 2005



Source: Ofcom – data provided by Broadcasters

2.15 Analysis of the historic trends in peak time current affairs indicates that:

- There has been a significant increase in the amount of current affairs programming shown on Channel 4 in peak time rising from 77 hours playing in peak in 2000 to 125 hours in 2005. In 2005 79% of Channel 4's current affairs output was transmitted in peak whereas less than 50% of the channel's current affairs output was broadcast in peak in 2000
- There has been an increase in peak time current affairs programming on ITV1, largely accounted for by the fact that *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* has been transmitted twice a week at 20:00 since 2002
- The decrease in Five's peak time current affairs output is due to a change agreed with Ofcom. Prior to 2002 a segment of Five's news was classified as current affairs
- The proportion of current affairs programming transmitted in peak has remained relatively steady on BBC One and BBC Two - at around 30% and 20% respectively

The Audit Findings - Volume

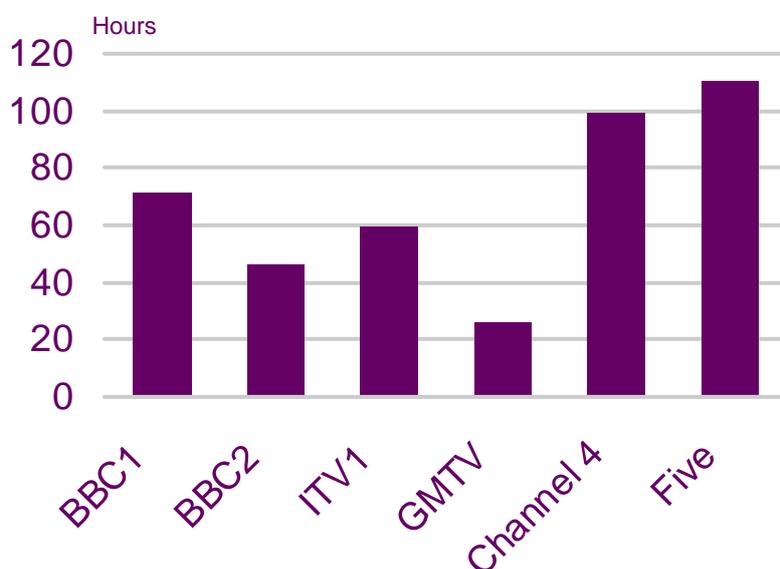
2005 Current Affairs Programming – Weekly Averages

2.16 The table below illustrates the weekly averages achieved by the public service broadcasters in 2005 against their quotas. The broadcasters all met or exceeded their targets.

Broadcaster	All Time Quota (Hours: Mins)	All Time Achieved 2005 (Hours: Mins)	Peak Time Quota (Hours: Mins)	Peak Time Achieved 2005 (Hours: Mins)
BBC One/BBC Two	7:00	8:18	2:00	2:06
ITV1	1:30	1:48	0:42	0:54
Channel 4	4:00	4:06	1:30	2:24
Five	2:30	4:48	0:12	0:18

Current Affairs Output 1 July 2005 to 31 December 2005

2.17 The chart below shows the volume of output broadcast by the PSBs during the period of the audit.



Source: Ofcom – data provided by Broadcasters

2.18 According to the broadcasters' data returns to Ofcom a total of 387 hours of current affairs programming was transmitted during the period of the audit. This figure rises to 553 hours if BBC programmes classified by the broadcaster as news or politics (*Newsnight*, *Sunday AM*, *The Daily Politics*) are included.

2.19 Over the period of the audit BBC One broadcast 71 hours of current affairs programming (17 hours in peak), BBC Two broadcast 46 hours (39 in peak), ITV1 broadcast 59 hours (20 in peak), Channel 4 broadcast 99 hours (58 in peak) and Five broadcast 110 hours (11 in peak).

BBC One

2.20 Over the period of the audit BBC One broadcast 71 hours of current affairs programming of which 17 hours were in peak time (not including *Sunday AM* and the *Daily Politics*). BBC One's flagship current affairs strand *Panorama* is normally transmitted late on Sunday evenings. However, between July and December 2005 there were two *Panorama* specials (*Undercover Hospital Cleaner* and *Undercover Nurse*) which were broadcast at 19:00 and 21:00 on Wednesday evening respectively.

2.21 BBC One's primary peak time current affairs programming during this period was *Real Story with Fiona Bruce* at 19:30 on Mondays.

2.22 Other BBC current affairs during the period of the audit included: *Question Time*, *This Week*, *The Daily Politics*, *Should I Worry About*, *Sunday AM* and *Bunking Off*.

BBC Two

2.23 Between July and December 2005 BBC Two broadcast 46 hours of programming which it classified as current affairs. This does not include *Newsnight* and *The Daily Politics* which, as noted above, are returned by the BBC as news or politics.

- 2.24 The main current affairs series on BBC Two during this period were the international affairs strand *This World* and the business series *The Money Programme*. There were also a number of short series or single documentaries. These included: *Children of Beslan*, *Israel and the Arabs* and *How Euro Are You*.

ITV1

- 2.25 In the six month period of the audit ITV1 broadcast 59 hours of current affairs programming, including 20 hours in peak time. GMTV broadcast an additional 26 hours of the current affairs series *The Sunday Programme*.
- 2.26 ITV1's flagship current affairs series is *Tonight With Trevor McDonald* which is broadcast at 20:00 on Mondays and Fridays. Other current affairs programmes in the period of the audit include *Jonathan Dimbleby* and *999 Frontline*.

Channel 4

- 2.27 Between July and December 2005 Channel 4 broadcast 99 hours of current affairs, including 58 in peak.
- 2.28 Channel 4's output during this period included its key current affairs strand *Dispatches*, the international affairs series *Unreported World*, the political interview programme *Morgan and Platell* as well as a number of series and one off programmes including *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber* and *Gaza: The Fight for Israel*.

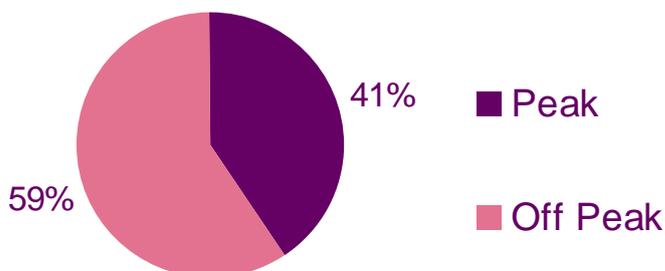
Five

- 2.29 In the period of the audit Five broadcast 110 hours of current affairs programming, including 11 hours in peak.
- 2.30 The overwhelming majority of Five's current affairs output comprises the daily talk show *The Wright Stuff*. Peak time current affairs programming during the period of the audit included *McIntyre's Big Sting* and the polemical series *Don't Get Me Started*.

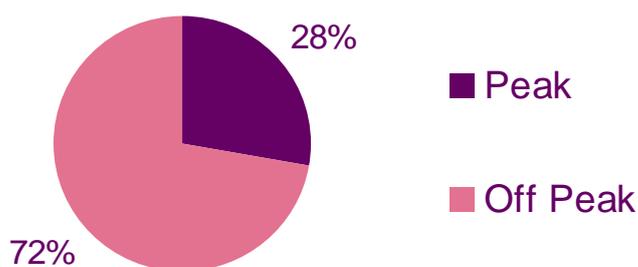
Scheduling

Proportion of Current Affairs Programming Transmitted in Peak 1 July 2005 to 31 December 2005

Current Affairs (excluding all news programming)



Current Affairs (including relevant news programming)



Source: Ofcom – data provided by Broadcasters

Key Findings

- 41% of current affairs programming in this period was transmitted in peak time
- This figure excludes some BBC programming - such as *Newsnight*, *Sunday AM* and *The Daily Politics* which are classified by the BBC as news or politics even though they contain some current affairs style analysis. If these programmes are included then the proportion of output that played in peak during the audit decreases to 28%
- Some of the main current affairs series transmitted in peak time during the audit were: *Real Story with Fiona Bruce* (BBC1), *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* (ITV1) and *Dispatches* (Channel 4)
- A key finding of the audit was that the amount of current affairs programming shown in peak on Channel 4 has increased significantly over the last few years. During the period more than 50% of Channel 4's current affairs output was transmitted in peak viewing time. This included the majority of Channel 4's

flagship current affairs strand *Dispatches*, the international series *Unreported World*, the political interview programming *Morgan and Platell* as well as a number of specials such as *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber*

- ITV1's peak time current affairs predominately comprised the twice weekly programme *Tonight With Trevor McDonald*
- Since 2000 *Panorama* has moved to a late Sunday evening slot with most of the strand therefore falling outside peak. During the period of the audit there were two *Panorama* specials transmitted in peak time. The majority of BBC1's peak time current affairs programming was made up of *Real Story with Fiona Bruce*
- As mentioned earlier, much of BBC2's political/news current affairs programming is transmitted outside of peak e.g. *Newsnight*, in a late evening slot, and *The Daily Politics*, shown at lunchtime during the week. However, a number of other current affairs shows were transmitted in peak. These included some episodes of the international strand *This World* as well as a run of the business series *The Money Programme* and the award winning special *Children of Beslan*
- It is evident that although a significant amount of current affairs programming is transmitted in peak time (particularly on Channel 4) a large proportion of this peak time current affairs comprises 'softer' more popular subjects such as social affairs. The majority of political programming is broadcast outside peak. One of the few dedicated political strands to be transmitted in peak time during the period of this audit was Channel 4's *Morgan and Platell*

Source of Current Affairs Programming

Key Findings

- The audit revealed a fairly even split between current affairs programming produced in house (47%) and programming produced by external producers (51%). These figures do not include the programmes that the BBC classifies as news/politics (e.g. *Newsnight* and *The Daily Politics*) which are predominantly produced in-house
- Unsurprisingly, due to the nature of current affairs programmes, only a very small proportion of the current affairs programming transmitted during the period of the audit was acquired from other broadcasters (2%)
- Of the BBC programmes returned as current affairs 87 hours were produced in house and 30 were produced externally. Much of the latter was accounted for by *Question Time*, produced by independent producer Mentorn
- The great majority of ITV1's programming was produced in house (52 hours) with only one hour commissioned from an external producer. In the period of the audit ITV1 acquired six hours of current affairs programming – the series *Frontline 999*
- Channel 4 commissioned 59 hours of current affairs programming from external producers. The remaining 40 hours comprised current affairs inserts in news programmes
- The vast majority (108 hours) of Five's current affairs output was commissioned programming. There was only one hour of acquired current affairs programming

Range Of Subject Matter

International Current Affairs

- 2.31 The Communications Act 2003 requires that current affairs output includes both national and international programmes. International current affairs is one of the areas that has been flagged up as 'at risk' by previous research into the genre. A *Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South* noted that BBC Two was increasingly becoming the sole purveyor of international current affairs.
- 2.32 Over the six month period of the audit 18% of the current affairs programmes analysed were considered to be 'international programming'. Programmes were categorised as international if they predominately covered an international issue or issues. Nearly all of the international programmes that qualified involved some overseas filming. (NB magazine style studio current affairs programmes have been excluded from this category as they overwhelmingly focus on a number of different topical issues which, depending on the news agenda, may include international issues).
- 2.33 The majority of international programmes during the period of the audit were broadcast by BBC Two or Channel 4. Much of this output formed part of their key international strands *This World* (BBC Two) and *Unreported World* (Channel 4). These strands featured a wide range of geographical locations. Examples include: a report on religious insurgency in Thailand, an investigation of child trafficking in India and an investigation into Iran's nuclear secrets.
- 2.34 Between 1 July 2005 and 31 December 2005 there were also a number of high profile single documentaries or short series on international affairs. For example, *Children of Beslan* (BBC Two) and *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber* (Channel 4).
- 2.35 The flagship current affairs strands on BBC One, Channel 4 and ITV1 primarily cover domestic issues. However, during the period of the audit some editions of *Panorama*, *Dispatches* and *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* also covered international matters. These included a *Dispatches* on the Beslan Siege, a *Panorama* report on the situation in Darfur and a *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* investigation into crime affecting British expatriates and tourists in Spain.
- 2.36 Other current affairs series also covered international issues, for example *The Money Programme* on BBC Two.
- 2.37 In terms of the range of subject matter, international coverage was dominated by the war in Iraq and Al Qaeda. However the audit revealed current affairs programmes on a range of locations and issues. Countries covered in the six months of the audit include: Spain, Russia, Thailand, India, Somalia, Israel and Colombia.

Range Of Domestic Current Affairs

- 2.38 Domestic current affairs output included a range of subject matter. To assess the range of programming in the period of the audit current affairs programming was divided into six core categories. These are defined below:
- Social Affairs - programmes on social institutions or societal matters e.g. the NHS, the royal family, housing

- Politics - programmes predominantly on political issues that usually feature contributions from politicians
 - Economics or Business - programmes on financial issues
 - Topical News - series such as *Newsnight* that follow a news agenda
 - Channel 4 News - sections of the Channel 4 News programmes classified as current affairs
- 2.39 The audit revealed that around one third of the current affairs output from 1 July 2005 to 31 December 2005 tackled 'social affairs'. This included programmes on a wide range of issues including: the London Bombings, Bird Flu, ASBOs and the changes to the licensing laws. Programmes on social issues featured a number of institutions including: the NHS, the Post Office, schools, the Church of England and the Royal Family.
- 2.40 31% of the output was dedicated politics programming. The majority of this was made up of long running out of peak strands such as: *The Daily Politics*, *Sunday AM* and *The Sunday Programme*.
- 2.41 5% of programming was a combination of politics and social affairs.
- 2.42 Only a very small amount of the output during this period (3%) was dedicated economics/business current affairs. This included a series of *The Money Programme* (BBC Two) and programmes in some of the flagship current affairs strands e.g. *Brown's Miracle Economy* (*Panorama*, BBC One) and *Gordon Brown's Missing Billions* (*Dispatches*, Channel 4).
- 2.43 A further 22% of the output comprised *Newsnight* and 6% was made up of *Channel 4 News*.
- 2.44 The majority of the political programming was broadcast on BBC Two. Channel 4 also broadcast a peak time political interview series (*Morgan and Platell*). Other political series included *Jonathan Dimbleby* (ITV1) and *Question Time* (BBC One). Once again individual programmes within the key strands also featured occasional political episodes (e.g. *Panorama's Blair v Blair*).

Range Of Formats

- 2.45 The audit also examined the different formats that make up current affairs programming.

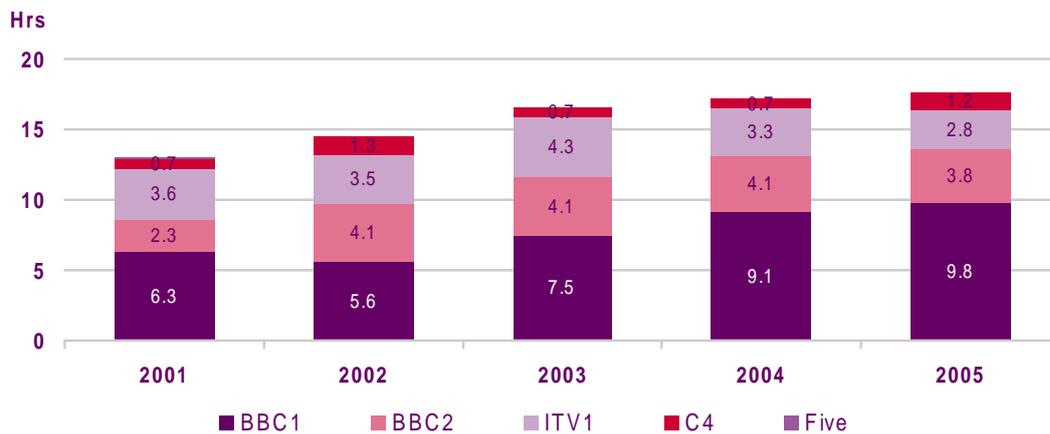
Key Findings

- Filmed narrative (i.e. documentary style programmes) accounted for just over a quarter of all current affairs programmes in this period. Flagship strands such as *Panorama*, *Tonight With Trevor McDonald* and *Dispatches* were predominantly filmed narrative programmes although there were a number of exceptions such as the *Panorama* debate on the war in Iraq
- Another quarter of the output was made up of filmed studio politics/news (programming predominantly studio based although this programming might also include filmed inserts)

- 27% of the output was classified as ‘talk’. This was accounted for by Five’s *The Wright Stuff* broadcast every weekday morning
- Discussion and Debate and Interview formats together made up a further 14% of the output
- Only a very small minority (2%) of the output during the period of the audit was accounted for by polemical programmes. This included the Five series *Don’t Get Me Started*
- Despite anecdotal reports that undercover programming is becoming increasingly common, investigative programming (including undercover investigations) only comprised 5% of the output. However, a number of these were high profile investigations including two *Panorama* specials shown in peak time (*Undercover Hospital Cleaner* and *Undercover Nurse*) as well as *MacIntyre’s Big Sting* on Five

The Current Affairs Audience

Total yearly hrs viewed of PSB Current Affairs (Political/Economical/Social)



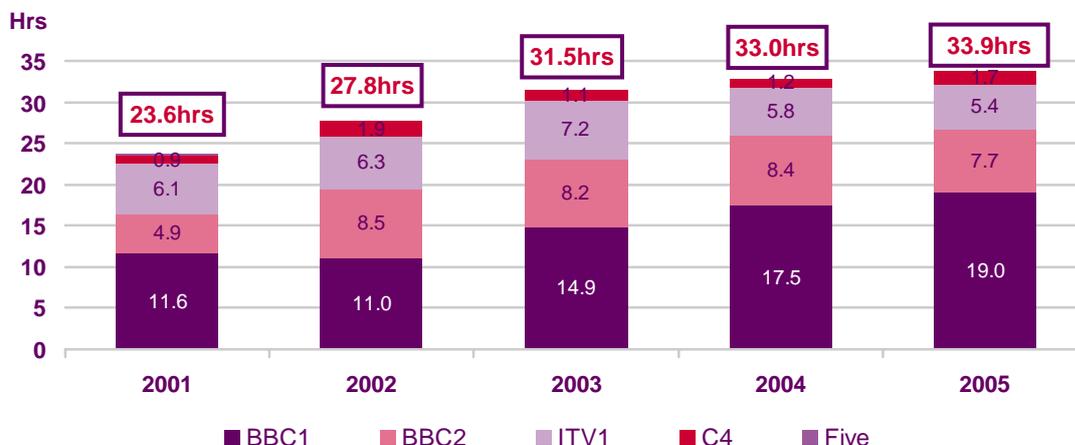
Source: BARB, Network, All hrs, Mon-Sun, Total hrs, individuals

Note : Five output *The Wright Stuff* classified by BARB as entertainment and *MacIntyre’s Big Sting* as Documentary

2.46 Perhaps surprisingly, considering previous research that indicated that current affairs was losing viewers, BARB data on the total yearly hours viewed of PSB current affairs (political/economical/social) revealed that the total hours of viewing of current affairs programming per annum has actually increased from 13 hours in 2001 to 17.06 in 2005. This increase in total hours viewed per annum may reflect the rise in the amount of current affairs programming scheduled on BBC1

Adults aged 55+

Total yearly hrs viewed of PSB Current Affairs (Political/Economical/Social)



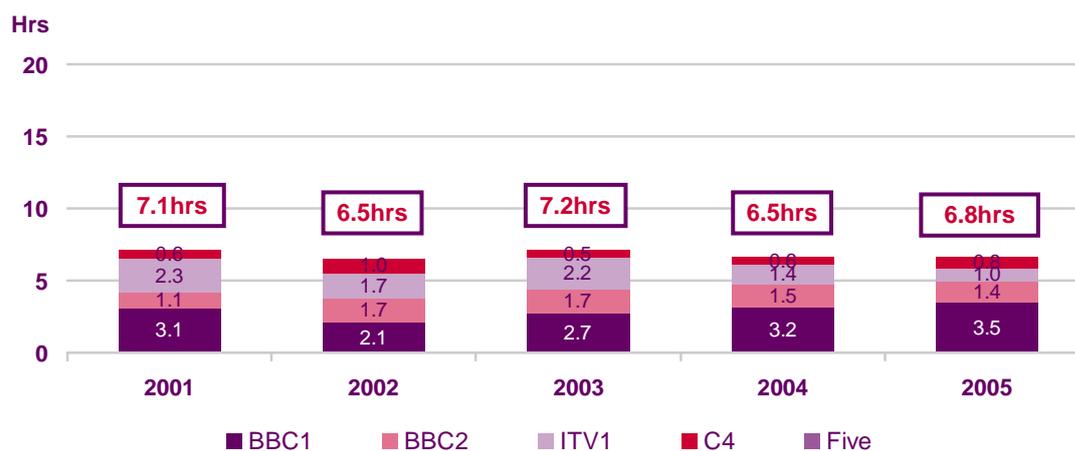
Source: BARB, Network, All hrs, Mon-Sun, Total hrs, Adults 55+

Note : Five output **The Wright Stuff** classified by BARB as entertainment and **MacIntyre's Big Sting** as Documentary

2.47 Breaking this data down reveals that the largest increase in total yearly hours viewed occurs amongst older viewers (age 55+). This age group's total hours viewed per year increased by just over 10 hours from 23.6 hours in 2001 to 33.9 hours in 2005. This increase is largely accounted for by an increase in the amount of hours viewed by this age group on BBC1 – rising from 11.6 hours in 2001 to 19.0 hours in 2005.

Adults aged 16-24

Total yearly hrs viewed of PSB Current Affairs (Political/Economical/Social)



Source: BARB, Network, All hrs, Mon-Sun, Total hrs, Adults 16-24

Note : Five output **The Wright Stuff** classified by BARB as entertainment and **MacIntyre's Big Sting** as Documentary

- 2.48 The only age group that decreased its total yearly hours viewed between 2001 and 2005 is the 16-24 age group whose hours of viewing fell slightly from a peak of 7.2 hours in 2003 to 6.8 hours in 2005. However, over five years the total amount viewed by 16- 24 year olds has remained relatively steady.
- 2.49 The reach of current affairs has also increased gradually (all day and peak time)

Conclusions

- 2.50 There has been an increase in volume of current affairs programming on BBC1 and ITV1. Output has remained fairly stable on Channel 4 and Five.
- 2.51 There has been a significant increase in the amount of current affairs shown in peak time on Channel 4.
- 2.52 Current affairs programming comprises a range of subjects. The majority of international affairs programming is transmitted by BBC Two and Channel 4. Much of the dedicated political programming is transmitted in the outer reaches of the schedule during the day or late in the evening.
- 2.53 There has been an increase in the audience for current affairs and a gradual increase in the reach.

Section 3

Current Affairs – The Nations and Regions Content Analysis

Overview

- 3.1 The focus of this section is the non network output broadcast by ITV1, the BBC (including Gaelic output, some of which is funded by the Gaelic Media Association) and S4C, for local consumption in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions.
- 3.2 The Nations and Regions audit analysed data provided to Ofcom by the broadcasters, both as part of their routine annual reporting and following a special request for more detailed information. Ofcom colleagues in the Nations and regions viewed and analysed a wide and representative range of programmes as part of the audit.
- 3.3 Ofcom's audit of current affairs in the Nations and regions covered the period between 1 July and 31 December 2005 and looked at:
 - a) The **volume** of non network current affairs
 - b) The **range** of formats and subject matter
 - c) The **scheduling** of non network current affairs programmes

Key findings

Volume

- There was a significantly higher volume of current affairs output in the Nations than in each of the English regions
- The BBC was the largest provider of non network current affairs in the Nations, with ITV the largest provider in the English regions
- Welsh language output, broadcast by S4C, accounted for a third of non network current affairs output in Wales

Range

- In the Nations politics and coverage of the Welsh Assembly/Scottish Parliament dominated, accounting for 63% of non network current affairs output, followed by filmed current affairs, accounting for 29%
- In England filmed current affairs was the most common format, accounting for 38% of non network output, followed by "blue light" series following the emergency services, accounting for 28%, and politics, accounting for 21%

- “Filmed current affairs” included a wide range of formats and subjects, such as hard hitting investigations, under cover programming, human interest/documentary style output, and social affairs/social action programmes
- The range of subject matter was particularly wide in the English regions, with the Nations much less likely to return features or fly on the wall documentary style programmes as current affairs

Scheduling

- 65% of non network current affairs was broadcast in peak or near peak in the English regions
- In the Nations 47% of current affairs was broadcast in peak or near peak, reflecting the higher overall volume of non network current affairs in the Nations and in particular the live, daytime coverage of National politics

The Formal Requirements

3.4 The formal requirements for the PSBs relating to non network current affairs are set out in the table below:

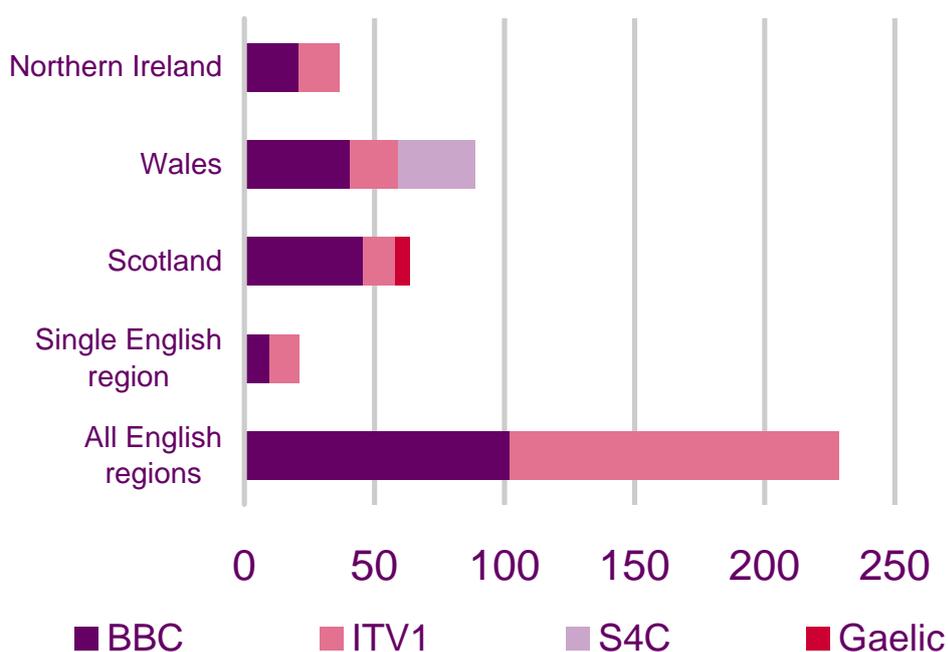
ITV	BBC	S4C
English regions - 26 minutes per week *	No formal non network genre quotas except for regional news	30 hours per year in peak
Scotland – 33 minutes per week shared between Scottish and Grampian	But a requirement for Nations and Regions programming to represent a range of genres	60 hours per year in total
Wales – 47 minutes per week		
Northern Ireland – 26 minutes per week		

* the smaller ITV regions – Border and Channel – have lower current affairs requirements reflecting their size

The Findings - Volume

The chart below shows the amount of current affairs produced in the Nations and in the regions of England during the second half of 2005.

Hours of non network current affairs output



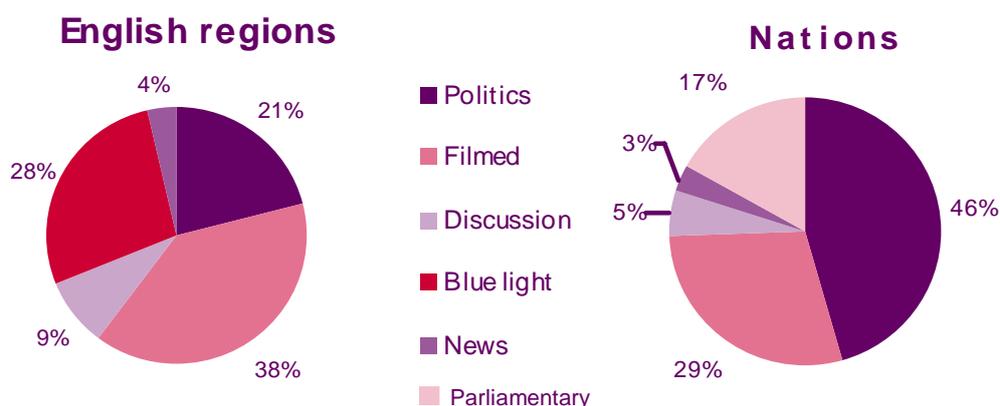
Source: Ofcom output audit

- 3.5 In line with the broader agenda that comes with their Nation status, there was a considerably higher level of current affairs output in the Nations than in the English regions, with 88.5 hours in Wales (including Welsh language output on S4C), 63.5 hours in Scotland (including Gaelic output) and 36.5 hours in Northern Ireland, along side an average of 21 hours in each English region during the audit period.
- 3.6 Across the UK the BBC broadcast 214 hours of non network current affairs programmes (including 5.5 hours of Gaelic output), Channel 3/ITV1 173 hours, and S4C 29.5 hours between July and December 2005. The BBC was the largest provider across the UK and in each of the three Nations during the audit period. ITV was the largest provider in the English regions. S4C's Welsh language output, supplied by the BBC, ITV and a number of independent producers, accounted for a third of non network current affairs output in Wales.
- 3.7 All of the Channel 3 Nations and Regions fulfilled their requirements for current affairs in 2005.

Range of Format and Subject Matter

- 3.8 The chart below shows the range of current affairs produced in the English regions and in the Nations during the audit period.

Range of non network current affairs



Source : Ofcom output audit

* Notes - Parliamentary includes coverage of the Welsh National Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. News denotes "news specials" or other news derived programming outside regional news programmes

Key findings

- Filmed current affairs was the most common format in the English regions, accounting for 38% of English non network current affairs programming
- Filmed current affairs was also a significant genre in the Nations, accounting for 29% of National current affairs output
- Political and Parliamentary programming dominated in the Nations, accounting for 63% of current affairs output in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Politics accounted for 21% of English regional output
- "Blue light" series following the emergency services accounted for 28% of output in the English regions, making this the second most common current affairs format in England. There was little evidence of blue light current affairs programming in the Nations during the audit
- In the arena of Welsh language current affairs, political programmes accounted for around a quarter of S4C's current affairs output, with filmed current affairs being the most common format. A significant proportion of S4C's current affairs output – including politics – was supplied by the BBC, with further output sourced from ITV Wales and independent producers in Wales
- In Gaelic current affairs programming there was a mixture of filmed current affairs and studio debate
- A wide range of subjects were covered in the Nations and regions. This was particularly evident in the English regions where the range between "hard" and "soft" subjects and treatments was very broad. In the Nations the audit found much less evidence of softer feature style current affairs programming, with more emphasis on harder topics and treatments

Filmed Current Affairs

- 3.9 A wide range of subjects was tackled within the filmed current affairs sub genre. There was a similarly wide range of treatments, from investigations and under cover programmes to output with a more documentary/features style, the latter particularly in the English regions.
- 3.10 The BBC's English regional strand, *Inside Out*, for example, included investigations into the Spanish property market and the reliability of mobile speed cameras alongside features-style pieces taking a "look at life" approach to subjects such as the paranormal and the demise of the transport café.
- 3.11 The range of subjects and styles was equally apparent in Channel 3's filmed current affairs output and varied from traditional in depth investigations into subjects such as nuclear waste dumping and aircraft safety, through treatments of issue based topics such as housing and roads, to features-style histories of ITV plc and social action style programming.
- 3.12 As noted above, filmed current affairs in the Nations was less likely to tackle "softer" topics, with the BBC's *Frontline Scotland*, covering subjects such as equal pay and teenage binge drinking, UTV's *Insight*, looking at, for example, post traumatic stress disorder and the future of Loyalist paramilitaries, and ITV Wales' *Wales This Week*, tackling issues such as e-coli and counterfeit goods.
- 3.13 It is worth noting that some output that might have been classified as current affairs in the English regions, such as ITV Wales' *The Ferret* (consumer affairs) and Scottish Television's *Unsolved* series, looking at unsolved murder cases, was not classified as current affairs by broadcasters in the Nations.
- 3.14 A significant proportion of non network filmed current affairs took the form of established strands, such as BBC 1's *Inside Out*, ITV Meridian's *Focus* and S4C's *Y Byd ar Bedwar* (The World on Four), where a range of subjects are tackled under a single umbrella.
- 3.15 However, some Nations and Regions also produced series with a particular focus on a single topic. For example, ITV Yorkshire's *Xposed* revealing undesirable practices via undercover filming, Granada's *On The Edge*, looking at social exclusion, and S4C's *Ffermio* (farming) series.
- 3.16 Very few one off filmed current affairs programmes were produced during the audit period with Tyne Tees' *Babyshock!* and BBC East's *VJ Day East* proving relative rarities in the regional schedule.
- 3.17 In England some ITV regions classified programmes marking ITV's 50th anniversary and social action style programmes as current affairs. This type of output accounted for just under 5% of non network current affairs output in England.

Politics

- 3.18 Unsurprisingly, coverage of politics and of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly accounted for a significantly higher proportion of non network current affairs in the Nations than in the English regions, with politics representing almost two thirds of non network current affairs in the Nations and around a fifth of output in the regions of England during the audit period.

- 3.19 The BBC broadcast live daytime programmes covering the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly, accounting for 17% of non network current affairs output in the Nations. Coverage of the Welsh National Assembly on S4C's digital channels was not included in the audit, as was the case with BBC Parliament across the UK. But clearly this output contributes significantly to the availability of political current affairs programming in Wales.
- 3.20 Viewers in the Nations were also served by a variety of weekly political programmes such as SMG's *Politics Now*, BBC Northern Ireland's *Hearts and Minds* and S4C's *Manifesto*. Both ITV and the BBC also provided regular political coverage in the English regions during the audit period, although – perhaps inevitably - politics played outside peak in England. In the Nations, however, there were a number of examples of political programmes broadcast in peak and near peak, such as the BBC's *Politics Scotland* (19:30) and BBC Wales' *Dragon's Eye* (22:35).
- 3.21 Political formats in the Nations and regions tended to be studio based, with filmed inserts and live links, and usually followed the tried and tested pattern of combining comment and analysis from political correspondents with political interviews.
- 3.22 A notable exception in England was ITV Westcountry, which produced location based political programming with a particular focus on environmental issues.
- 3.23 There was also some evidence of a greater range of political programming in the Nations. Here, traditional "straight" political output was complemented by political programmes with a more adversarial style, including *Question Time* type discussions, and – in the case of ITV Wales - a political awards ceremony which injected some humour into the political programming sphere.

Blue Light Programmes

- 3.24 The "blue light" format, following the emergency services fly on the wall style, has established itself as a regular feature of ITV1's late evening regional current affairs schedule in England over the last few years.
- 3.25 During the audit period blue light programming accounted for 28% of non network current affairs output in the English regions. Series were broadly fly on the wall documentary in style, with most including some analysis of events and commentary placing incidents into a political/public policy context. There was little evidence of blue light current affairs programming in the Nations.

Discussion Programmes

- 3.26 Studio based discussion programmes, some of which included location reports, accounted for 9% of English regional output and 5% of current affairs output in the Nations.
- 3.27 As with filmed current affairs, a wide range of subjects were covered, from the right to roam (ITV Wales' *On the Edge*), to the development of controversial high rise buildings (Channel Television), and from the hunting debate to the rise of the TV dinner (ITV's *Central Extra*).

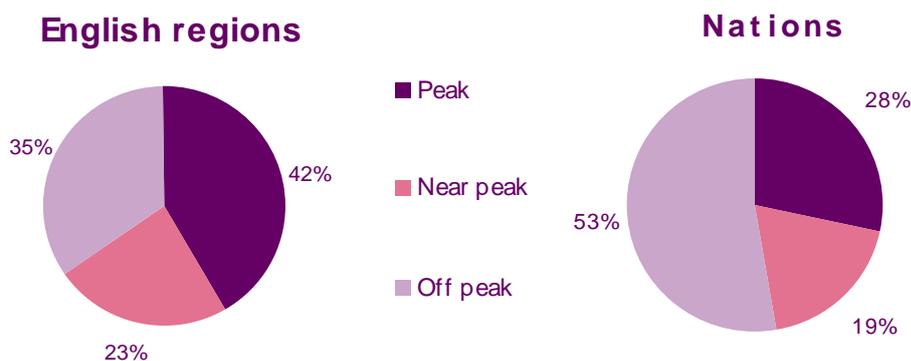
International Output in the Nations and Regions

3.28 The audit found that non network current affairs programmes are not necessarily confined to domestic matters. Examples of non network international coverage during the audit period include BBC 1's *Inside Out Pakistan Earthquake Specials*, ITV Westcountry's *East Meets Westcountry*, examining the local consequences of EU expansion, ITV Central's *Central Extra* programmes about Iraq and the Pakistan Earthquake, and the Gaelic series *Eorpa*, exploring European issues such as the aftermath of the Beslan siege and bird flu in the Netherlands.

Scheduling

3.29 The chart below shows the proportion of non network current affairs that was scheduled in peak (18:00 – 22:30), near peak (one hour each side of peak) and outside peak in the English regions and in the Nations during the audit period. Near peak is included as Channel 3 licensees are required to schedule a proportion of their non news programming in near peak.

Scheduling of non network current affairs



Source : Ofcom output audit

3.30 The proportion of output that was scheduled in peak in the English regions was relatively high, at 42%, with a further 23% of programmes scheduled in near peak.

3.31 Reflecting the higher overall volumes of current affairs in the Nations and the fact that this output included live daytime coverage of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly, the proportion of current affairs scheduled in peak in the Nations was 28%.

3.32 Politics tended to be scheduled outside peak, particularly in the English regions, although as noted above there were some examples of political programmes in the Nations that were scheduled in peak or near peak.

3.33 Filmed current affairs and topical discussion programmes were more likely to be scheduled in peak than politics, with 19:30 the most common peak time slot on the BBC and Channel 3 and 20:30 a popular slot for Welsh language current affairs on S4C.

3.34 During the audit period all of the 5.5 hours of Gaelic current affairs programming on the BBC were scheduled in peak.

- 3.35 In the Nations there were a number of examples of current affairs programmes opting out of the network, such as BBC Wales' *Dragon's Eye* which displaced *Question Time* by half an hour in Wales. This trend has continued into 2006 with ITV Wales and UTV both opting out of *Tonight with Trevor McDonald* with bespoke National current affairs programming.

Conclusions

- 3.36 The audit found that there was a higher volume of current affairs in the Nations than in the regions of England, with the BBC the main provider. ITV continued to provide the highest volume of current affairs output in the English regions.
- 3.37 Politics was the main type of non network current affairs in the Nations. While political programming was also a key feature in the English regions it was less dominant and played outside peak.
- 3.38 Filmed current affairs, including investigations, made up a significant proportion of non network current affairs output during the audit. A wide range of subject matter was covered in the nations and regions, but with the English regions particularly likely to include softer subjects and treatments.
- 3.39 In terms of scheduling 65% of non network current affairs was scheduled in peak or near peak in the English regions, while almost half of the output in the nations was scheduled in peak or near peak.

Section 4

Current Affairs – Qualitative Viewer Research

Overview

- 4.1 This section summarises the qualitative audience research conducted by Ofcom in advance of the current affairs symposium on the 28th March 2006.
- 4.2 The goal of this research was to inform Ofcom about what viewers thought of the public service broadcasters' delivery of current affairs and to inform discussion at the symposium. The fieldwork for this research took place in December 2005 and January 2006 and the particular topics that were prominent at the time were: binge drinking and the change to 24 hour licensing, bird flu, ASBOs, and pensions.
- 4.3 The key findings of the research were presented at the Ofcom current affairs symposium.
- 4.4 The research was designed by Ofcom colleagues in conjunction with an advisory panel. The advisory panel comprised current affairs experts in broadcasting, production and academia.
- 4.5 The panel members were¹: Jeff Anderson (Editor, *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*), Dorothy Byrne (Head of News and Current Affairs, Channel 4), Professor John Corner (Liverpool University), Pam Giddy (Ofcom Content Board), Professor Brian McNair (University of Strathclyde), Mike Robinson (Editor, *Panorama*), Samir Shah (CEO, Juniper TV) and Chris Shaw (Senior Programme Controller, News, Current Affairs & Documentaries, Five).
- 4.6 Some of the key questions that were posed by this research were:
 - What is 'current affairs'? Viewer definitions
 - What are viewers' motivations for watching current affairs programming?
 - What kinds of content/format/tones do viewers prefer?
 - What do viewers think about balance and impartiality?
 - What is the future of current affairs on television? What impact will new media/technology have?

Methodology

- 4.7 The research was conducted by TWResearch. Twelve focus groups were held in six locations across the UK. Focus groups were held in each of the Nations and in some regions of England, and included a diverse range of people in terms of gender, age and socio-economic group.

¹ Roles at the time the Current Affairs Panel was convened.

- 4.8 The research specifically concentrated on viewers of current affairs in order to gather views from people who were to some extent familiar with these types of programme. These were divided into two categories:
- Regular Viewers – who had watched two or more named current affairs strands in the last three weeks
 - Light viewers – who had watched one named current affairs strand in the last three weeks

Key Findings

What is current affairs?

- 4.9 The research found that in their initial ‘top of mind’ response viewers tend to define current affairs fairly narrowly, describing the genre as comprising quite serious ‘traditional’ programmes such as *Panorama* and *Question Time*. However, when people were asked to consider this further they offered a much more elastic definition of current affairs widening the genre to include any programmes that are topical or relevant to them.

- 4.10 Satirical commentary about current events was also included within the definition - one example offered in several of the focus groups was *Have I Got News for You*.

“I started off doing News and *Question Time*, then I thought well actually is something like *Have I Got News for You* current affairs? Although it’s jokey and funny, they do talk about what’s going on in the world” [35-44, Female, London]

- 4.11 Viewers did tend to blur the boundaries between news and current affairs programming during the research sessions.

- 4.12 Many respondents were surprised at the extent of current affairs programming in the schedules

“I was surprised at how many current affairs programmes were on during the day. I’d never heard of half of them” [25-33, Female, Newcastle].

Why do people watch current affairs?

- 4.13 The focus groups revealed a variety of reasons and motivations for watching current affairs programming. The most common of these were:

- An interest in a particular topic because it had a personal relevance (e.g. pensions)
- To appear knowledgeable and to be able to offer an opinion on topical issues and subjects.

- 4.14 Secondary motivations included:

- The desire to know information and to garner ‘extreme facts’ that they can pass on to others

- Out of voyeurism – particularly with certain types of current affairs programming e.g. programmes on binge drinking.
- 4.15 The research also revealed a range of reasons why current affairs might not be watched, including:
- Current affairs is not always planned viewing and often relies on a chance encounter or on seeing a trailer that sparks interest:

“If I see an advert for *Panorama* on TV and it looks good, I’ll definitely try to remember to watch it” [35-44, Male, Newcastle]
 - News bulletins contain increasing levels of analysis - this is sufficient for some viewers who will not seek further analysis in a current affairs programme
 - Television is a leisure activity and viewing current affairs programming has to fit into everyday life. Therefore domestic compromises occur.

Subjects and Treatments

Domestic and International Current Affairs

- 4.16 A key finding of the research was that it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ current affairs. Viewers tended to define current affairs as tackling ‘things that concern me’ and this definition is often equally relevant for programming on international subjects.
- 4.17 Viewers increasingly watch current affairs on international issues with a view to how it affects them. This can occur on many levels e.g. programmes on international terrorism or crime in holiday resorts.

Politics

- 4.18 There was an overall interest expressed in political current affairs. However, the focus groups also indicated frustration over the perceived emphasis of current affairs programmes on the *process* of politics and the theatre of Westminster.
- 4.19 It was also apparent that viewers find stalemate frustrating and lose interest in long running subjects that don’t appear to have a resolution. Examples given were the situation in Northern Ireland and the war in Iraq:

“What annoys me is that you don’t see any outcome of it. I think they’re always banging on about terrorism and I think that’s why I don’t watch it and I switch off...” [25-34, Female, Newcastle].
- 4.20 Some viewers perceive politicians as evasive which is why many liked the combative style of programmes such as *Newsnight* and *Question Time*:

“A lot of people watch *Newsnight* with Jeremy Paxman because of the way he probes and makes them squirm; you wait for it” [45-54, Male, Belfast].

Consumer issues and social affairs

There was an appreciation – particularly among female viewers - for programmes that tackled consumer issues and social affairs.

The Treatment of Current Affairs

- 4.21 Within the focus groups, viewers expressed a desire for programmes that achieve an outcome rather than just debating an issue. *Jamie's School Dinners* was offered as an example of a programme that was perceived to deliver a result:

“Like with *Jamie's School Dinners*, it's a good way of getting it across to people in an entertaining way and it achieved something and people like to see results. He actually went out and he changed something.” [35-44, Female, London].

- 4.22 It is apparent that treatment or style can encourage or discourage interest in a subject. As noted earlier, television is a leisure activity and viewers are looking to be entertained. The focus groups indicated that viewers liked programmes which engaged them and which they felt showed ‘the real story’. Undercover programmes were popular for this reason. One viewer claimed:

“With undercover programmes you see the real truth, not someone's point of view. The cameras show you what's really going on “[18 – 24, Female, Belfast].

Balance and Impartiality

- 4.23 In the focus groups opinion on ‘balanced’ versus ‘partial’ programming was divided. Older viewers (often more conservative males) preferred balanced programming whereas younger viewers were more accepting of partial programming.
- 4.24 The research indicates an overall desire for balance either within a programme or in the wider schedule. However, ‘traditional’ balanced current affairs programmes were not always seen as entertaining television.
- 4.25 Viewers also appreciated strong, polarised opinions e.g. programmes such as *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Many respondents felt that these types of programmes were able to show the real story and that as long as the polarity was made explicit, it was acceptable:

“But it's up to you to say well there's some good points there but he's terribly biased and Michael Moore is very against the government and opinionated but everyone knows that about him and he does come out with some good facts.” [35-44, Female, London].

The Future of Current Affairs

- 4.26 In a digital environment and with the advent of new technologies there are increasing numbers of television channels and different ways to receive content – not least the internet.
- 4.27 Viewers appear to be increasingly selective about where they source their ‘current affairs’. One trend is that there is less ‘masthead’ loyalty than previously (e.g. to a particular strand or broadcaster). The research showed that people select

information not on where it comes from but on the basis of what interests them and therefore they tend to mix and match their news and current affairs sources quite creatively.

“If you go to BBC online you can set it up to give you breaking news, it just comes up on the screen. Then if you want to know more, you can go to the site and drill down” [25-34 Male, London].

- 4.28 This new environment brings with it threats. Increased competition from multiple channels means that it is now far easier for a viewer to avoid current affairs programming than in the past. However, new technologies also lead to new opportunities. For example the PVR offers viewers the ability to capture and find current affairs in the schedule and watch it at a time which is convenient for them.
- 4.29 In addition, while portable devices might provide the breaking news, TV remains the province of longer-form, analytic overviews that people can find very valuable.

Section 5

Symposium on The Future of Current Affairs

Overview

- 5.1 This was the first of Ofcom's 'stakeholder symposia' on delivery of PSB objectives. The event took place on the 28 March 2006. The event was chaired by Roger Bolton (Chairman, Flame TV) and was attended by current affairs practitioners, academics and other stakeholders. A list of those who accepted an invitation to attend the seminar is included at the end of Section 5.
- 5.2 The days agenda was:
- Key note speech – Steve Hewlett
 - Presentation of the Network Content Analysis – Stephanie Peat, Ofcom
 - Presentation of the Nations and Regions Content Analysis – Katy Boulton, Ofcom
 - Presentation of the Qualitative Viewer Research – Alison Preston, Ofcom
 - Panel Discussion
- 5.3 The panel comprised²: Steve Anderson (Creative Director, Mentorn/Folio), George Entwistle (Head of Television Current Affairs, BBC), James Garrett (Head of Current Affairs, ITV West), Nick Pollard (Head of Sky News)³. Tom Steinberg (mysociety.org) was unable to attend on the day.

Keynote Speech by Steve Hewlett

- 5.4 The key observations made in response to the keynote speech were:
- It was suggested that there has never been a golden age for current affairs – relatively low audience ratings (and hence lukewarm reaction from channel controllers) were the same 30 years ago
 - There is now greater pressure on the commercial PSBs to deliver ratings across all programmes, but also some recognition of the importance of current affairs as a flagship for a channel's public service broadcasting status
 - Despite the increase in the volume and titles of current affairs, there may have been a tendency for the range of formats and presentation styles to narrow. Series such as *Dispatches* and *Panorama* are now actively diversifying the formats and scheduling episodes within the series to address this
 - Extended news programmes (e.g. *Newsnight*) and 24 hour News channels have, to some extent, commandeered the demand for topical current affairs: going

² Roles at the time of the symposium

forward, current affairs programming may adapt so that it become more driven by news services

- Both practitioners and researchers of current affairs are naturally input focused, rather than necessarily addressing what viewers demand. However, internal support within broadcasters for the journalistic and investigative roots of current affairs remains important to the delivery of high quality output

Content analysis and research presentations - Ofcom

5.5 Ofcom presented the findings from its 6 month audit of network and non network current affairs output on the PSB channels in the second half of 2005 (as summarised in sections 2 and 3 of this document).

5.6 The key observations made in response to the research were:

- The positive story in terms of audience reach and viewing hours was welcomed
- The relatively low proportion of discussion and debate programmes broadcast was felt to be important, although it was acknowledged that discussion and talk current affairs programmes did exist e.g. *Question Time* (BBC One), *The Wright Stuff* (Five)
- Other studies have identified a longer term decline over the last two decades in 'authentic' investigative programmes within returning series
- It was argued that further research should drill down more on the actual topics dealt with in current affairs programming, and on the contribution current affairs output makes to informing the public on socio-political issues, given that changes in output and scheduling are largely due to regulatory influence.
- It was observed that ITV's budgets for regional current affairs have declined significantly, and that this may continue as the value of the regional licences declines toward digital switchover. This limits the type of programming that can be funded, with investigative programming and live audience discussion programmes seen as being under threat. However, it was noted that more of ITV's regional output is now scheduled in or near peak time than in previous years
- It was suggested that the decrease in financial commitment to current affairs by the ITV regional broadcasters was understandable but regrettable, although it was acknowledged that ITV's delivery in terms of hours has remained much the same over the last 15 years. It was suggested that there was some variation in the nature and indeed the quality of current affairs programming between regions, but that current affairs – including traditional investigations - remains robust in many areas.

5.7 Ofcom then presented the findings from new qualitative research into how viewers perceive and consume current affairs (as summarised in section 4 of this document).

5.8 The key observations made in response to the research were:

- The research reinforced the importance of treatment, and the inter-relation with other successful genres and formats, to attracting audiences

- It was questioned whether further research should be conducted into those viewers who do not watch current affairs programming and their reasons for doing so, as the research presented necessarily had to focus on viewers with at least some engagement with the genre
- Research elsewhere has identified that viewing behaviour may be ingrained for younger generations – some households simply do not watch news and topical programming, and children as a result do not pick up the habit
- Research for the future should focus on the navigation towards, and behaviour when, viewing current affairs programmes – particularly for demographic groups who are currently not reached by the genre (e.g. young females aged 18 - 30).

Panel discussion

5.9 Roger Bolton introduced a practitioners' panel and invited each member to comment on the current perspective and approach of their organisations to the genre.

5.10 **George Entwistle (Head of Current Affairs, BBC):**

- Noted that current affairs plays an important role for a broadcaster but acknowledged that “cultural apartness” of current affairs has been, and to some extent continues to be, an issue
- Is currently re-focusing the department on the basic building blocks of current affairs programming which he defined as: topicality, treatment, timing and tone of programme
- Suggested that topicality will become increasingly important – the days when audiences would watch a programme long after the event are gone
- Is very interested in developing more presenter-led/authored programmes where opinion is to the fore. He suggested that a shared discovery approach is more attractive to younger audiences than the old teacher/pupil model
- The rise of ‘on demand’ could be an opportunity for current affairs enabling the genre to pick up a ‘long tail’ of viewers
- The BBC needs to start looking at the future for current affairs programming now – the future may include a 'curatorial' role in order to make relevant back catalogue easily available: plus the repurposing of long-form content for use on other platforms.

5.11 **Nick Pollard (Head of News, Sky):**

- The multi-channel environment is still evolving, and it is difficult to project forward on the composition of schedule. However, Sky News has the airtime and resources to go beyond the rolling news proposition – the only barrier is that audiences currently identify the brand and view the service in this way. With Sky's re-launch they have tried to keep their reputation for breaking news but also to push more into the current affairs arena (although they are limited here as people who want more analysis can always go to *Panorama* or *Newsnight*)

- Going forward, Sky will deliver multiple types of content across multiple platforms. There are likely to be more applications for re-purposed content rather than standalone current affairs programming
- The major challenge for all media companies is how to retain audience attention for an extended period of time in competitive peak time viewing

5.12 **James Garrett (Head of Features and Current Affairs, ITV West):**

- Although the future for ITV's regional output post digital switch over might look bleak in some ways, it is likely that the remaining half hour per week of non news regional programming will be predominantly current affairs, and much of this may be transmitted in peak time. The proportion of current affairs to other non news regional programmes has already increased, and this trend will continue
- As a producer, ITV is looking at a wide range of genres for techniques in creating programmes, rather than simply the norms for current affairs
- Reiterated that 'current affairs' issues are often covered by other genres
- Undercover and investigative regional current affairs remain popular with viewers.

5.13 **Steve Anderson (Mentorn):**

- Independent producers will only be able to make sufficient returns to work in the genre if they are commissioned for high volumes of programmes and long running series
- Current affairs programmes remain 'unformatted' in type and 'perishable' in content, hence there is little secondary value in programmes
- The future of independent current affairs production will probably consist of a few larger companies that do regular long running series complemented by 'boutique' companies that produce one offs
- A number of independents have 'moved out' of the genre in recent years, and others have made it clear that they do not intend to "move in" – the supply base will remain small
- The level of innovation in the production of current affairs remains high – as it must to compete with more populist genres such as drama - but an alliance with a broadcaster is important as independent producers rely on a commitment from the broadcaster in order to hire and keep staff and to invest in development.

5.14 The panel then discussed a number of issues raised by, and with contributions from, the floor:

Making 'difficult' subjects appeal

5.15 Current affairs producers want, and are required, to deal with complex topics that do not naturally lend themselves to narrative TV e.g. Israel and Palestine. It is difficult to make such programmes appeal to audiences and hence to channel controllers.

- 5.16 It was suggested that general health, business, religious and youth issues in particular were victims of this difficulty, despite their appeal to demographics outside the typical current affairs audience.
- 5.17 A response of producers could be to ensure that a story is both 'topical and tellable': A response of broadcasters could be to ensure that supporting or contextual content is made available via other means of distribution in order that these do not clutter the narrative.
- 5.18 Some current affairs programming that only achieves small audience figures is valuable. There is still a role for *Panorama* to produce programmes on a 'need to know' as well as a 'want to know' basis. The trick is to look for ways to make difficult subjects engaging.

Weaknesses in current affairs provision

- 5.19 It was commented that the major exclusion was not topical but generational. Young people don't think that current affairs programming covers issues important to them. When young people are covered in current affairs programming they are usually seen as a problem. They are not involved in policy discussion which is why they are losing touch with citizen issues.

The merits of impartiality

- 5.20 Broadcasters are already exploring opinion-led programmes that are presented with 'passion', and some would like to go further in the future as they have noted the success of such an approach with younger demographics.
- 5.21 There is an argument that impartiality should remain a requirement of the PSBs, but that more latitude could be given to non-PSB suppliers. In reply, it was claimed that non-PSB 'partial' output tended to play 'fast and loose' with the facts of an issue, which a viewer expects a PSB not to do. It would be important that less partial programmes should be labelled and understood as being so.
- 5.22 The merits of impartiality in an individual programme versus impartiality across a strand or series were discussed. It was pointed out that some series currently being broadcast did include individual programmes that had a subjective point of view while maintaining a balance across the entirety of the series.
- 5.23 It was noted that regulation for fairness and partiality was important on the main news providers but that it might be valuable to enable other suppliers of factual information to push the boundaries in more partial ways.

The blurring of boundaries between news and current affairs

- 5.24 It was suggested that audiences don't make as much distinction between news and current affairs as broadcasters, producers and regulators do.
- 5.25 On demand will blur the distinctions further. News pieces will be aggregated and long form documentaries made available on demand so that when a news story breaks the viewer can access supporting material.

Impact of digital TV and new media

- 5.26 It was suggested that after digital switchover there will be less scope to impose quotas for current affairs output on the commercial PSBs, in particular ITV. It was queried whether ITV would be required or willing to broadcast current affairs at all: but argued in reply that the current Channel 3 licences stipulate that current affairs output should extend beyond digital switch over, and also that it may prove commercially valuable to keep current affairs in a schedule of expensive entertainment and drama.
- 5.27 It was discussed whether a shift towards on-demand, non-linear TV consumption might be a greater threat to current affairs. This offered new technical possibilities for delivery, but it was felt that current affairs might be less competitive than other genres in this environment.
- 5.28 Content on the internet would be largely partial and unregulated, and consumers would be responsible for selecting their own sources. TV information services will be operating in response to these pressures.
- 5.28.1 It was suggested that in an online world, the BBC might be the most important service both domestically and internationally for distribution of current affairs. Opinion was divided on whether its primary role would be as an aggregator and archivist of content generated externally, and how far its online delivery would be linked to its TV services.
- 5.28.2 The BBC, Channel 4 and a potential Public Service Publisher would all have a role to play in delivering current affairs post digital switch over.
- 5.28.3 New distribution platforms would offer opportunities to 'sweat' content but not to increase profits.
- 5.28.4 It was argued that the future would be dramatically different with the public service broadcasters' role becoming that of 'information aggregators' rather than broadcasters. Viewers were becoming more sophisticated and would no longer need journalists or 'intermediaries' but would produce and consume their own content. There will also be room for more opinion, and if television current affairs does not offer this then viewers will turn elsewhere.

Symposium summary – Sara Nathan, Ofcom Board Member

- 5.29 The discussion suggested several reasons to be cheerful:
- New media represents new opportunities for distribution of programmes over a longer period and diverse platforms
 - Audience viewing and reach for current affairs are increasing
 - The range of topics and formats remains broad across the PSBs
 - BBC and Channel 4 report less internal pressure regarding ratings, and Channel 4 has increased its commitment in primetime
 - There was a call for an emphasis on the four T's – Topicality, Treatment, Timing and Tone.

5.30 The discussion has also given several points for reflection:

- ITV's investment in current affairs is declining, although the idea that ITV will not be able to afford wall to wall drama and entertainment might offer a lifeline to current affairs on the channel in the future
- The growth of "blue light" series in regional current affairs
- Certain issues/topics may not be covered adequately either because they are unpopular with audiences or because producers are not sufficiently qualified to tackle them
- There may be a role for partial programming so long as it is done with due care
- The future will see an increased blurring in the divide between news and current affairs

5.31 Thanks were expressed to the Chair, speakers and all attending.

Acceptances to Seminar

Mark Ambrose	CNBC
Jeff Anderson	ITV
Steve Anderson	Mentorn
Chris Banatvala	Ofcom
Emma Barker	ITV London
Ian Betteridge	gmail.com
Mike Blair	ITV Central
Jane Blanchard	ITV Westcountry
Roger Bolton	Flame
Katy Boulton	Ofcom
Steve Boulton	Steve Boulton
Matthew Bourne	Ofcom
Andrew Brown	
Dorothy Byrne	Channel 4
Kevin Carey	Ofcom
Tom Coates	Yahoo/Plastic bag
Prof. Stephen Coleman	Leeds University
Nick Couldry	LSE
Jamie Cowling	DCMS
Dan Dixon	Headshift
Cenwyn Edwards	Tinopolis
George Entwistle	BBC
James Garrett	ITV West
Kristina Glushkova	Ofcom
Stevie Harrison	Napier University
Jocelyn Hay	VLV
Steve Hewlett	
Pat Holland	Bournemouth University
Peter Horrocks	BBC
Gideon Joseph	Channel 4
Garfield	Lewis BBC Wales
Richard Lindley	
David Lloyd	City University

Janet Lowther	Ofcom
Alasdair Macleod	BBC Scotland
Tim Markham	LSE
Brian McNair	Strathclyde University
Peter Monteith	Ofcom
Sara Nathan	Ofcom
Caroline O'Dwyer	Ofcom
Tony Parker	BBC
Dorothy Parker	BBC Scotland
Zandria Pauncefort	Institute for Citizenship
Stephanie Peat	Ofcom
Steve Perkins	Ofcom
Nick Pollard	Sky
Alison Preston	Ofcom
Stewart Purvis	City University
Don Redding	Public Voice
Mark Roberts	Channel 4
Mike Robinson	BBC
Duncan Rycroft	ITV Granada
Graham Smith	ITV Westcountry
Andrew Sparrow	Citizenship Foundation
Tom Steinberg	mysociety.org
Kate Stross	Ofcom
Kevin Sutcliffe	Channel 4
Tim Suter	Ofcom
Richard Tait	Cardiff University
Mike Talbot	ITV Anglia
Neil Thompson	ITV Anglia
Jo Twist	IPPR
Nick Ware	Community Channel
Christian Watt	Films of Record
Kay Whithers	IPPR
Peter Williams	Consultant