
Understanding audience perceptions of the BBC during Covid-19

Summary of quantitative and qualitative research

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Overview

The Covid-19 pandemic created new challenges for the BBC, as the need for trusted, reliable news was greater than ever; the demand for stay-at-home entertainment soared; and children across the country urgently needed support while learning from home. All this in the context of immediately stopping productions and needing to find Covid-safe ways to keep programmes on air.

We commissioned research to understand audience perceptions of the BBC during this period and how it was seen to have delivered its Mission to inform, educate and entertain.

What we have found – in brief

Overall, the BBC performed well throughout the pandemic and most respondents were positive about it

- More than a quarter of respondents said they were using the BBC more
- Three-fifths of respondents had a positive overall impression of the BBC

Audiences turned to the BBC as a source of reliable and trustworthy news

- Almost a third increased their use of BBC news since the start of the first lockdown

The BBC performed well in its provision of educational content for children

- Six in ten respondents felt that the BBC had done well in providing educational/learning programmes
- A quarter of BBC Bitesize users reported using the service more as part of home schooling

Two-thirds of adults rated the BBC highly for providing entertaining and engaging content

- BBC iPlayer was used more frequently as people sought out new content

There was an increase in the use of video-on-demand services

- Six in ten Netflix viewers use the service more now compared to just before the start of the pandemic
- Netflix's increase in popularity is in part due to the volume of content the service offers

Some felt there are now more providers offering the type of content traditionally provided by the BBC

- For some audience groups, online providers including YouTube and Netflix were seen as better at providing educational content than the BBC

Methodology

This study was conducted as a two-phase quantitative/qualitative research project with the overall objective of understanding audiences' perceptions of the BBC's response to the impact of Covid-19. More specifically, the research aimed to understand audience perceptions in relation to the BBC's output of informative, educational, and entertaining content, with a particular focus on:

- Measuring the perceived impact of Covid-19 on levels of viewing, listening and website/app usage among the UK population, specifically in relation to the use of BBC services.
- Exploring why respondents may have felt their use of BBC services had changed since the impact of Covid-19, and why.
- Understanding public perceptions of whether the BBC is meeting its core principle to 'inform, educate and entertain', including relative to other media services.

We commissioned the market research agency Yonder.

Quantitative stage methodology

Fieldwork was conducted via a c.20-minute online survey between 29th March and 6th April 2021, using Yonder's online panel (PopulusLive). It reached an online nationally representative sample of 2,152 UK individuals aged 13+. Quotas were set for age, gender, region and socio-economic group.

Qualitative stage methodology

The qualitative phase included adult focus groups and smaller triad focus groups with children. At the end of the quantitative survey, adult respondents were asked whether they were interested in participating in a follow-up qualitative study. Interested adult respondents were then recontacted and recruited from the PopulusLive panel for the online focus groups. Each focus group had 6 respondents, with a spread across socio-economic group, ethnicity, and nationwide locations.

Friendship triads were used for the children to encourage this age group to relax and talk confidently as well as create a rapport within the sessions to facilitate the discussion.

Fieldwork took place between 4th May - 6th May 2021. All adult groups were conducted via Zoom and lasted around 90 minutes. Each focus group covered adults at various life stages:

- 1 x parents with children aged 4-12 years old
- 1 x parents with children aged 12-16 years old
- 1 x 18-34 year olds
- 1 x aged 50+

Children's triads took place via a Zoom session and lasted around 60 minutes. Each triad covered a different range of ages:

- 1 triad x 13-14 year olds
- 1 triad x 15-16 year olds
- 1 triad x 17 year olds

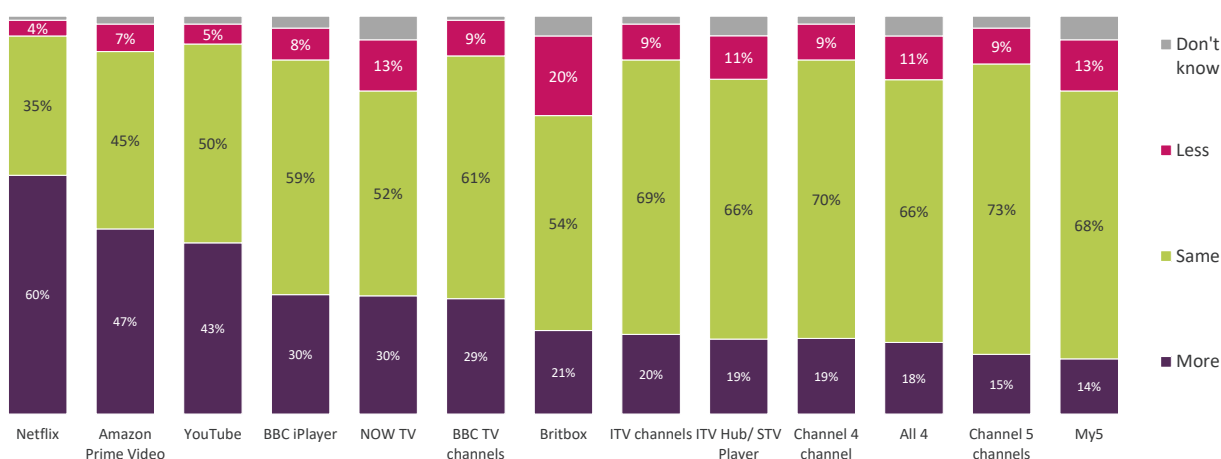
There is also a full [technical appendix](#) available which provides further detail on the methodology as well as data tables from the quantitative online survey.

Summary of key findings

Overall, the BBC performed well throughout the pandemic and most respondents were positive about it

When asked about their TV viewing habits now compared to just before Covid-19 restrictions came into place in March 2020, around three in ten BBC TV viewers and BBC iPlayer users said they had used these services more. This was considerably higher than those who said they had watched BBC TV and BBC iPlayer less (9% and 8% respectively). Comparatively, when looking at the other public service broadcasters (PSBs), 20% of ITV viewers, 19% of Channel 4 viewers and 15% of Channel 5 viewers said they had watched these channels more since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

Change in usage of TV channels and services since March 2020



Source: Quantitative stage

Q7. Thinking about your TV viewing habits now compared to March 2020, just before Covid-19 restrictions came into place, how has your viewing of these different TV providers changed, if at all? Base: All who watch the channel/service. All bases above 200

It was a positive story for other BBC services; for example, 27% of BBC Sounds users said they had used it more since March 2020, while 30% of BBC News website/app users and 24% of BBC Bitesize users said the same.

The BBC also performed well in terms of overall impressions; when asked to think about everything it does across TV, radio and online, 60% of respondents gave the BBC a positive rating of between 7 and 10.

Audiences turned to the BBC as a source of reliable and trustworthy news

Many respondents felt the BBC's heritage is in news, and that this is their core connection to the BBC brand. With heightened demand for up-to-date information and the regular occurrence of government briefings, a lot of respondents turned to the BBC as their 'go-to' source of news during ³

the pandemic. When those who said they were using the BBC more since the pandemic were asked why, many cited the provision of trustworthy and reliable news as key factors.

*I've had more free time to watch TV. I've been watching the BBC as a reliable source of Covid news during this time.
(Female, 25-34, Scotland, AB household)*

*I watch a lot of news on the BBC because they have updates from the government on Covid, it is my go to station when I switch on my telly in the morning
(Male, 45-54, Northern Ireland, C1C2 household)*

*Because I feel that BBC was the only medium reporting true facts and figures during the period of crisis'
(Male, 25-34, West Midlands, AB household)*

When respondents were asked to think about their experience of the BBC across TV, radio and online over the past year since the start of Covid-19 restrictions and to say how well or badly the BBC does at providing informative programmes and content (including news and current affairs), a majority thought the BBC did well (66%), with only 11% saying the BBC had done badly (17% were neutral). Respondents saw the BBC's provision of news content as reliable, informative, accurate and wide-ranging.

*I hardly ever watched the BBC before Covid but since then I think it has got much better informing the public on everything that is going on regarding the Covid restrictions and what we can and can't do
(Female, 65+, Yorks and Humber, DE household)*

*The BBC has always provided in depth/unbiased and accurate reports and never been more useful than during the pandemic
(Male, 65+, Northern Ireland, C1C2)*

However, some respondents said that the BBC lacked impartiality and this resulted in a lack of trust. In addition to this, some believed that the BBC has been overly focused on news of the pandemic and lacked other content, with coverage perceived to be excessively negative.

*Because it's clearly not impartial, just used as a mouthpiece for the current government, rather than using any kind of impartiality and questioning
(Female, 35-44, Yorks and Humber, AB household)*

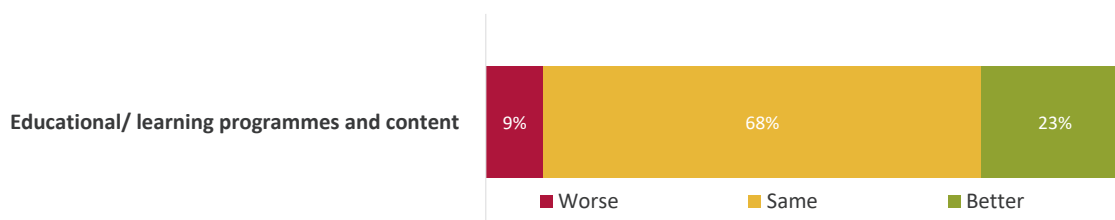
Sadly, I no longer consider BBC News to be as independent or as comprehensive as it has been in the past. Restrictions on the way that presenters are able to express their views and an almost obscene obsession to not offend the government has made their output bland and non-challenging
(Male, 55-64, Yorks and Humber, AB household)

I was already thinking of moving away from the BBC as I was fed up with it driving its own agenda. However, once the pandemic kicked in, I found it was putting out a lot of "doom and gloom" reporting, as well as scaremongering
(Female, 45-54, North East, C1C2 household)

The BBC did well in its provision of educational content for children

We asked respondents who used BBC services if their opinion of the BBC had changed since March 2020 and around one in four respondents thought the BBC's provision of educational content had improved over the past year. Parents of children aged under 16 were more likely to think the BBC's educational output had improved than those who did not have children (27% vs. 21%). In addition, those aged 13-18 were more likely than all respondents to say the BBC had got better (35% vs. 23%). The main reason for improved perception of the BBC's educational output since March 2020 was the content provided to support home schooling while schools were closed. Respondents thought that the BBC stepped up to its role as a public service broadcaster, helping the UK's children and parents in a time of need.

Change in opinion of BBC educational content since March 2020



Q23. How, if at all, has your opinion of the BBC changed since March 2020, just before Covid-19 restrictions came into place? Providing educational and learning programmes and content (this includes documentaries as well as children's educational content). Base: Ever use any of the BBC services

Better educational programmes especially for younger viewers, love the Bitesize programmes that keep the kids from getting bored
(Male, 45-54, Yorks and Humber, C1C2 household)

The BBC really stepped up providing educational programmes for school children and students during the major lockdowns and times schools were closed and I was very impressed by their response and amount of airtime they gave
(Male, 25-34, South West, DE household)

*I think the BBC reacted very well in providing additional educational programmes for children during lockdowns, particularly when it became obvious that many children did not have access to computers or tablets
(Female, 65+, Northern Ireland, DE household)*

Teenage respondents highlighted that their teachers often directed them to the BBC as a helpful and reliable learning resource:

*I have done lots of home learning during the lockdowns and the teacher often tells us to use Bitesize as part of the lesson
(Female, 13-18, South West, AB household)*

*I use BBC Bitesize much more because I have been doing my schoolwork at home and many of the exercises have been directed by my teachers
(Female, 13-18, West Midlands, AB household)*

In addition, older respondents had also been using Bitesize as a tool for additional learning.

*I have been furloughed so have tried some of the education programmes for a bit of learning and brain stimulation
(Female, 35-44, Scotland, C1C2 household)*

*I've had more time at home, and have wanted to keep my brain active and learn something new
(Female, 55-64, South West, C1C2 household)*

Two-thirds of adults said they were positive about the BBC's provision of entertaining and engaging content during the pandemic

There was a sense among some respondents that the BBC kept providing new entertainment content throughout the lockdown period which helped to keep people occupied when they could not participate in other activities. When asked how well or badly the BBC provided entertaining programmes and content, six in ten (62%) of respondents were positive. Some respondents seemed impressed by the amount of entertaining new content that the BBC was managing to provide despite the restrictions.

*There have been lots of series and new programmes which have been made before March 2020 and shown now
(Male, 65+, Yorks and Humber, AB household)*

*It can't have been easy to adapt programmes to keep all the COVID rules and I think they have done brilliantly
(Female, 65+, London, C1C2E household)*

*Good entertainment and making sure all restrictions are followed, they kept programmes running under difficult circumstances
(Female, 65+, West Midlands, DE household)*

The restrictions and lockdowns allowed some respondents more time to watch the entertainment content offered by the BBC: they took the opportunity to explore BBC iPlayer and BBC Sounds archive to discover old entertainment shows and boxsets they had not previously watched. Furthermore, while some felt that there were a lot of repeats, others welcomed the nostalgia of archive programmes.

*I enjoyed the archive and additional content that they added to iPlayer
(Male, 13-18, South West, C1C2 household)*

*Great mix of comedies, drama and documentary shows uploaded to BBC Sounds and added to the radio schedule. Started showing range of comedy shows including previously unseen pilots
(Male, 45-54, South West, DE household)*

There was an increase in use of video-on-demand (VoD) services

Use of VoD services increased since Covid-19 restrictions came into place: 60% of Netflix users said they have used the service more since March 2020, while 47% of Amazon Prime Video and 43% of YouTube users said the same. Respondents indicated that the rise in popularity of these services during the pandemic was due to the vast volume of content, the offer 'of escapism' and helping to pass the time when they could not participate in other activities. Having more time to watch content meant people were turning to these platforms for programmes they could 'binge', and they enjoyed the recommendations. Some respondents felt that as their regular content such as live sport or soaps had stopped production, they had to search out other things to watch and VoD services had often filled that void.

For those who said they were watching BBC TV services less, one reported reason for this was a switch to these other VoD services. This seemed to have particularly impacted BBC iPlayer: 44% of

people who reported using BBC iPlayer less said it was because they had discovered other services like Netflix.

*I'm moving towards streaming more and more as I prefer on demand shows through one subscription service
(Male, 25-34, East Midlands, AB household)*

*I've grown more used to using Netflix and other streaming services during the pandemic. This has replaced what I usually watch on BBC
(Female, 13-18, Northern Ireland, AB household)*

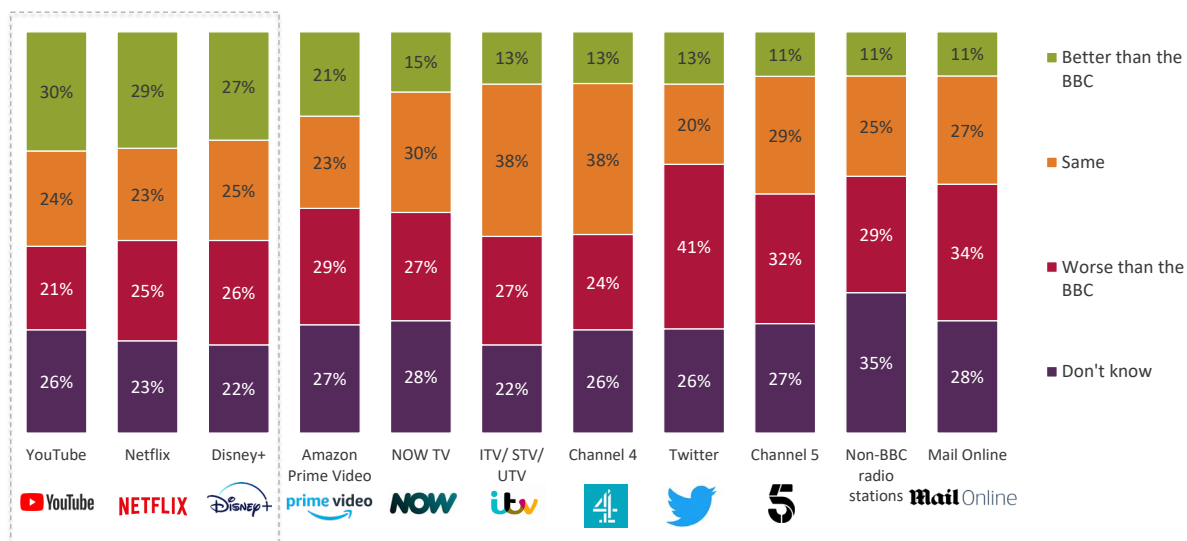
For some, BBC iPlayer was perceived to lack the volume of content compared to Netflix and other streaming platforms, with it largely being used to catch-up on live TV rather than to discover new content. Similarly, when those who said they used BBC radio less since March 2020 were asked why that was, one of the reasons was due to a shift to other services such as Spotify and Amazon Music.

*Since the pandemic I have been making more use of Spotify for music and podcasts instead of BBC Sounds as there is a greater range of music and programming
(Male, 35-44, North East, C1C2 household)*

Some felt there are now more providers offering content traditionally provided by the BBC

Considering the BBC's provision of informative, educational and entertaining content, VoD services were often perceived as equal or in some circumstances, better. YouTube and Netflix are particularly popular with under-34s and with parents. Men and minority ethnic respondents were significantly more likely than all respondents to say YouTube was better than the BBC for education. YouTube was perceived to be a good source for educational content as it could be used like a search engine where a user can type in specific questions, although this does mean that some of the content accessed this way was made by the BBC. Some teens during the qualitative stage told us that during homeschooling, their teachers would post tutorials on YouTube and therefore direct students there.

BBC performance compared to other services: Educational content



Source: Quantitative stage

Q28. How well do you think the following media services compare with the BBC in terms of providing educational and learning content (this includes documentaries as well as children’s educational content)? Base: All who use each service (all bases above 100)

Among those that watched both Netflix and the BBC TV, 60% said the streaming service was better than the BBC for entertainment. This is particularly true when looking at under-34s and those in DE households, with both groups being more likely than all respondents to say Netflix is better. Only 5% of Netflix users thought it was worse than the BBC for providing entertaining content. Similarly, 35% of Netflix users thought the service had better informative content than the BBC, while 27% thought Netflix was worse here. This view was held particularly strongly by 25-34-year-olds, of whom 43% said Netflix provides better informative content.