



Oliver & Ohlbaum

Advertising Regulation – a 2025 update

An Oliver & Ohlbaum report for COBA

October 2025

A change in regulation will extend ad breaks at the expense of news programming



- Currently all broadcasters are restricted to a maximum of 12 minutes of advertising per hour
- PSBs have an additional restriction of an average of 8 mins per hour in peak time
- PSBs meet this requirement by reducing advertising in news programming, redeploying it elsewhere in the schedule



- For a change in regulation to make any difference, the PSBs would have to increase advertising during news – these are the only peak time hours that have available capacity



- This additional advertising would come at the expense of news programming, reducing total news provision
- It would also make it less attractive to audiences, reducing news consumption

The unavoidable consequence of a change in regulation will be a loss of news programming and a reduction in news consumption

- 1. Executive summary**
2. Overview of current COSTA regulation and PSB ad inventory management
3. The impact of changes to COSTA regulation on news coverage

Executive summary

In producing this report, we have conducted a thorough analysis on the current COSTA regulations, how broadcasters currently schedule advertising to conform with COSTA, and the impact of a potential change to PSB peak time ad minutage regulation

Current regulation limits PSBs to a maximum of 12 minutes of ads per hour and a maximum average of 8 minutes of ads per hour in peak time. To comply with these requirements, PSBs tend to run minimal advertising during news programming, allowing other hours to use the full 12 min allocation.

In its 2025 *Transmission Critical* report, Ofcom drew attention to the importance of accurate news as ‘the foundation for civic debate and democratic society’. The regulator also highlighted that PSBs play a critical role in news: they ‘remain the most trusted sources of news’ for audiences, who perceive the delivery of trusted and accurate news as a very important PSB attribute.

Removing the advertising restrictions would see additional ad minutage run in news hours, the only hours where PSBs have scope to increase their hourly minutes. This potential change would have a range of impacts on news:

1 Reduction in news coverage

- ITV and Channel 4 currently broadcast the majority of their news content during peak time. During this peak time news content, they programme minimal advertising. This allows them to fill other peak programming (where audience is higher) with the maximum level of advertising possible, thus maximising revenue
- A potential regulation change could lead to channels 3, 4 and 5 **increasing ad minutage in peak time news hours**, leading to a **reduction in the volume of news output**
- We estimate this could result in a loss of approximately 26 minutes of peak news content across ITV and Channel 4 on a typical weekday. Across the year this could amount to **over 110 hours of news programming lost during peak time**

2 Diminished news audience

- Although viewers are used to advertising on TV, these potential changes are substantial – up to 11x more advertising in the case of Channel 4 News
- This level of increase is likely to have a negative impact on audiences – both on perception of news and on audience levels, with some deterred from watching

3 Total consumption of news falls

- The reduction in news coverage and diminished audiences would combine to result in a significant fall in total PSB news consumption (audience hours)

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2. **Overview of current COSTA regulation and PSB ad inventory management**
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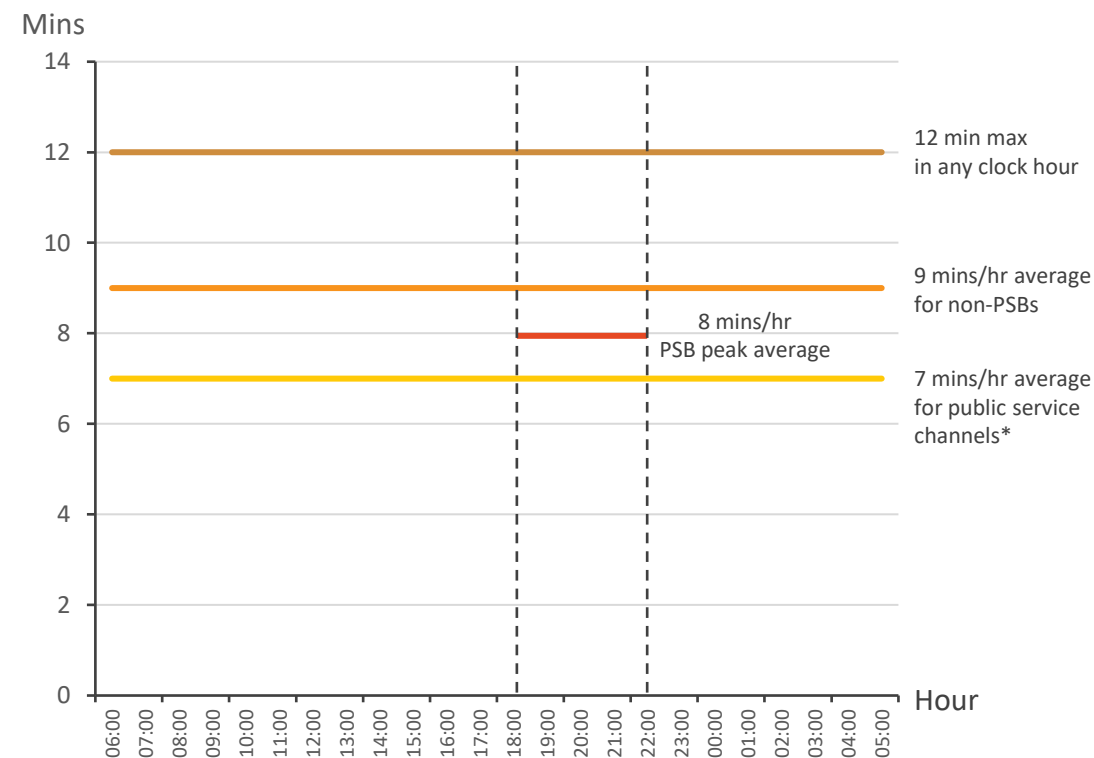
Current regulations for total advertising time

Ofcom's rules impose restrictions on the amount and distribution of advertising for all broadcasters, with the tightest requirements applying to commercial public service broadcasters. Additional average minutage rules apply to PSBs in peak time

Current rules under the Code on the Scheduling of Television Advertising (effective since April 2016)

	PSB	PSB portfolio	Multichannel
Max av. ad minutes p/h	7		9
Max ad minutes in any clock hour	12		12
Max av. ad minutes, 6pm-11pm	8		-
Total number of ad minutes per day	168		216

Permitted hourly volume and distribution of television advertising, by channel type



Note: *Public service channels are inclusive of Channel 3 services, Channel 4, Channel 5 and S4C – but exclude commercial PSB portfolio channels
Source: Ofcom, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

Current regulations over advertising break scheduling

Ofcom impose further restrictions on the amount and distribution of advertising breaks for all broadcasters, with the tightest requirements applying to commercial public service broadcasters. An additional restriction on the maximum length of an ad break exists for PSBs

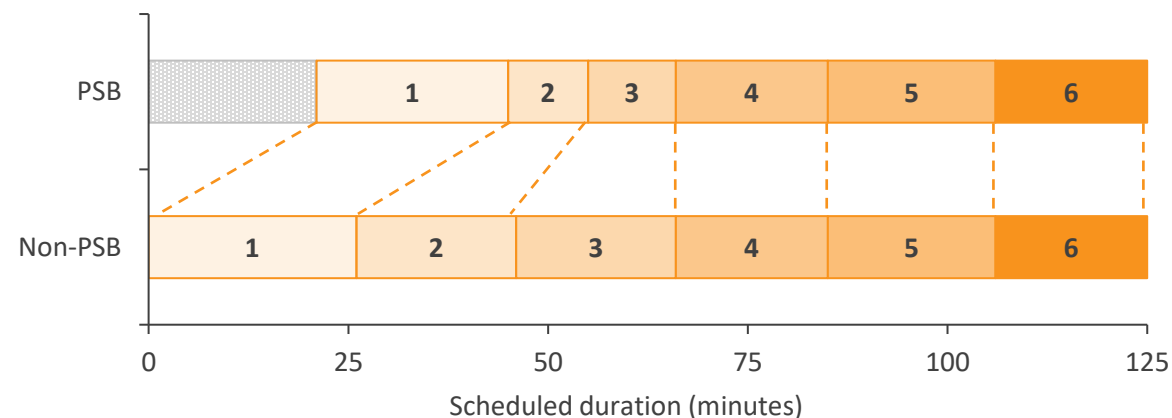
Current rules under the Code on the Scheduling of Television Advertising (effective since April 2016)

Number of ad breaks			
PSB channels		Non-PSB channels	
Scheduled duration (minutes)	Number of ad breaks	Scheduled duration (minutes)	Number of ad breaks
21-44	1	< 26	1
45-54	2	26-45	2
55-65	3	46-65	3
66-85	4	66-85	4
86-105	5	86-105	5
106-125	6	106-125	6
Maximum duration of advertising breaks			
PSB		Non-PSB channels	
3 min 50 sec*		-	

Note: *Of which advertising and teleshopping spots may not exceed 3 minutes and 30 seconds
Source: Ofcom, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

Number of permitted advertising breaks per programme based on scheduled duration, by channel type

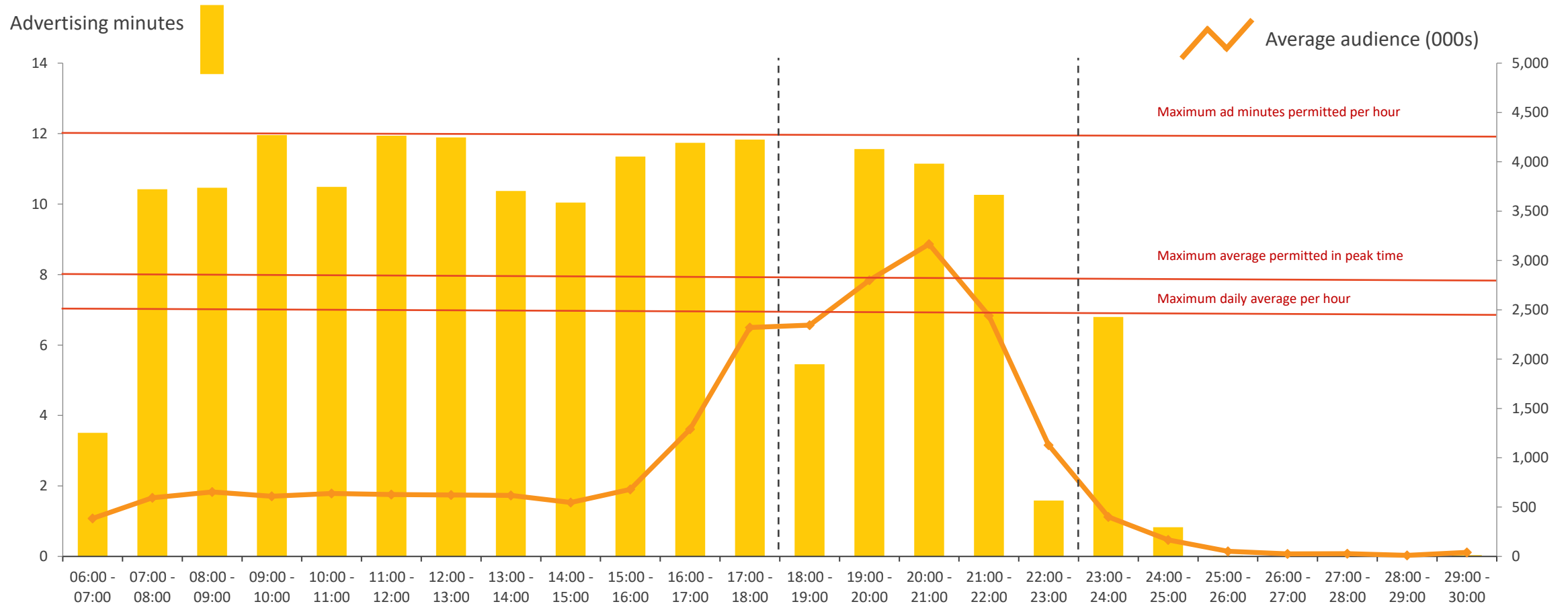
Number of ad breaks permitted per duration of broadcast



ITV's main channel advertising inventory management: Monday to Friday

ITV's maximum peak time ad minutage is book-ended by its early and late evening news broadcasts, retaining an average of eight minutes per hour during peak time

ITV's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)

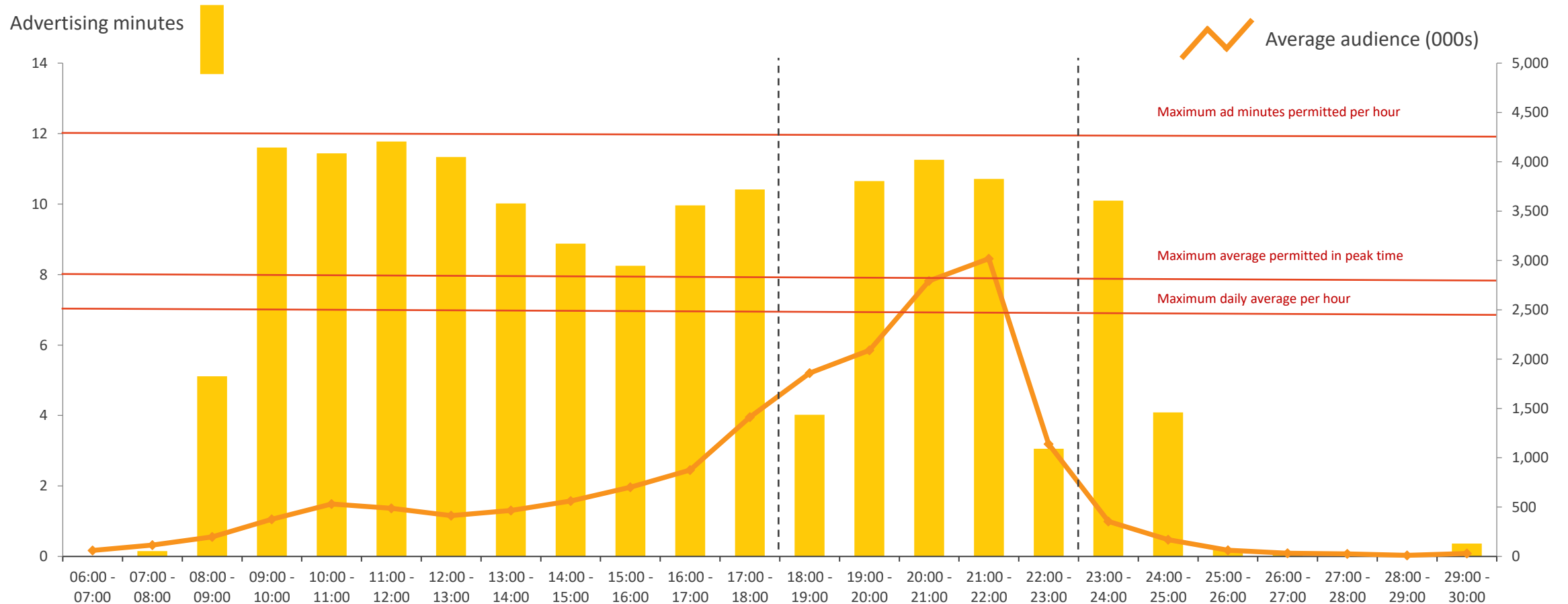


Note: Data above is inclusive of ITV main channel (inc. Breakfast) in both SD, HD
Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

ITV's main channel advertising inventory management: Saturday to Sunday

Showing relatively little advertising in the early hours across the week allows ITV to maximise minutage during the day, with ad times throughout the day often approaching the 12 minute maximum

ITV's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Saturday to Sunday (2024 annual average)

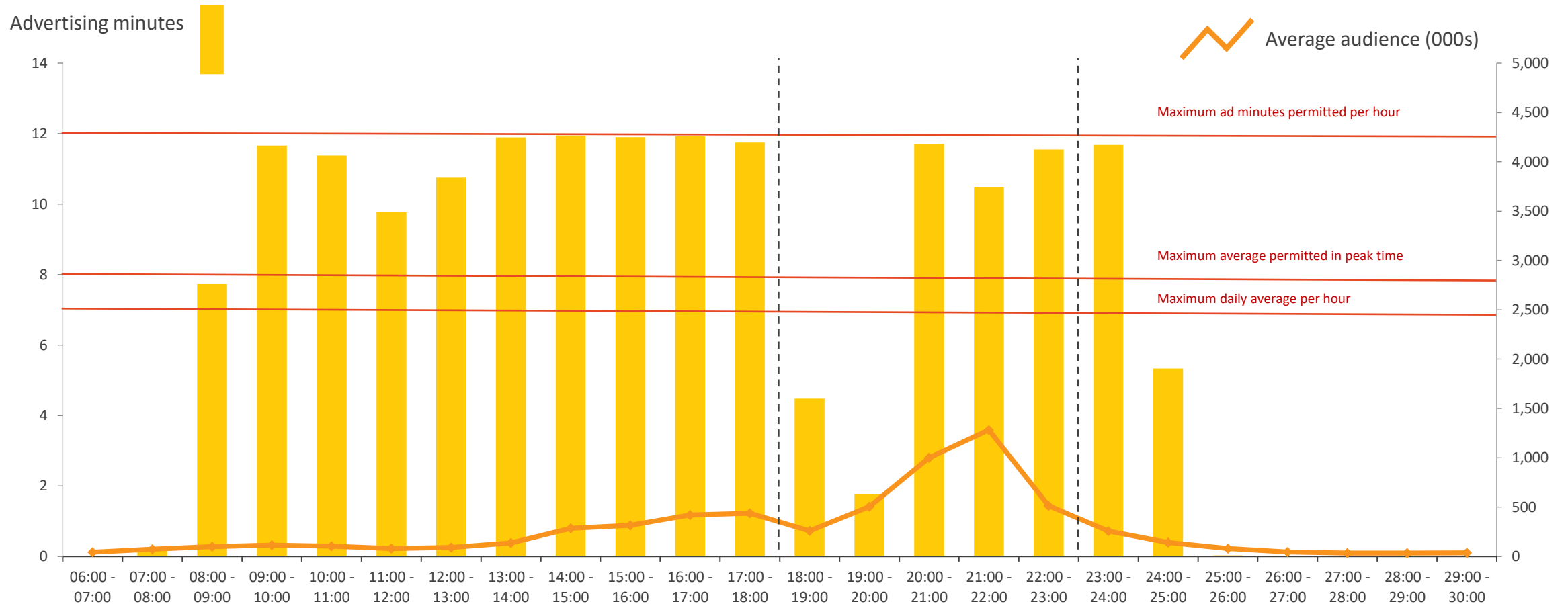


Note: Data above is inclusive of ITV main channel (inc. Breakfast) in both SD, HD
 Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

Channel 4's main channel advertising inventory management: Monday to Friday

By showing little advertising in the early hours and breakfast time, and by reducing minutage during the evening news broadcast, Channel 4 maximises its inventory during daytime and peak

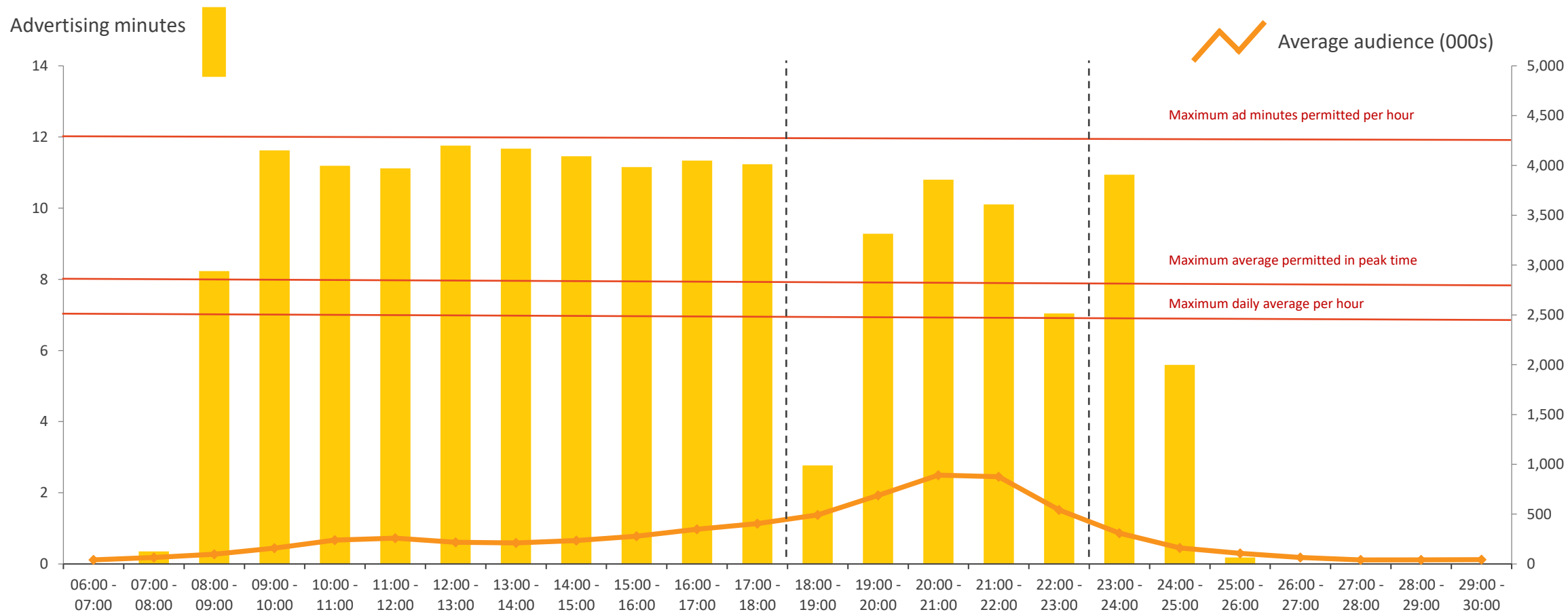
Channel 4's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)



Channel 4's main channel advertising inventory management: Saturday to Sunday

On weekends Channel 4's evening news moves to the earlier time of 6.30pm, as a result the advertising minutage over peak time is more evenly distributed between 7 and 11

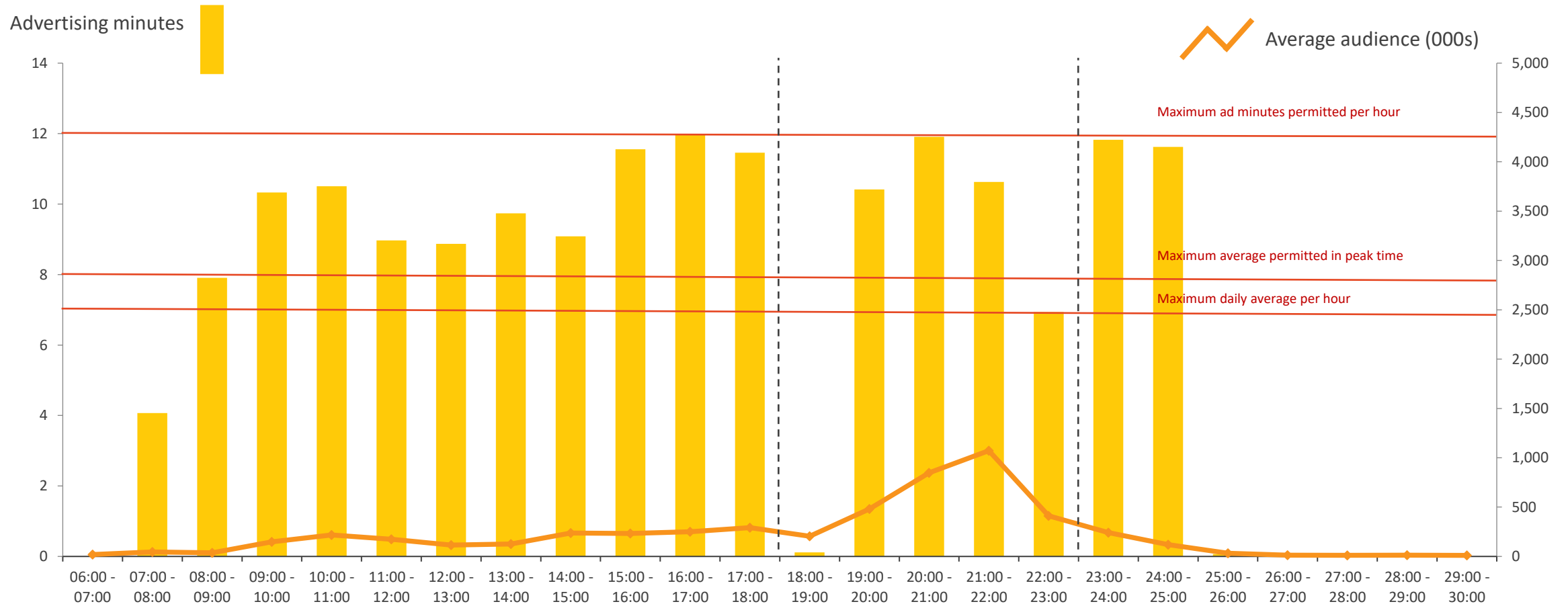
Channel 4's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Saturday to Sunday (2024 annual average)



Channel 5's main channel advertising inventory management: Monday to Friday

Channel 5 is able to maximise its inventory across the rest of the day, by reducing its advertising minutage during the late morning to early afternoon and in the 6pm hour including its early evening news bulletin

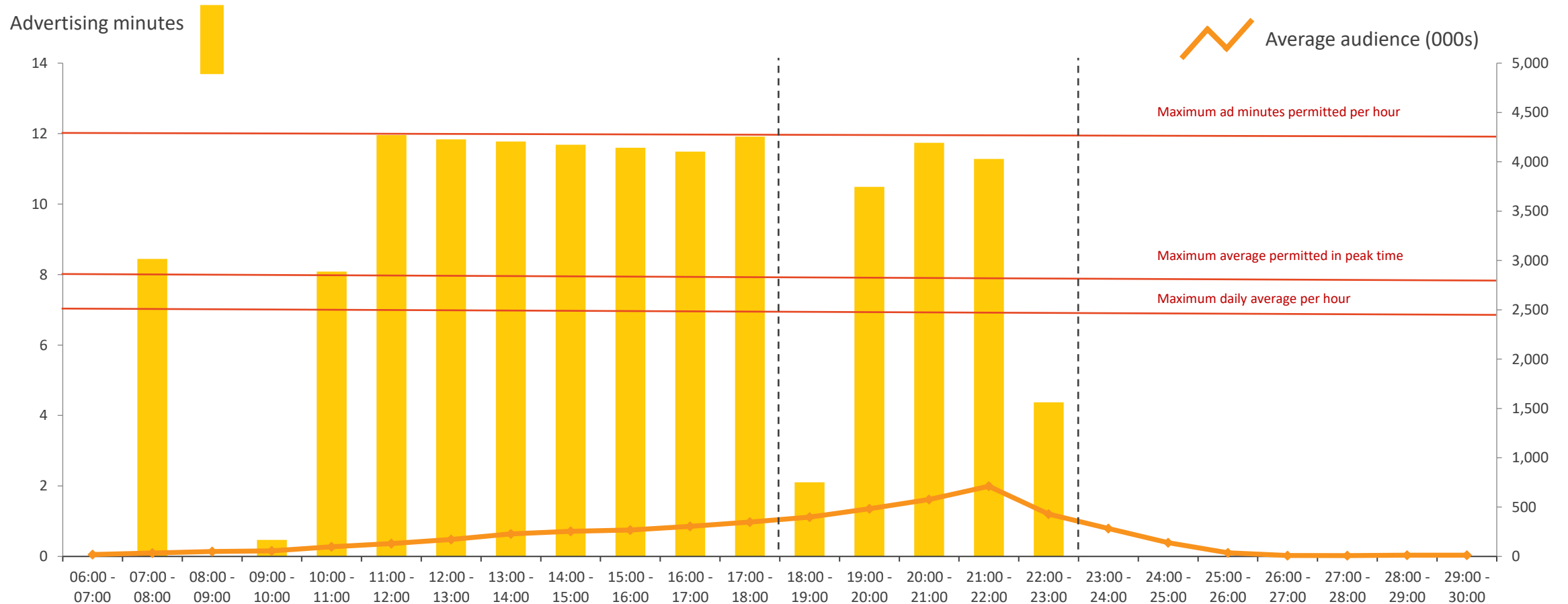
Channel 5's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)



Channel 5's main channel advertising inventory management: Saturday to Sunday

On weekend mornings Channel 5 primarily broadcasts children's programming, as such its advertising during this period is significantly reduced as a result their minutage later in the day is consistently over eleven minutes

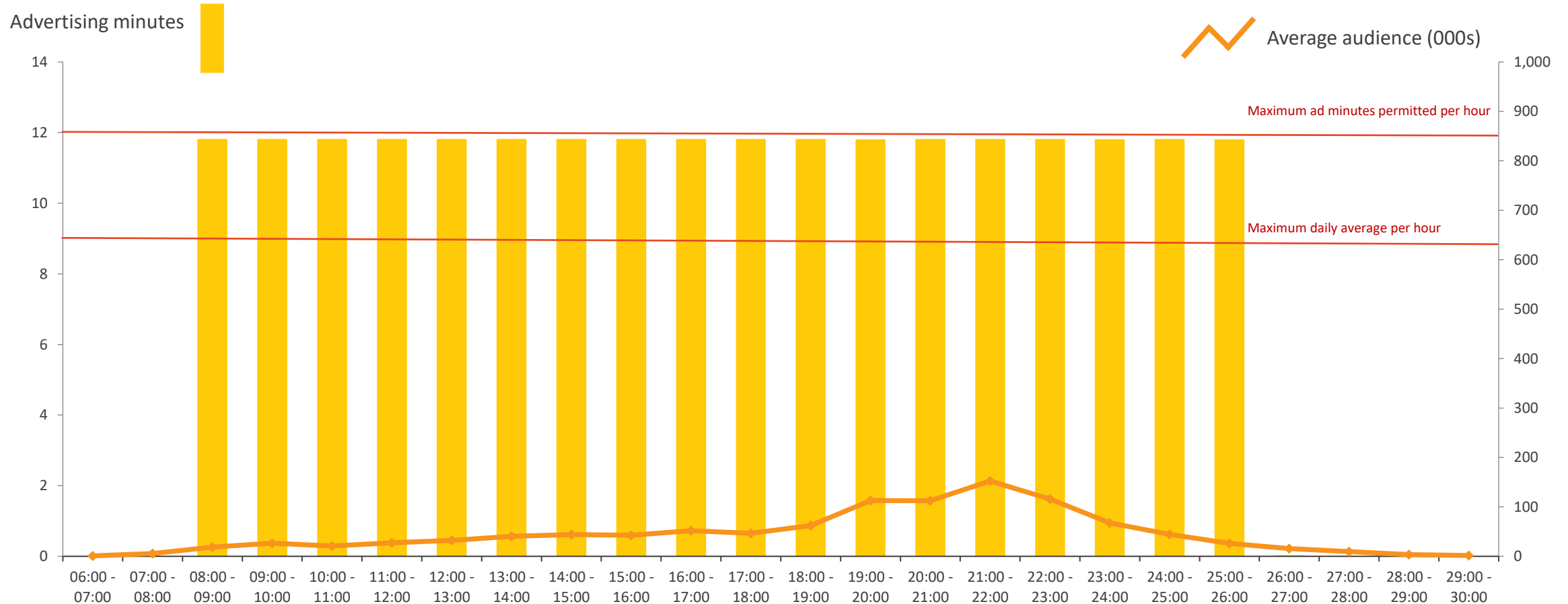
Channel 5's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Saturday to Sunday (2024 annual average)



PSB Portfolio and Multichannel inventory management is markedly different due to different COSTA rules

Absent peak time restrictions, portfolio channels and multichannels, such as U&Dave, can maximise ad load during hours with bigger audiences. This contrasts with the average ad minutes distribution of the PSBs which includes peak time drops during news hours to achieve an 8 min average

U&Dave's average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)



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- 3. The impact of changes to COSTA regulation on news coverage**

Changes to advertising regulation are likely to negatively impact news coverage

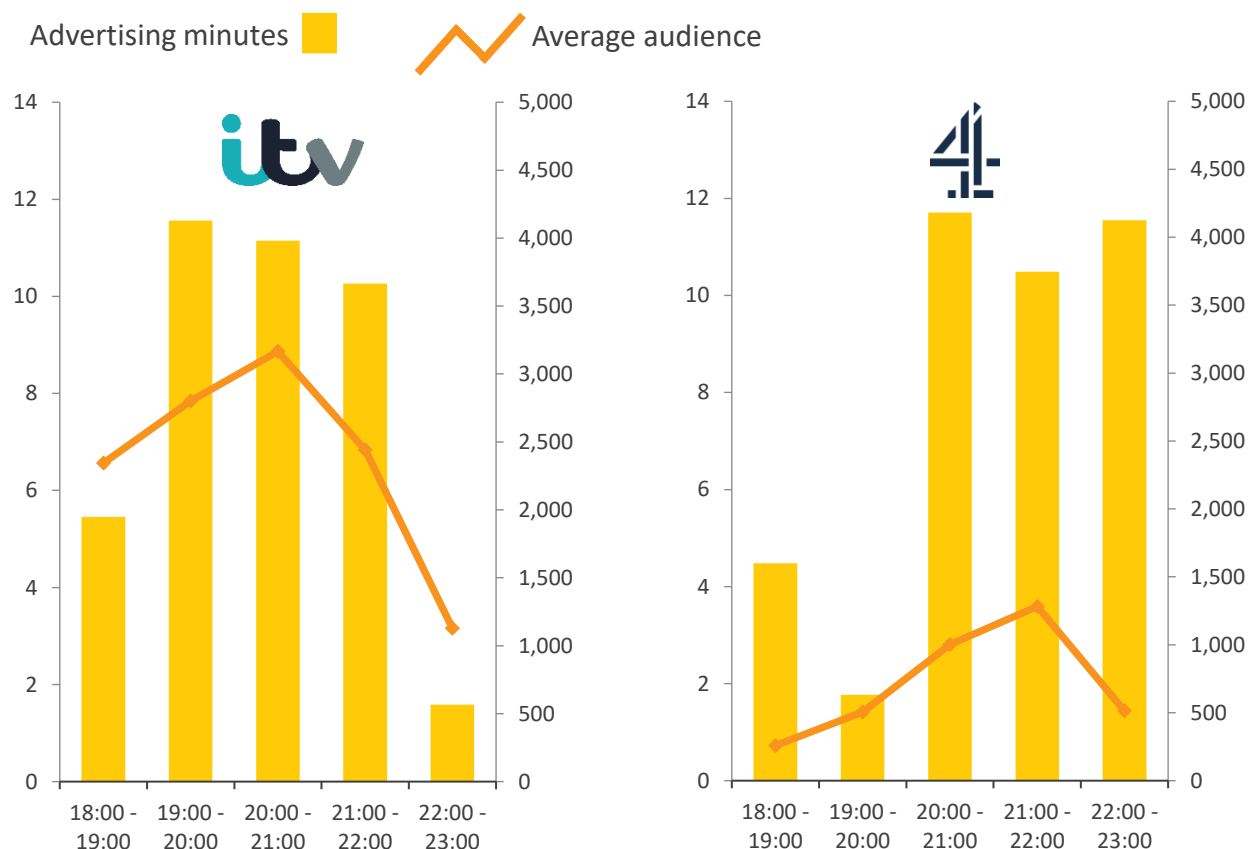
Changes to peak time ad restrictions for PSBs would negatively impact news coverage because broadcasters could schedule more advertising minutes in their peak evening slots, where they have an obligation to broadcast news

- In 2023 Ofcom undertook a Consultation on the issue of television advertising regulation, in particular looking at potentially increasing the advertising minutage available to the PSBs. These proposals were ultimately averted
- In its 2023 consultation paper, Ofcom acknowledged that potential ad regulation could have an adverse effect on news coverage:
 - *“We are particularly mindful that given current scheduling patterns, the rules could lead to a reduction in the amount of news content on PSB channels. This is because the change would, in effect, allow broadcasters to schedule more advertising minutes in their evening slots, which generally run during 18:00 to 19:00 and 22:00 to 23:00. Currently, these slots include relatively fewer minutes of advertising” (1.18 – Ofcom COSTA Consultation, 19 April 2023)*
- Ofcom’s 2025 Public Service Media report reaffirmed the importance of accurate news as ‘the foundation for civic debate and democratic society’
- In the report the regulator also emphasised that PSBs play a critical role in news provision: they ‘remain the most trusted sources of news’, with a large proportion of audiences (49 per cent) ranking the provision of trusted and accurate news ‘in their three most important attributes for PSBs to deliver to society overall’
- In this section of our report, we update analysis that we conducted in 2023 to develop a detailed understanding of how changes to COSTA could impact provision of news
- Using 2024 data we explore the effects potential regulation change to the peak time ad restriction for PSBs would have today

PSBs currently run limited advertising during peak time news

Running minimal advertising during news hours allows broadcasters to fill other peak programming (where audiences are typically higher) with the maximum level of advertising possible (12 minutes), maximising revenue

Main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)



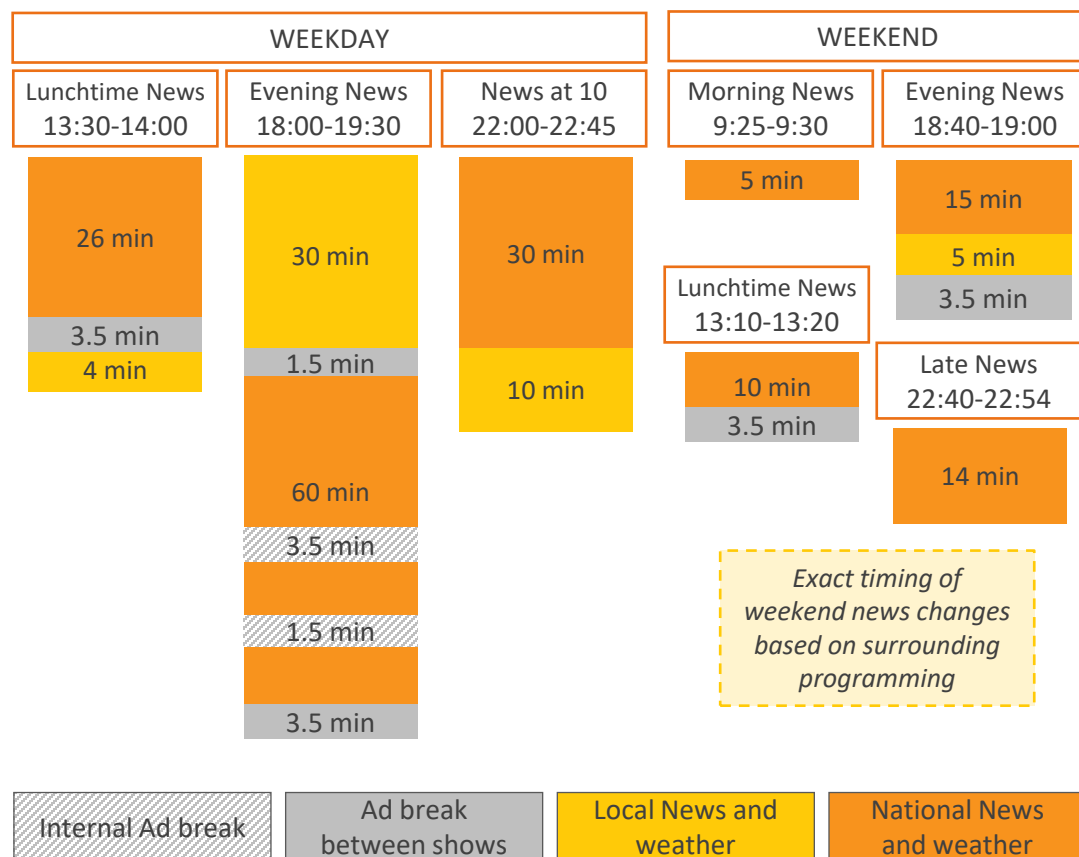
Note: Data above is inclusive of ITV main channel in both SD, HD
Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

- The current regulatory environment has two separate areas that PSBs use symbiotically:
 - A requirement to broadcast news during peak hours
 - A requirement to have an average of 8 min / hour advertising in peak, with a maximum of 12 min
- PSBs achieve this by running limited advertising during news programming hours (6-7pm and 10pm for ITV, and 7-8pm for Channel 4)
- This allows other hours to reach full utilisation of the 12 minute allocation for advertising, while meeting the 8 min average requirement in peak hours

ITV averages just under 4 minutes 30 seconds per broadcast hour during weekday peak time news

ITV's two main news blocks – Evening News and News at 10 – currently feature relatively little advertising, this allows ITV to maximise its ad load elsewhere

Illustrative ITV news schedule



- On weekdays, ITV broadcasts approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes of news content during peak time. Consisting of around 90 minutes of national content and 40 minutes of local content.
- This is well above its peak time news required by its Ofcom license for both local and regional news
- During a sample of five normal weeks between weeks Q1 2024 and Q4 2024, ITV aired an average of 10 minutes and 0 seconds of advertising during weekday peak time news programming
- ITV's evening news block, from 6pm-7.30pm, typically includes 6 minutes and 30 seconds of internal advertising per transmission
- While this is high for news content, it is still well below the maximum ad load during peak time

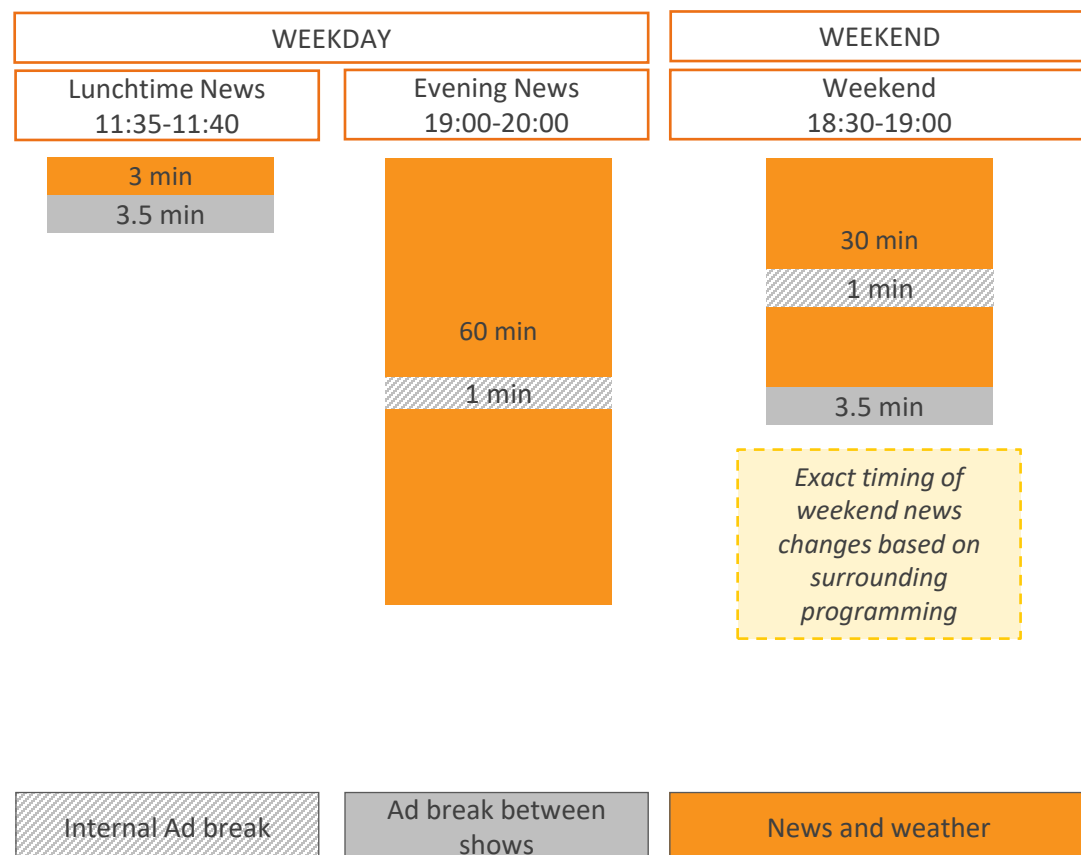
Note: Data above is inclusive of ITV main channel (inc. Breakfast) both SD, HD. Averages include days with no advertising minutage. Advertising minutage attributed to news programmes includes centre-breaks, direct end-breaks or end-breaks of any following weather bulletin.

Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

Channel 4 currently runs under one minute of advertising during its peak time news

On a typical weekday, Channel 4 runs one hour of News content in early peak time, with additional news content at lunch time in the form of a short news bulletin

Illustrative Channel 4 news schedule

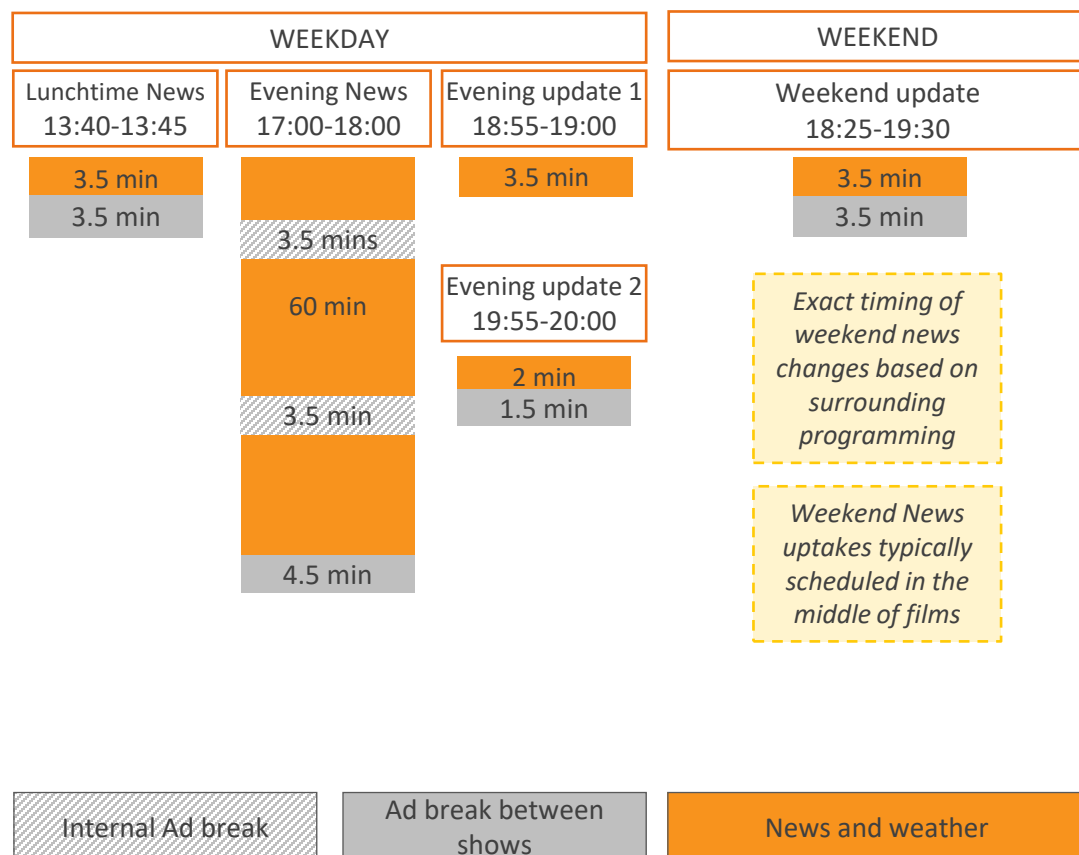


- On weekdays, Channel 4 schedules one hour of news programming during peak time, with this reducing to 30 minutes on weekends
- Channel 4 currently places extremely limited advertising minutes during its prime time news content, with an average ad time per transmission during peak time of just 1 minute and 1 second
- Channel 4 currently broadcasts little additional news coverage outside of prime time, with just a short 3 minute news bulletin at 11:35 appearing regularly on its schedule
- Channel 4 is required in its licence to provide at least one news programme at lunchtimes and one in the early evening each weekday, and also program in the early evening at weekends, while also providing a total of at least 208 hours per annum of news content

Channel 5 programmes the majority of its news content outside of peak time

During peak time, Channel 5 programs 5.5 minutes of news content per weekday, delivered as two short news bulletins. Due to the brief nature of this programming, it is unlikely that a change in peak time COSTA rules would have a significant impact on Channel 5's news output

Illustrative Channel 5 news schedule

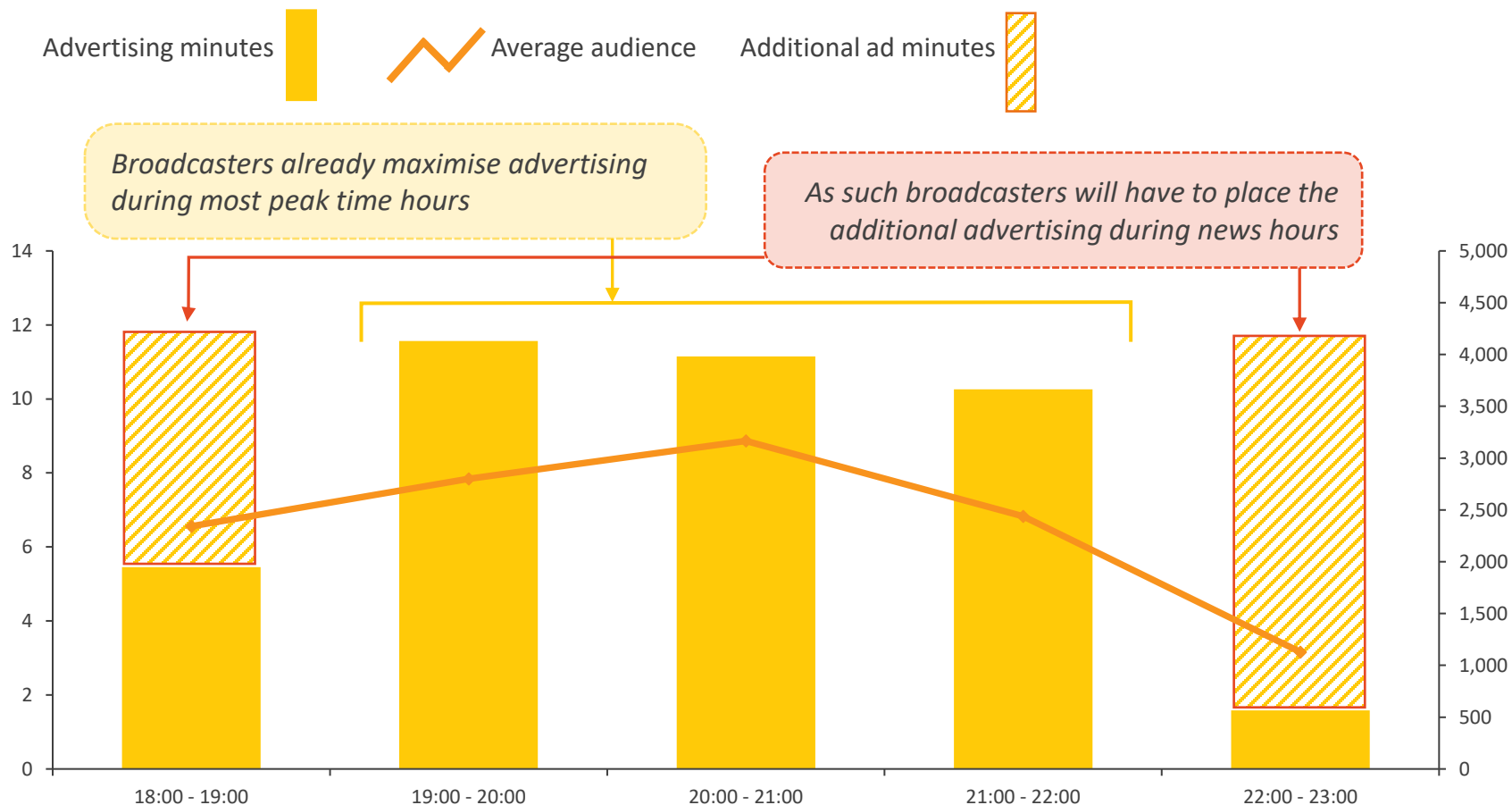


- Channel 5's remit stipulates its main news programming takes place in the early evening. It takes place outside of peak, between 5-6pm, avoiding overlaps with other PSB provision
- During peak time Channel 5 broadcasts multiple short News bulletins, averaging just over 5 minutes 30 seconds of peak time news content per weekday evening
- Channel 5 is required to broadcast 20 hours of news content in each calendar year during peak time
- Due to the limited amount of News content that Channel 5 currently broadcasts during peak time it is unlikely that any change in peak time ad requirements will have a significant impact on Channel 5's total news output

Removing restrictions will lead to an increase in ads during peak time news

With non-news hours already running the maximum 12 minutes of ad minutes, PSBs will broadcast additional minutes in news hours. This would lead to a reduction in the amount of news programming in the news hours

ITV's main channel average ad minutes and audience per hour, Monday to Friday (2024 annual average)



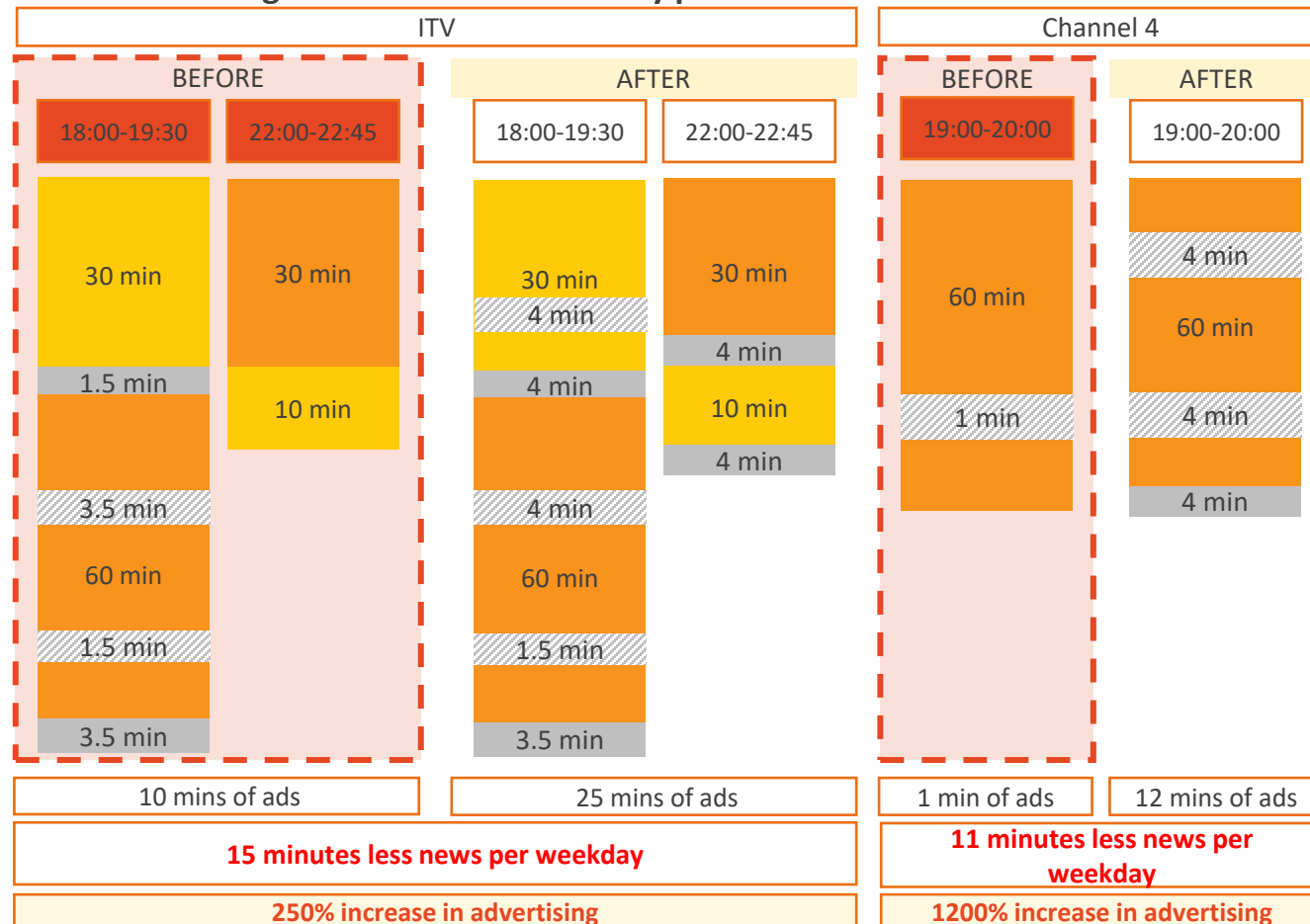
Note: Data above is inclusive of ITV main channel (inc. Breakfast) in both SD, HD
Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

- Removing the peak time ad minutage restriction which is exclusive to PSB channels would enable them to utilising 12 minutes per hour of advertising throughout peak time
- However, since PSBs already utilize the 12 minute allowance in most peak time hours, the additional advertising minutes will primarily affect news programming hours which currently have low levels of advertising
- Increasing advertising minutage in these hours will lead to a corresponding reduction in news programming

ITV and C4 will increase their ad minutage during peak time news

If peak time ad restrictions changed for PSBs, PSBs will maximise their ad load during peak time news. We estimate that this could result in up to 26 minutes less peak time news content per day

Illustrative Changes to ITV and C4 weekday peak time news schedule



- Our analysis is based on the assumption that if ad restrictions were changed for PSBs, Rule 10 of COSTA would nonetheless remain upheld: *“The transmission of films and news programmes may be interrupted by advertising or teleshopping only once for each scheduled period of at least 30 minutes”*
- If the maximum ad break duration (currently 3min30secs) were removed, broadcasters would be able to hit the maximum 12 minutes through a number of different break combinations (see left)
 - 4 mins, 4 mins, 4mins
 - 3.5 mins, 5 mins, 3.5 mins
- Our analysis shows that this could result in up to 26 minutes less peak time news content on a typical weekday, amounting to over 110 hours over the course of a year

Note: ITV ad minutage around programming between 7-8pm, including the Evening News, will not change as ITV already runs the maximum minutes
 Source: BARB, Oliver & Ohlbaum analysis

These potential changes would therefore lead to a reduction in total news consumption

This would come as a result of a reduced number of news reports covered and a diminished audience

- 1

Reduction in news coverage

 - As we have illustrated, a potential change in ad regulations could lead to channels 3, 4 and 5 increasing their ad minutage in peak time news hours, leading to a reduction in the volume of their news output
 - This would lead to a reduction in the length and breadth of stories covered, as either:
 - News programmes will contain fewer reports
 - Or the duration of each news report will reduce (to maintain the same number of reports)
- 2

Diminished news audience

 - Although viewers are used to advertising on TV, these potential changes are substantial – up to 11x more advertising in the case of Channel 4 News
 - This level of increase is likely to have a negative impact on audiences – both on perception of news and on audience levels, with some deterred from watching
- 3

Total consumption of news falls

 - We estimate that this may amount to over 110 hours of news programming lost during peak time each year on the PSB channels
 - This lost volume of programming would combine with a decrease in audience to result in a significant fall in total PSB news consumption (audience hours)

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