

Institution: Cardiff University		
Unit of Assessment: Communication, Cultural & Media Studies, Library & Information Management (34)		
Title of case study: Enhancing the accuracy and impartiality of journalism: reshaping broadcasters' editorial guidelines and practices		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Stephen Cushion Justin Lewis	Professor Professor	01/01/2006 – present 15/08/2000 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Yes		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>UK broadcasters have a legal requirement to deliver news accurately and impartially, but how well this is achieved is open to scrutiny. Cardiff researchers, with over a decade of involvement with media regulators – such as the BBC Trust and Ofcom – and with senior news editors, conducted large-scale content analyses to explore how news accuracy and impartiality might be improved. This research shaped UK editorial practices and standards, resulting in: significant changes in the BBC's editorial guidelines about reporting devolution and statistics; updates to structures and processes of newsgathering; and the creation of new journalistic practices and features. It also enhanced the journalistic practices of other broadcasters, including the reporting of differing devolved health polices during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Since 2007, Cardiff University has carried out six BBC Impartiality Reviews commissioned by the BBC Trust, with reviews since 2014 focussing on devolution and statistics [G3.1, G3.2, G3.3]. This work is illustrative of a wider body of research at Cardiff – supported by UK research council awards [G3.4] and by Ofcom [G3.5] – exploring the accuracy and impartiality of news.</p>		
2.1 Devolution (2015 – 2020)		
<p>Since devolution, the UK's four nations have pursued distinct and different approaches in key policy areas, such as health and education. Broadcasters have a responsibility to accurately report stories in a way that acknowledges these differences and which enables audience understanding of what is happening in their own and other parts of the UK.</p>		
<p>Building on previous research which was the focus of Lewis and Cushion's REF 2014 impact case study (id=17644), Cardiff University was commissioned by the BBC Trust in 2015 and 2016 [G3.1, G3.2] to assess whether the BBC was accurately and impartially reflecting a policy landscape that no longer centres on Westminster [3.1, 3.2, 3.3]. The team's analysis of 5,732 news items [3.1]:</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenged the assumption that accuracy of devolved coverage continued to improve; • found that in some areas accuracy had declined since their last review in 2010, with England often treated as a default for the UK, even when different policies were pursued across the UK's four nations. 		
<p>These points were brought into sharper focus during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a £579K AHRC funded project [G3.4] conducted in collaboration with a range of broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News), Cushion studied television news coverage of the lockdown measures, highlighting audience confusion about which policies applied in different parts of the UK, and identifying ways in which network broadcasters could provide greater clarity when explaining devolved differences in approach.</p>		

2.2 Statistics (2015 – 2017)

The Cardiff team carried out an impartiality review of the accuracy and impartiality of reporting statistics by the BBC and commercial news media. The research, funded by the BBC Trust after a competitive tender process [G3.3], developed a new benchmark for tracking how statistics are used by journalists and applied in news reporting [3.4, 3.5]. They analysed 6,916 news items across a range of UK media, reviewed 4,285 statistical references, and drew on eight qualitative case studies to assess the accuracy and impartiality of how statistics were reported [3.4]. Key findings included:

- most statistical references were vague and lacked context, without an identifying source;
- few substantive statistical claims were challenged by journalists.

2.3 Range and depth of news (2019 – 2020)

In May 2019, Cardiff University (via competitive tender) was commissioned by Ofcom to assess the range and depth of BBC news and current affairs across all platforms, and how it compares with other UK news providers [G3.5]. The team, led by Cushion, carried out a large-scale content analysis of 3,056 news items [3.6]. This revealed that, in line with its public service broadcast remit to provide high-quality news and current affairs, most BBC outlets featured a harder news agenda, and supplied a higher level of policy information and analysis, than many commercial news providers.

The study also identified areas where the public service media could enhance its range and depth of news and current affairs programming. For example, the BBC predominately used internal rather than external hyperlinks in online news, which led to Ofcom questioning whether the BBC was meeting its public service licence condition of linking to an adequate amount of third-party material. The Cardiff team recommended defining what an “adequate” amount of linking to third party material represents and Cushion met with the BBC (after the Ofcom report was published) to discuss ways of enhancing the use of external hyperlinks.

This body of research prompted UK broadcasters to implement a series of changes that improved the accuracy and impartiality of UK news reporting about devolution and statistics, as well as enhancing the range and depth of news and current affairs programming.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Cushion, S., Lewis, J., Sambrook, R. and Kilby, A. (2015) *Four Nations Impartiality Review Follow-up 2015: An Analysis of Reporting Devolution*. London: BBC Trust. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2016/cardiff_university_2015.pdf

[3.2] Cushion, S., Lewis, J., and Kilby, A. (2020) ‘Why context, relevance and repetition matter in political reporting: News Media, public knowledge and understanding politics in a devolved United Kingdom’, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 21(01): 34-53 <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464884917746560>

[3.3] Cushion, S., Lewis, J., and Sambrook, R. (2016) *Nations Impartiality Review: A snapshot picture*. London: BBC Trust. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/2016/cardiff_university_2016.pdf

[3.4] Cushion, S., Lewis, J., Sambrook, R. and Callaghan, R. (2016) *Impartiality Review of BBC Reporting of Statistics: A Content Analysis*. London: BBC Trust. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/stats_impartiality/content_analysis.pdf

[3.5] Cushion, S., Lewis, J. and Callaghan, R. (2017) ‘Data Journalism, Impartiality and Statistical Claims: Towards more independent scrutiny in news reporting’, *Journalism Practice*, Vol.11(10): 1198-1215 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1256789>

[3.6] Cushion, S. (2019) 'The Range and Depth of BBC News and Current Affairs: A Content Analysis'. London: Ofcom. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/174205/bbc-news-review-content-analysis-full-report.pdf

Selected grants:

[G3.1] Cushion, S., Lewis, J. and Sambrook, R. *2016 Nations Impartiality Review and devolution in the UK*, BBC Trust, 03/05/2016 – 06/01/2017, £70,704

[G3.2] Cushion, S., Lewis, J. and Sambrook, R. *Nations Impartiality Review and devolution in the UK*, BBC Trust, 05/10/2015 – 31/01/2016, £79,269

[G3.3] Cushion, S. *Impartiality Review of BBC reporting of statistics*, BBC Trust, 12/10/2015 – 30/09/2016, £70,285

[G3.4] Cushion, S. *Countering disinformation: enhancing journalistic legitimacy in public service media* 29/12/2019 – 28/12/2021, Arts and Humanities Research Council, £579,183, AH/S012508/1

[G3.5] Cushion, S. *The Range and Depth of BBC News and Current Affairs: A Content Analysis*, Ofcom, 21/05/2019 – 31/01/2020, £105,587

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

4.1 Influencing editorial practice to reflect a devolved UK

The BBC Executive responded to Cardiff's 2015 and 2016 studies **[3.1 - 3.3]** by implementing editorial changes, including new editorial practices and conventions. Rhys Evans, BBC Wales' Deputy Head of News and Current Affairs at the time, stated that *"the fact that so many positive changes have occurred as a result of Cardiff's research, and the subsequent recommendations, have transformed the way BBC News is reported across the four nations of the UK"* **[5.1]**. Changes are outlined in the response from the BBC Trust and the BBC Executive to these reports, some of which include:

- flagging devolved stories in advance and in real time, with the BBC Nations asked to highlight any lapses to the UK News Editor **[5.2a]**;
- introduction of a permanent 'Nations news belt' on the News at Six, guaranteeing a profile for stories from around the UK **[5.2a]**;
- appointment of a Scotland Editor, a new post created to raise the profile of Scottish news **[5.2a]**. The BBC subsequently launched a new channel for Scotland, with a nightly one-hour news programme, to give *"audiences in Scotland an improved offer and a real choice over whether to watch UK news and/or to watch a programme from a purely Scottish perspective"* **[5.3a, p. 16]**;
- the BBC's 9am news conference now includes the Heads of News from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by video conference **[5.2a]**. Rhys Evans (BBC Wales) noted that *"this integration has allowed us to further advise output editors so that we deliver a news agenda that serves the UK, including Wales. This approach, based on continuous dialogue, has also been reflected in major news events – for example UK and devolved elections"* **[5.1]**;
- weekly news planning meetings have now adopted the same model, which opens up opportunities for more comparative treatments of stories between the Nations (a shortcoming identified in **[3.1-3.3]**). The BBC Trust stated that they *"expect this development to reinforce the importance of reporting thoroughly from around the whole UK"* **[5.2a]**.

In assessing the research, the BBC Trust described Cardiff's review and follow-up content analysis as *"invaluable in tracking and assessing the BBC's record over the past eight years"* **[5.2a p3]** and confirmed that *"that the nations' impartiality reviews have been one of our most important pieces of work and have been of particular significance to the different nations of the UK"* **[5.3a, p23]**.

4.2 Devolution coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic

With all four devolved UK nations pursuing different public health approaches during the pandemic, the need for clarity in news coverage – highlighted in Cushion’s 2020 analysis of their COVID-19 coverage – became especially critical. The team submitted this research as evidence to i) the UK Government’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ‘Future of Public Service Broadcasting Inquiry’ in May 2020 [5.4], and ii) a Senedd Cymru – Welsh Parliament (Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee) inquiry in July 2020 into the pandemic’s impact on journalism and local media [5.5]. The Committee’s subsequent report (September 2020) stated: *“We agree with Professor Stephen Cushion that broadcasters should be reminded of their commitment to the four nations when it comes to UK network news. We therefore call on the Welsh Government to urge Ofcom to ensure that broadcasters maintain impartiality by reporting on all four UK nations equally, as a matter of course, but especially when it comes to their approach to public health”* [5.5, p.15].

Cushion subsequently produced short videos for senior broadcast editors based on Cardiff’s research, with recommendations on how reporting could be improved. In response to this, Cait Fitzsimmons (Editor, 5 News) stated: *“The Covid pandemic has added a new impetus to our coverage of devolved policies and the way each of the four nations is responding to the crisis...This became increasingly important as the initial full lockdown was eased. The follow-up research that Stephen Cushion provided for us was invaluable. Programmes are debriefed every day so individual successes and failures are picked up but having an overview helped every understand when we weren’t getting it right and why. His ‘bird’s eye view’ of our output was essentially a shortcut to focus on exactly what more we needed to do to be better”* [5.6].

4.3 Informing how journalists report statistics (2015 – 2017)

The Cardiff team’s review of statistics, which included recommendations for future practice [5.7], generated widespread debate across news media [5.8] and informed the BBC Trust’s 2016 Making Sense of Statistics report [5.2b]. This report – which references and quotes Cardiff research 42 times – led to new editorial guidelines about reporting statistics [5.2b]. In March 2017 a follow-up review evidenced how the BBC had addressed the report’s findings [5.2c], by:

- introducing ‘Reality Check’ as a permanent fixture running through all BBC news programming. The Trust described this as *“crucially important to the BBC’s long-term strategy in the reporting of statistics and in combating the spurious legitimacy of ‘fake news’”*;
- ensuring that BBC News does more to contextualise facts and figures through *“heightened awareness within BBC News teams of the need to be rigorous in testing stories based on statistics”*;
- giving presenters the confidence to challenge statistical references and guide the audience at appropriate times. Three programmes (Today, BBC Breakfast, and Five Live Drive) were identified as the priority output following the report. Their presenters and production teams were briefed on the report recommendations, with editors subsequently reporting *“a shift in culture, with greater discussion and examination of the robustness of statistics in editorial meetings”*;
- supporting specialist programme-makers to interpret and explain competing sets of statistics more carefully;
- rewarding the excellent use of statistics in programme making;
- exploring the ways in which further editorial guidance could be provided by organisations such as the Royal Statistical Society.

The BBC’s 2019 editorial guidelines included a new section entitled ‘Reporting Statistics’ informed by Cardiff findings [3.4] offering constructive advice on handling statistics [5.9].

4.4 Reviewing BBC news and current affairs

Cushion's analysis of the range and depth of BBC news and current affairs [3.6] was part of the evidence base for Ofcom's formal review of the BBC (October 2019). The review draws attention to Cardiff's finding that the BBC was not providing adequate hyperlinks to third-party online material [5.10a, p. 19-20] and Ofcom subsequently engaged with the BBC about this.

Ofcom's 2019/20 Annual Report (November 2020) confirmed that *"The BBC has acted on our recommendation on linking to online sources outside the BBC" and that "[the BBC] would be providing further guidance to its journalists to ensure that links and attribution would continue to be provided across its online news content"* [5.10b, p.36]. This provision of links to external content supports the wider industry and provides users with a wealth of information, as required by the BBC's Operating Licence condition [5.10b, p.36].

4.5 Beyond the BBC and ongoing engagement

While the primary focus of the Cardiff research has been on the BBC (the UK's leading news provider) the team continues to engage with and influence other broadcasters. For example, Cait Fitzsimmons, Editor of 5 News and a member of ITN's senior management team, highlighted the importance of the Ofcom review's findings [3.6]. She noted that *"these recommendations were significant because it led to a reflection on our own strategies and practices, for example how we deal with some issues of impartiality, where 50/50 balance is not necessarily the right way forward e.g. climate change"* [5.6]. She confirmed that, as a result of the research, the news team is *"where appropriate, trying to explain to the viewer...why we've taken a different angle"* and that *"It's also helped in my efforts to find distinctive stories – particularly from groups who are under-represented or under-served by broadcast news"* [5.6].

Across both UK public service and commercial media, Cardiff University research directly informed improvements in the editorial standards of broadcast journalism, which have led to new editorial guidelines and practices that, in specific but important ways, enhance the accuracy and impartiality of news and current affairs programming.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Testimonial from Rhys Evans, Head of Strategy and Education, BBC Wales (formerly Deputy Head of News and Current Affairs, BBC Wales)

[5.2] BBC Trust impartiality reviews:

- a. Network news and current affairs coverage of the four UK nations: 2015 and 2016 follow up-to 2008 review (November 2016)
- b. Making sense of statistics (August 2016)
- c. Making sense of statistics: The BBC Trust's conclusions on the Executive's follow up report (March 2017)

[5.3] BBC reports:

- a. BBC Trust End of Charter Report (2017)
- b. BBC annual report (2020)

[5.4] Written evidence submitted to Future of Public Service Broadcasting Inquiry

[5.5] Senedd Cymru's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee report: Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on journalism and local media (September 2020)

[5.6] Testimonial from Cait Fitzsimmons, Editor, 5 News -

[5.7] Cardiff University letter with recommendations for improving coverage of statistics

[5.8] Sweeney, Mark (2016) 'BBC has high dependency on Tory government for statistics', Media Guardian, 10 August

[5.9] BBC Guidance on reporting statistics

[5.10] Ofcom reports:

- a. Ofcom Review of BBC News and Current Affairs (October 2019)
- b. Ofcom Annual Report on the BBC 2019/2020 (November 2020)