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Forever old? Why TV news is losing younger viewers, and what can be done about it

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Chapter One: Do we need television news?	5
Chapter Two: What’s the problem with television news?	10
Chapter Three: Making changes? An analysis of four TV news programmes ...19	
Chapter Four: Audience feedback	33
Chapter Five: Conclusions and recommendations	42
Bibliography	52
Appendix One: Table of interviewees	55
Appendix Two: Audience research questionnaire	56

Table of Figures

Figure One: Content analysis - positive / negative framing.....	22
Figure Two: Content analysis - prominence of positive stories.....	23
Figure Three: Content analysis - political and violent stories.....	24
Figure Four: Content analysis - who tells the stories.....	25
Figure Five: Content analysis - stories told by 'real' people.....	26
Figure Six: Content analysis - style of story telling.....	27
Figure Seven: Audience research - story comprehension.....	34
Figure Eight: Audience research - story engagement.....	35
Figure Nine: Audience research - presenter engagement.....	36
Figure Ten: Audience research - presenter engagement, strongly agree.....	37
Figure Eleven: Audience research - on-screen design.....	37
Figure Twelve: Audience research - value of television news.....	38

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CHAPTER ONE: *Do we need television news?*

For those working in television news, these are challenging times. Producers and editors face existential questions about their industry. If their medium once ruled the battle for attention, it is now competing with an insurgency of new information formats, all of which are more accessible and immediate than the traditional TV news bulletin. Viewing figures tell us that this challenge is particularly acute with younger audiences. In the United Kingdom, overall viewership has remained fairly stable in recent years¹, but that fact disguises a far more dramatic drop in viewing figures amongst younger people² (OFCOM, 2018: 27-28). Outside the UK we find a similar story. For example, according to ABC Australia, 83% of the audience for its flagship 7pm bulletin is over the age of 50, up from 70% in 2008 (ABC 2017). And research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism shows that “in the US, the UK, and France, television news bulletins in particular are of declining importance as a source of news, especially for younger viewers” (Nielsen & Sambrook 2016: 9).

This is undoubtedly a worrying trend for television journalists, but it is important to note at the very beginning of this paper that in many countries, television news remains the single most important source of news for the population as a whole (e.g. OFCOM 2018: 14 {UK}, Pew Research Centre 2017 {USA}). For huge numbers of people, particularly older generations, watching the evening news has become part of the daily routine, and there are many good reasons for this; TV news is digestible, visually interesting and accessible. One of the key challenges for those in the television news industry, then, is how to attract new, younger viewers without losing the current audience.

Of course, younger audiences have always been less interested in the news than older generations. In the past, though, audiences could be relied upon to pick up the television news habit as they got older. With jobs, children and mortgages comes a greater need for information about the world, and TV bulletins were designed to fit in to the more rigid

¹ An average of 121 hours per year in 2010, dropping to 110 hours per year in 2017 (a 9% decline)

² 16-24 year olds watched 34 hours of TV news a year in 2010, and 23 hours per year in 2017 (a 32% decline)

routines of people with full-time employment and families. But that pattern is now changing. Emma Theedom³, a research manager at the BBC who recently led a study into television news audiences, explains that “you’re never really going to get teenagers watching news in huge numbers, you never really did... It [is] that middle group, the 35-54 year olds, that [isn’t] growing into the news in the way that [it] should”. The digital world is drastically changing how our patterns of news consumption change as we get older, and television news is not immune to that. As Theedom’s colleague Katherine Hardymont, the BBC’s Head of Youth Audiences, explains, “What we’re seeing at the moment is young audiences are leading the market shift, but the market shift affects all audiences, and it’s here to stay”.

It is important to recognise that a big part of this market shift is the extraordinary proliferation of news sources and platforms, driving a move towards personalisation and away from the standardised model that forms the basis of most television news programmes. This increased choice makes it extremely unlikely that TV news audience figures will return to their previous peaks, meaning success in the future will look very different to success in the past. However, increased choice is not the only problem for TV news. Just as problematic is the way in which it is perceived; for a long time, audience researchers have found that TV news is particularly unappealing to younger viewers (e.g. Buckingham 2000a: 64). This problem has been exacerbated by online news sources, which offer an alternative to television news that often feels much more relevant to young people’s lives. This sudden explosion of new media has focussed a spotlight on TV news, casting its shortcomings into sharp relief when compared with the digital world. Younger generations are at the forefront of this because they are the most digitally literate, and therefore the most likely to get their news online and experience this contrast. However, many of the criticisms young people make of television news are not really age-specific; that is, they are unlikely to disappear as people get older. This is an important point to make, because it means that as time goes on, audiences of all ages will be increasingly aware of the shortcomings of TV news, and as willing to switch it off as young people currently are.

This poses a question; if there are so many other places to get news, do we even need *television* news? Broadcasters could start planning now for a post-TV future, and huge

³ For a full list of interviewees see Appendix One, page 55

financial savings could eventually be made by closing down television infrastructure as the audience disappears. However, I believe that there are two key reasons to think that television news is still of value to society; it has relatively high levels of trust, and, by (theoretically at least) appealing to a mass, general audience, it helps to define public debate.

Research suggests that around the world, people's trust in television news remains relatively high, albeit in the context of low levels of trust in the media generally. For example, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 finds that in twenty-six of thirty-seven territories measured (70%), the most trusted brand is a television channel or public service broadcaster (PSB) with a strong tradition of television news (Newman et al. 2018: n.p.). Of course, trust in an organisation which makes news for multiple platforms doesn't necessarily mean that people trust *television* specifically. However, Kantar's Trust in News survey conducted in the UK, US, Brazil and France found a slightly higher level of trust for rolling news channels and television news bulletins than for the websites or apps of TV or radio companies, suggesting that TV news may be more trusted than digital news made by the same organisation. Kantar also found significantly lower levels of trust in online-only news brands (Kantar 2017). These data suggest that there is something about television news that people feel able to trust. Perhaps it is because TV news is delivered by personalities, or because television news is generally produced by large media organisations, so the public assumes they have the resources to check their information. Or it could simply be the idea that 'seeing is believing'; Newman et al. find that "TV is considered less open to manipulation than online media, because live pictures and reporters on the spot give consumers confidence that what they are seeing is true" (Newman et al. 2017: 5). Whatever the reason, the relatively high level of trust in television makes it valuable to society.

As products of mass consumption, television news bulletins have also traditionally helped to set the framework of public debate in many countries. Arguably, the idea of a common public sphere is endangered by the increasing importance of personalisation in digital media, leading to concerns over fragmentation as each individual's news consumption differs from the next person's. This is a much discussed idea in contemporary media research, but it should be noted that a recent study of six high-income countries found that "the structural move toward a high-choice media environment with far greater potential for audience fragmentation has so far not in fact been accompanied by widespread

fragmentation of news audiences” (Fletcher & Nielsen 2017: 492). However, Fletcher and Nielsen themselves advise caution, pointing out that their research

May not capture the subtler ways in which online news consumption is different. For instance, we might question whether people spend as much time consuming news online as they do offline, with implications for understanding and information retention. It is not immediately clear that an increase in duplication driven by incidental exposure to headlines and snippets in search results and social media feeds, rather than full articles, would translate into more informed debate (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017: 493)

In other words, not all news consumption is necessarily equal. Although research suggests that by using digital media, consumers are likely to serendipitously come upon the same news topics as their peers, it is not clear that this incidental discovery of stories helps to frame a broad public discourse in the same way as the mass consumption of a single product. At its best, the TV news bulletin offers a contextualisation of current events, with a curated rundown and high-impact storytelling helping the viewer to make sense of the world around them. It is not yet clear if the online world offers a direct, single-product alternative to this.

If we accept these arguments, then it becomes a matter of importance to make television news more attractive to new audiences, as older existing ones disappear. This research paper does this in three ways. First, I conducted interviews with industry experts and reviewed existing research, in order to understand the key criticisms and key opportunities for television news. By understanding what TV should do less of and what it should do more of, we can make concrete suggestions for change. These key criticisms and opportunities are considered in Chapter Two.

Next, I conducted a content analysis of four television news programmes. Three of them were created with the specific goal of changing the traditional television news format. The fourth is a more typical news programme, which is also making changes in response to audience feedback. Where possible, I framed my content analysis using the key criticisms of television news outlined in Chapter Two, allowing me to discover the extent to which the

programmes have made changes in response to these specific criticisms. My content analysis is detailed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four outlines the results of my own audience research, which surveyed a group of nearly 400 people worldwide, asking them to respond specifically to excerpts of the four programmes in this study. This helped me to understand which stylistic elements of each programme appealed to the audience, and the extent to which the audience appreciated the differences between the programmes.

Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss in detail the significance of my findings, with some concrete recommendations of how television news could approach the challenges it faces.

Given the specific focus on television news, I will not be considering in great detail the *digital* strategies of television news programmes. Although it is important for broadcasters to make their television content work on digital platforms (many broadcasters, e.g. Channel 4 News in the UK do this very successfully), a news organisation must be able to make an independent argument for continuing to resource a television bulletin. If the key reason for making a daily television programme is to generate content for digital platforms, this is nothing more than a very expensive digital video strategy.

Ultimately, television news must find a new place for itself in the contemporary news media landscape. If it has traditionally seen itself somewhat in isolation, it must now be seen as one news product of many that an individual will consume each day. This has profound implications for what a television bulletin should look like, both in the style and substance of the content. By considering what brings people to television despite already learning the news elsewhere, and confronting the criticisms that turn people away, it may be possible to find a niche for television news which gives it a meaningful role in the lives of future generations.

CHAPTER TWO: *What's the problem with TV news?*

Writing in the year 2000 about young people's changing media habits, David Buckingham highlights "the need for innovation if news is to reawaken the interest of younger audiences, and indeed of the large majority of the population" (Buckingham 2000b: 182). It is curious, then, that eighteen years later the traditional television news bulletin appears - on the surface at least - not to have changed much. A look back at British TV news bulletins from 2000 finds a smartly-dressed person sitting at a desk, often with an image behind them relating to the story. The presenter reads a tightly-written script in a tone and register more formal than that of ordinary speech. A well-formed 'package' follows the introduction, voiced by a reporter who talks through a sequence of clips of people connected to the story. Live correspondents are used throughout the programme to bring extra analysis and a sense of immediacy.

There are many good reasons why television news is produced in this way. But it is also surprising that a news bulletin from eighteen years ago is so recognisable, despite the fact that in the intervening years the news media has gone through one of the most dramatic periods of change in its history. As David Buckingham warned all those years ago, television news must adapt to remain relevant to future audiences.

Part of the challenge is to define what younger audiences want. Unpublished research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2017 suggests different age groups have similar levels of interest in most types of story. In the UK, for example, 49% of people over thirty-five said they are very or extremely interested in political news, compared to 44% of those under thirty-five. The younger age group were slightly more interested in science and technology news and celebrity news, but again the difference was not huge. Wayne et al. (2010: 79) cite two more studies which find that young people are interested in the same kinds of news topics as their elders, leading them to argue that for younger audiences "it is not just what is reported in the news that is important, but how" (2010: 80). This should act as a warning against trying to attract young audiences by filling a programme with funny, celebrity or light news, but it is also a recognition that stories must be told in ways that feels relevant to people's lives.

What, then, are the changes needed to make television news more attractive to young audiences? First, the editorial proposition itself must be of interest. This is about telling relevant stories in engaging ways, and the people through whom these stories are told. Second, television news must fit into an individual's broader news consumption pattern, recognising the fact that many people who watch an evening news programme will already be up to date with the day's news.

The rest of this chapter will consider these two ideas in detail. First, I will discuss how the product itself could adapt, focussing on three areas which appear frequently in discussions about television news and young audiences; negativity in the news agenda, connecting with the audience, and the format and style of the programme. Second, I will discuss contemporary news consumption patterns, asking what TV can offer in a world where people get their news from multiple sources.

Good news, please!

It is easy to disregard the public's desire for more positive news stories. For example, there is research to suggest that although people say they prefer positive news stories, they actually select more negative ones (Trussler & Soroka 2014: 373). However, Trussler and Soroka also note the reciprocal nature of supply and demand in the news media, speculating that "efforts on the part of journalists to produce more positive, substantive news content may well lead to a shift in consumer behaviour" (2014: 374).

Katherine Hardyment, the BBC's Head of Youth Audiences, places great importance on this issue:

"Probably the single most simple, tangible change we could make is sorting out that negativity in the news agenda which just comes up again and again... If you look at some of the online research we did with younger audiences, they say 'why would I read in depth about a subject that really upsets me and I can do nothing about?'"

Of course, the news has always been more negative than positive, but in a world where the news is in our pocket, where at any given moment we are just one tap away from learning

about the latest war, disaster or corruption scandal, journalists must be careful to ensure that they do not overload the consumer with negativity. This is of particular importance to television news because it is a linear, passive form of consumption. The audience has relinquished control over which stories they consume to the programme editor. If that decision too often results in a negative change of mood, the viewer is unlikely to make that programme a regular part of their news diet.

Ulrik Haagerup, the former Executive Director of news at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, believes so strongly that the news media over-emphasise negative stories that he founded the Constructive Institute, an organisation which advocates a form of journalism that gives a more balanced portrayal of world events. He takes his inspiration from Carl Bernstein's famous description of journalism as "the best obtainable version of the truth", arguing that a news bulletin or newspaper packed full of negative stories is not a fair reflection of the world around us (Haagerup 2016). He makes it clear that 'constructive journalism' is not just positive propaganda. Instead, it is about solutions, and it is about people who do things that the rest of us could learn from. If 'breaking news' is about today, he suggests, then 'constructive journalism' is about tomorrow. Viewed this way, a more positive news agenda which offers solutions, inspiration and opportunities seems an obvious attraction to younger audiences, who are the people with the biggest stake in our future.

Connecting with the audience

In 2017, the well known British TV news presenter, Jon Snow, gave the keynote MacTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival. It took place two months after the Grenfell Tower disaster in London, when a huge fire engulfed a residential block killing seventy-two people. In his speech, Snow accused the media of being "too far removed from those who lived their lives in Grenfell", instead prioritising news about the political elite.

How much time had we devoted to social housing in this year since the EU referendum, when day after day we found ourselves filling the airwaves with [the] negotiating positions of Theresa May, Boris Johnson...and the rest, before serious negotiations had even begun? Not just Brexit, consuming the airwaves with so much

political flatulence. Stuff which we know from viewing figures...bore and frustrate the viewer (Snow, 2017).

Jon Snow wasn't speaking about the disconnect between the media and *young* people specifically, but he could have been. For example, Wayne et al.'s qualitative study of eighty young people in the UK found that "most of our participants expressed significant disillusionment with formal politics", and that "television news and current affairs were so linked into this arena that there was little to guide audiences in terms of analysis" (2010: 210).

There are two core issues here; the selection of stories in a news bulletin, and the voices through which those stories are told. Research tends to suggest that viewers of all ages would like to see fewer stories about political institutions, and more stories which they perceive to be directly relevant to their lives. A recent study by ABC Australia concluded that the flagship 7pm news programme should focus more on "issues like infrastructure, cost of living pressures, development and community issues like health, schools and diversity" (The Australian 2018). Similarly, the BBC's own research found that the audience wants to see issues like the environment, health and social mobility given more prominence in bulletins (BBC/Flamingo 2018).

However, it is too simplistic to suggest that just by covering less politics, you would attract more people to television news. Indeed, detailed and robust journalistic coverage of politics is absolutely central to a functioning democracy, and should continue to be a key part of the agenda. This is where we must consider the voices through which television news is told. David Buckingham says that journalists must "find ways of establishing the *relevance* of politics, and of *connecting* the 'micro-politics' of personal experience with the macro-politics of the public sphere. This...will require a definition of politics that goes well beyond the formal operations of political institutions" (2000b: 187). This is echoed by the BBC's own research into television news audiences, which concludes that "news stories that felt 'of the people' resonated better than those about politicians or people in a position of authority". One suggestion from a member of the public was to tell "political news through the people they are going to impact, rather than through the politicians and Westminster" (BBC/Flamingo 2018).

There are practical difficulties to overcome when telling stories through the eyes of the people impacted. Television news reports produced on the day often feature people in positions of authority, with experts providing analysis. These people are easy to find and are available for interview through press-officers and contact books. 'Real' people take more time to find, and will not always be able to articulate their thoughts as clearly as people with media experience. There are also editorial issues, for example ensuring that one person's experience is truly indicative of a wider news story. And, of course, there are some stories about politics, politicians and political parties which simply cannot be ignored. But despite this, more variation in the type of story and the voices through which they are told is a necessary step towards reestablishing a connection between young audiences and television news.

Tone, style and formality

Nearly every person I spoke to for this project perceived television news as being too serious, too formal, too formulaic, or just too boring. As David Buckingham warns, a "narrow insistence on seriousness" can alienate young people (Buckingham 2000b: 182), and this formal tone is further highlighted when contrasted with the often more natural, informal style of much of the digital news media. It may also be the case that the more emotive and partisan style found particularly on social media helps to engage viewers in a way that broadcasters find difficult to do. For example, Axel Bruns argues that:

The more equitable balance between rational and affective elements in public debate that can be found in some...of the discursive spaces provided by social media could be seen as an important step towards modes of news engagement and political discussion that are more inclusive and thus better able to generate meaningful societal consensus (Bruns 2018: 316).

This poses a particular problem for organisations which are required by law to be objective and impartial. It is certainly not easy to move away from the serious and straight world of television news to a more emotive and discursive one, without showing a preference for one side over the other. In fact, a 2007 report by the UK broadcasting regulator OFCOM went so

far as to question British media regulation, at least with regards to commercial television, by asking if:

For channels other than PSBs, is impartiality still important, or is it a barrier to diversity in an era with a wide range of services available to viewers?..Should other channels be allowed to offer partial news in the same way that newspapers and some websites do at present? (OFCOM 2007: 71).

OFCOM wonders if the regulatory framework of broadcasting could limit engagement, when competing for attention with a wealth of partial and opinionated online news sources. Clearly, there is a much larger discussion to be had about what impartiality means in the current media landscape. I do not support any deregulation of television news, because I believe it would jeopardise the relatively high level of trust that it currently enjoys. However, the perceived formality and strict objectivity of television news increasingly appears to inhibit the audience's engagement with it, particularly amongst younger people. It is, therefore, important for television news to experiment with new ways of engaging with its viewers in a less formal tone, without compromising its impartiality.

News repertoires: How and why news is consumed

The above criticisms and suggestions focus on the ways television news could change in order for it to better appeal to younger audiences. The next part of this chapter will consider the *opportunities* for television in a multimedia environment. It is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of the potential TV news audience will already be aware of the day's headlines. What, then, can TV news offer the consumer which they cannot find elsewhere?

To explain the idea of a news repertoire, Schroeder uses a metaphor from everyday life, comparing our news media choices to "shopping in the 'supermarket of news', taking news media from the shelves and putting them into [our] daily, weekly or monthly 'shopping carts'" (2014: 61). To extend the metaphor, we can consider what it is about each product that attracts us, what leads us to select one item over another, and to consume it in conjunction with the other products in the trolley. Swart et al. (2017: 1353) identify six main reasons why people decide to use a particular source of news. Some are fairly obvious, for example

familiarity with and accessibility of the medium - television journalists need not worry about these. Two of the six reasons are more interesting. First, the idea that a news medium should offer a “*relative advantage*”, meaning that its benefits must outweigh its costs. Whether that cost is money, time, effort or supplying personal data, the consumer must feel that it is worth the price. Second, the use of a news medium is “dependent on the other news media that are consumed...a medium should *fit within the news media repertoire*”. Taken together, these two ideas boil down to one simple but critical consideration for television news, best articulated by the former Editor in Chief of Finnish broadcaster YLE, Atte Jääskeläinen: “Television news should be worth watching. If it’s not worth watching, why watch it?”.

For television news to be worth watching, it cannot simply repeat the experience of consuming news on a mobile phone. It needs to offer something different from the digital world. The most obvious distinguishing factor is the audio-visual quality of television; the experience of sitting in one’s living-room watching images on a large TV set is vastly superior to consuming video on a mobile phone, particularly when mobile video is consumed without sound. For Atte Jääskeläinen, this means TV news should invest heavily in production quality to “really create an experience”. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter One, the high level of trust we find for television news is connected to the fact that it is a visual medium. Television news, then, should be an audio-visually rich experience, setting it apart from the smaller-screen images the audience consumes via digital media.

Another potential niche for television news is the aspect of curation. Richard Sambrook, the former Director of BBC News, sees television news as a way for viewers to make sense of the world with the help of professional editors, something he considers an important selling point despite some public criticism of the mainstream media’s editorial choices. Kamahl Santamaria, presenter of Al Jazeera’s NewsGrid programme (which will be analysed in detail in Chapter Three), says that the idea of journalists as ‘curators’ was fundamental to the concept of his programme, in which he and his team aim to bring some order to the more chaotic informational world of social media.

“That is where I hope we as journalists don’t ever get put out of a job... It’s about our judgement, it’s about what we believe our audience wants, it’s about our own

journalistic integrity... In that sense I don't think [NewsGrid] changes from a regular news bulletin".

Perhaps a more contemporary version of this idea is put forward by Charlie Beckett, a media professor (and former TV news journalist) at the London School of Economics, who suggests that mainstream media organisations have a role in *organising* information into digestible pieces:

The plethora of data sources and competing platforms and outlets means there will be a premium for authoritative and trustworthy curating and filtering of news... The demand for transparent and relevant mediation will increase (Beckett, cited by Bruns 2018: 353).

Whether it is the selection of stories by professional editors, or the organisation of information into manageable chunks, television news has a role to play in guiding consumers towards relevant and genuinely important information. This curation role holds potential for television news, but it must be treated with respect. For as we have seen earlier in this chapter, if audiences feel that the wrong information is being selected, or if it is being presented in unattractive ways, they will turn away from television towards other news media.

A third area of opportunity for television news is as a platform for exclusive content. Richard Sambrook points out that many people already know the main stories of the day before switching on the evening news, so they need to expect something new. He suggests that this could be "more original journalism, and really showcasing it". Atte Jääskeläinen agrees, adding that if you commit resources to scoops, you need to ensure that they are saved for a particular platform where the audience will expect to find them. He is dismissive of the ideology of publishing everything immediately online. TV news, then, should showcase original content, and the audience should know that they can turn to TV to find the organisation's best journalism.

The above criticisms and opportunities are certainly not exhaustive lists, and there may be some disagreement over the particular examples I have given. However, regardless of the

specific examples, thinking about innovation in terms of responding to criticism while at the same time making the most out of television's best features, will help to ensure that any change made to the existing format is of real value to the consumer.

CHAPTER THREE: *Making changes? An analysis of four television news programmes trying to be different.*

Over the last few years the vast majority of creative innovation in the news media has focussed on digital platforms. This is crucially important, but I also believe it is necessary to innovate television news; after all, it is still the most trusted and most used news source in many countries. This chapter looks for innovation in the world of TV news, focussing on four programmes in particular; three which set out from the start to be different, the fourth a more traditional format trying to make changes to attract new audiences. The aim here is not to score or rank each programme, or offer an opinion on which of them is the most suitable for younger viewers. Rather, it is to gain an understanding of how each programme has interpreted the need to find new ways of producing TV news.

The programmes

Al Jazeera English's NewsGrid is broadcast live every weekday on TV and on Facebook. Like all of Al Jazeera's output it focusses on global news, and it describes itself as the channel's first 'interactive news bulletin', with a heavy focus on the use of social media. In this way it aims to bring the viewer into the programme, encouraging people to contact the host, Kamahl Santamaria, with comments and questions.

Outside Source began as a radio programme on the BBC World Service. It was the brainchild of Ros Atkins, who now presents the television edition. The idea was to bring some of the immediacy of the BBC's newsroom to the airwaves, breaking news as it happens and explaining a story as it develops, with expertise from the BBC's global network of journalists. This format has carried across to the television version which is broadcast simultaneously on the BBC's two continuous news channels, BBC World News and the BBC News Channel. It uses a giant touchscreen to show graphics, source material and social media, which help to explain the context and background to stories in a visually engaging way.

Vice News Tonight is broadcast every weekday evening on HBO in the United States, with some episodes also published on YouTube. It is made primarily for an American audience,

but also covers a lot of international news. As most news organisations are moving from offline to online media, this is an unusual example of the reverse; a television product made by an organisation which is better known for its digital content. It looks very different to a standard news bulletin because there is no presenter in a studio. Instead, each story is introduced by an out-of-vision voiceover. The programme's makers claim it has the youngest audience of any network or cable news programme in the US (New York 2018).

The News at Ten is the BBC's flagship evening news bulletin, broadcast on BBC One. It is one of the most watched news programmes in the United Kingdom, regularly getting between three to four million viewers. In some ways this programme could be considered to offer a control study, because it allows me to compare the three 'new-style' programmes with a more traditional bulletin. However, the programme is also trying to make changes, and it is interesting to see how a bulletin of this stature and longevity, with a large existing audience, is able to do this.

These programmes offer a variety of responses to the same core problem of declining audiences. Despite the differences in approach, there are also several similarities between the products. They are all evening programmes, which means they are to some extent digesting the day's news. They can all be referred to as 'bulletins', in that they cover several stories in one programme. And they are all primarily television products, meaning that any production or editorial decision is made first and foremost with a television audience in mind. It is important to note that these programmes do not have an explicit goal of attracting younger audiences (perhaps with the exception of Vice News Tonight). However, all of them recognise the need to be more in tune with the modern world; whether that be through the language they use or the stories they tell. We can, therefore, use these programmes to look for ideas which might make television news more appealing to new generations of viewers.

Methodology

For my content analysis, I watched each programme on the same five days over an eleven week period⁴. This meant I was able to compare how each programme dealt with a similar news agenda; highlighting differences in decisions over which stories to focus on, and in how each story is told. To do this I recorded each story that appeared in the programmes and analysed them in the following ways:

- 1) *Story Type*: This refers to the main topic of the story, for example US politics, war and conflict, the environment.
- 2) *Person Type*: A record of each type of person who appears on screen to tell the story, for example politician, expert, or 'real' person⁵. Many stories have more than one person type attached to them.
- 3) *Format*: How the story is told, e.g. reporter-led package, graphics sequence or interview. Many stories are told using more than one format.
- 4) *Positive / negative balance*: I listed all the stories which could be reasonably said to be 'positive' in nature, i.e. an example of solutions or constructive journalism, or a focus on positive change.
- 5) *Tone and style*: I considered the language used and the visual style of the programme. This was not something I was able to record using the same structured measurements detailed above.

Together, these data allowed me to form a detailed overview of each programme, with reference to some of the key criticisms of television news discussed in Chapter Two. This chapter first presents the findings of my analysis, followed by a discussion of their significance.

⁴ I did not select these days completely at random, because I wanted to ensure that I was recording relatively 'average' programmes. This meant focussing on programmes presented by the main presenter rather than stand-in presenters, and also finding days without major breaking news stories. There were also some practical considerations, for example not every edition of Vice News Tonight is uploaded to their YouTube channel.

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, a 'real' person is a member of the public affected by an issue, for example the victim of a crime or somebody suffering from an illness.

Positive and negative stories

It was not my original intention to analyse the balance of positive and negative stories in each programme, but my research shows negative framing to be such a frequent criticism of television news that I decided to return to my data to record the positive stories. I considered a story to be 'positive' when it offered constructive solutions to an issue, for example technology which can identify online videos promoting terrorism, or when it applied rigorous journalism to positive trends in society, for example a large medical study which concluded that antidepressants really do work. Reports on simple good-news stories were also marked as 'positive', like the birth of a new royal baby.

Figure One: Percentage of 'positive' stories

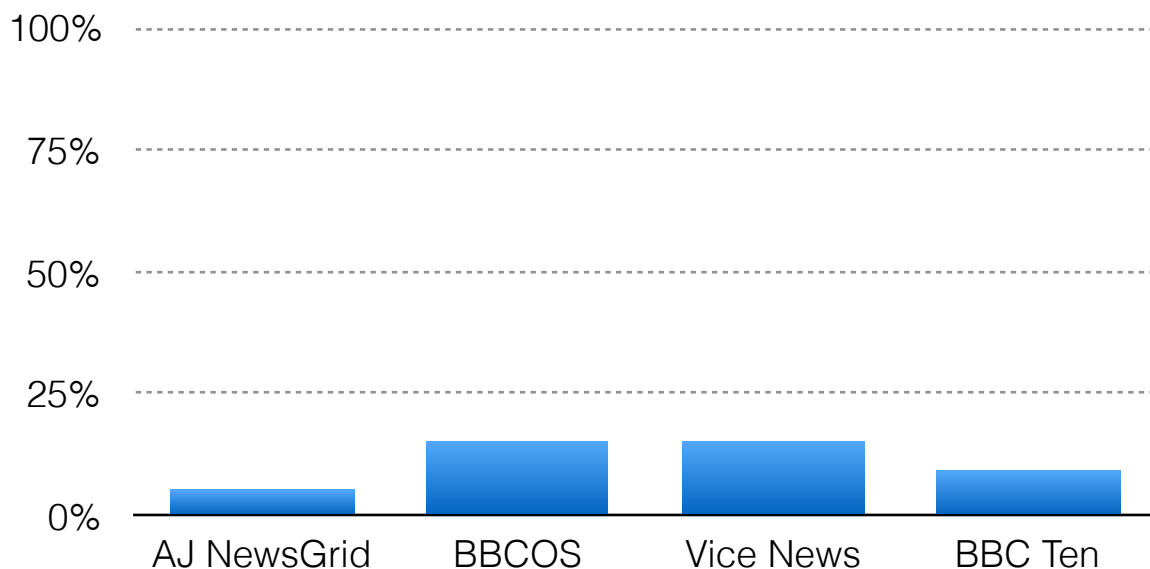
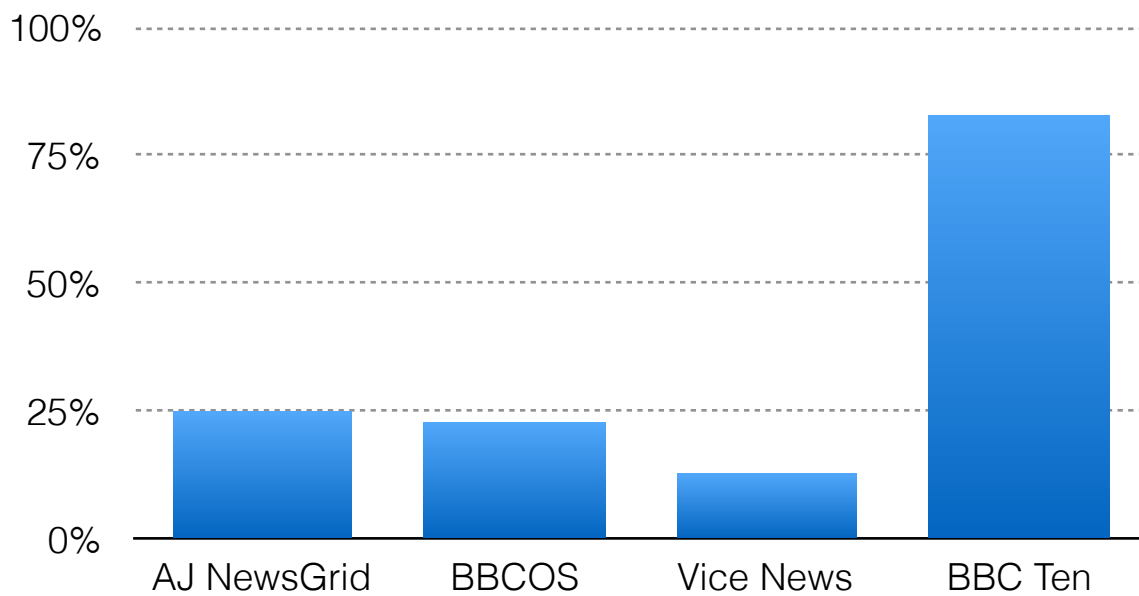


Figure One shows the percentage of all stories recorded which could be considered 'positive'. All programmes contain relatively few stories of this type, which suggests none of them have made a priority of responding to this particular criticism. I was also interested to find out how much prominence these stories were given in each programme. The best way to record this is to measure how close to the beginning of the programme the story appears. Generally speaking, the higher up the running order, the more importance the programme editor has attached to the story. The percentage of 'positive' stories which appeared in the top half of the running order is shown in Figure Two:

Figure Two: 'Positive' stories in top-half



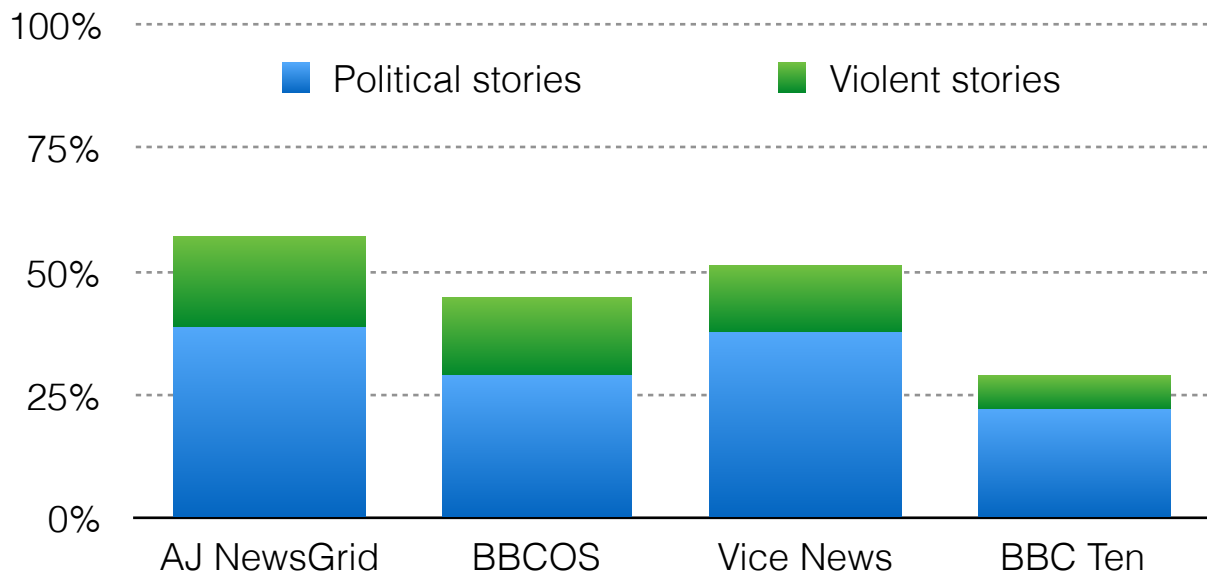
Interestingly, the BBC News at Ten - the more 'traditional' of the four programmes - appears to give these positive stories more prominence. Although a small subset of data, this suggests that the editors of the News at Ten are aware of the audience's desire for more positive stories, so showcase these stories when they can. Nina Goswami, a senior producer on the programme, explains that although journalists often think that 'positive' news means the lighter end-item, for the audience it means things like knife-crime going down or stories about social mobility. Given the low overall number of these stories, the challenge seems to be in finding and commissioning them. The other programmes appear to run most of their 'positive' stories towards the end, which may suggest a natural tendency to prioritise more traditional news stories about neutral or negative topics.

Connecting with the audience: Story type

As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a perception that television news focusses too much on political stories. There is also an assumption that television news puts too much emphasis on war and conflict in a way which does nothing but make the viewer feel helpless, or as Katherine Hardyment, the BBC's Head of Youth Audiences, puts it, "why would they watch something that completely depresses them". I was therefore keen to find out how many stories of this nature were featured in each of the programmes in my study. Figure Three

shows the percentage of stories which could be considered ‘political’, and the percentage of stories which could be considered ‘violent’ (i.e. stories about war, conflict or disaster).

Figure Three: Political & violent stories



My data show that roughly half of the stories in the three ‘new-style’ programmes are political or violent in nature. The BBC News at Ten dedicates about a quarter of its stories to these themes. I also found that the News at Ten is less likely to lead with a story about politics or violence⁶. It should be noted that this is a slightly unfair comparison, because the News at Ten has a more domestic focus than NewsGrid and Outside Source, which means it can more easily tell stories about topics like health or education. International news, on the other hand, often defaults to stories about supranational institutions or conflict, as they are seen as being relevant to a global audience.

Connecting with the audience: Who tells the story

Next, I measured the type of person who appears on screen to tell each story. This measurement is in response to the idea discussed in Chapter Two that stories which feel ‘of

⁶ Across the five days I studied, the BBC News at Ten led with a political or violent story on one occasion, Vice News Tonight three times, while BBC Outside Source and Al Jazeera NewsGrid led all five programmes with this type of story. Given the small sample size, it is possible that this result is an anomaly.

the people' resonate better than stories featuring politicians. Figure Four shows the percentage of stories which include 'politicians' or people in similar positions of authority, and the percentage of stories which include 'real' people.

Figure Four: Who tells the stories

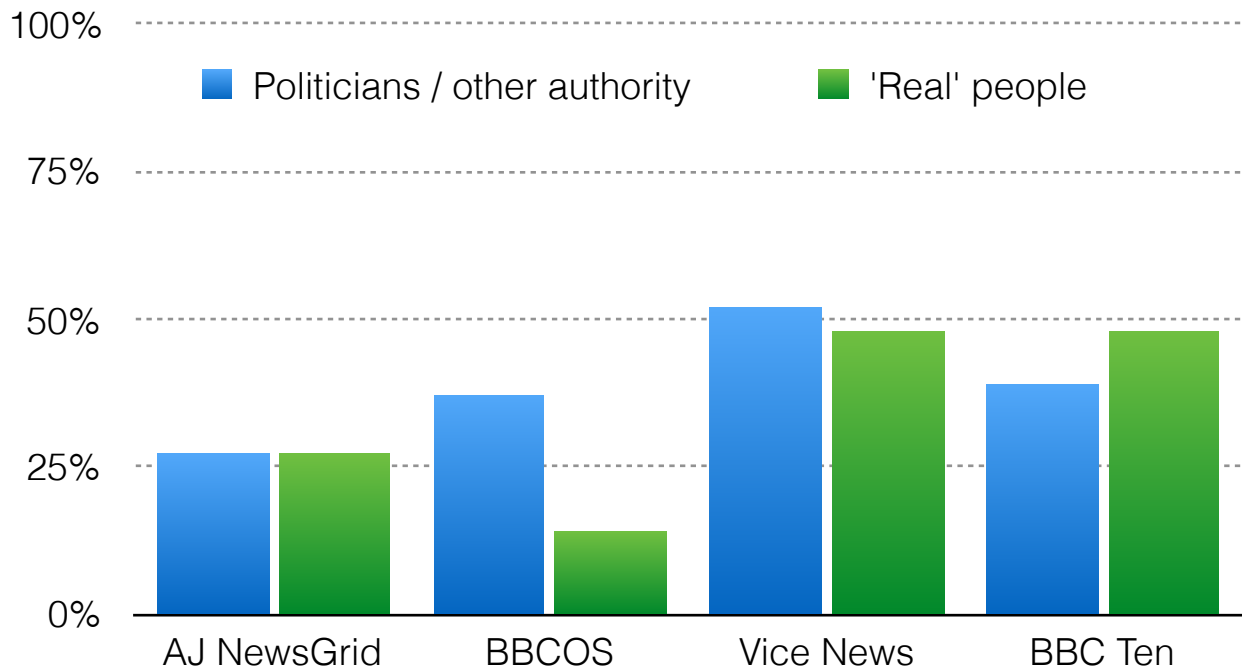
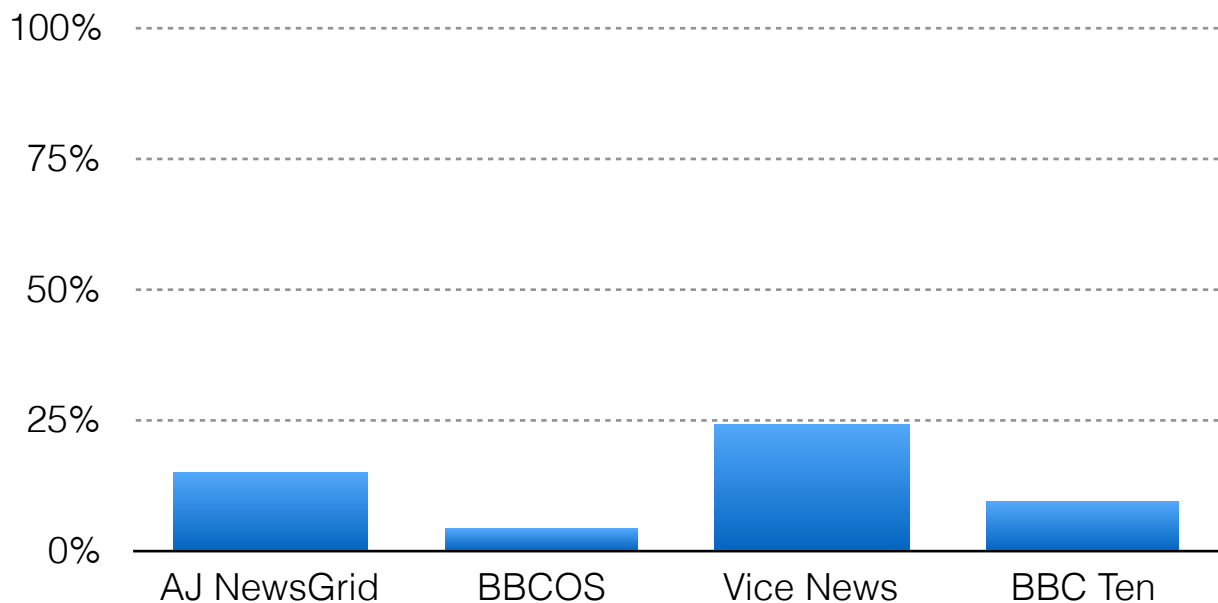


Figure Four shows us that Vice News Tonight and the BBC News at Ten have a higher percentage of stories featuring political figures and real people. Al Jazeera NewsGrid and BBC Outside Source feature fewer of these, because they tend to rely more heavily on interviews with experts or correspondents. The other notable finding in Figure Four is that the BBC News at Ten is the only programme with a higher percentage of stories featuring 'real' people than featuring political figures. This is perhaps surprising, given that it is the most 'traditional' of the programmes. However, the traditional television news report often contains a soundbite of a 'real' person, together with a politician or other authority figure, and an expert to give analysis. For that reason, 'real' people would be expected to appear frequently in a typical news programme.

I was therefore keen to measure more innovative story-telling techniques, particularly ones which might help the viewer to connect better with the story. To do this I measured the percentage of stories told *only* through the eyes of real people, i.e. stories in which it was

deemed unnecessary to include any authoritative or expert voices. Figure Five shows the percentage of stories in each programme which feature *only* 'real' people.

Figure Five: Stories with only 'real' people



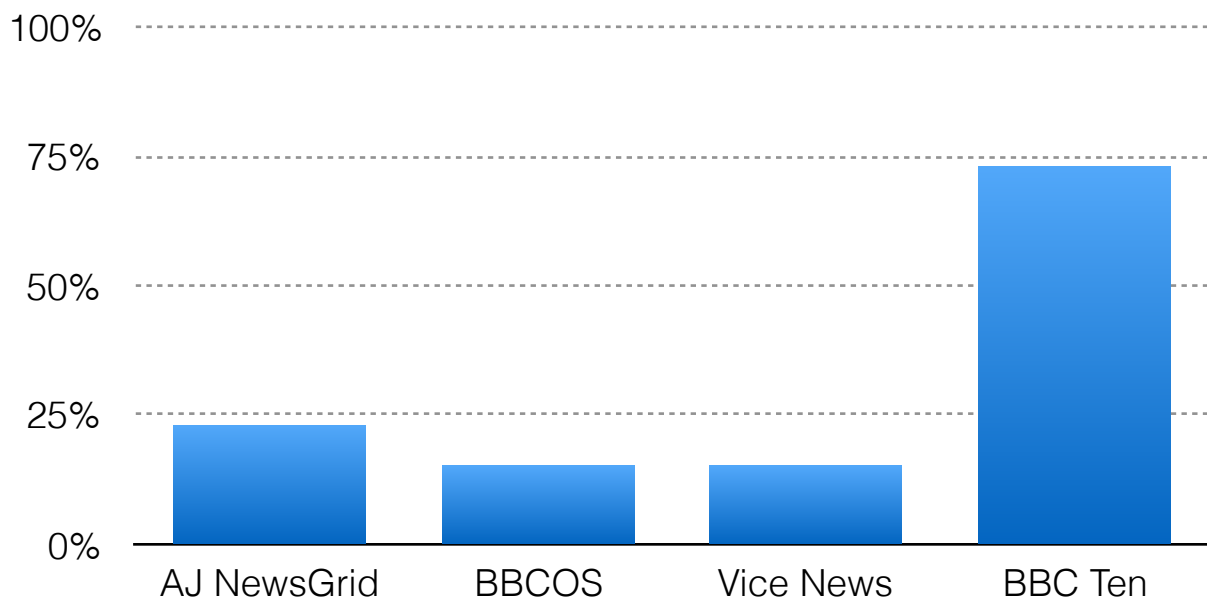
Notably, nearly a quarter of all stories covered by Vice News Tonight are told through the eyes of only 'real' people.⁷ This even includes stories of a political nature, for example a story about a volunteer political 'tracker'. It is his job to 'track' a candidate in a local election from meeting to meeting, recording everything the candidate says to ensure he is not making contradictory statements to different groups of people in order to win votes. The report simply follows him around on his mission, as he talks about why he does it and what he hopes to achieve. It is an interesting example of a grassroots political story told in an engaging way. Not all political stories can be told like this, and I came across other examples of these stories where I felt more context was needed. However, I believe there is potential in this kind of storytelling, focusing heavily on characters to whom viewers can relate.

⁷ Al Jazeera's NewsGrid also has several stories like this - usually they are an analysis of the social media response to a news story.

Format, tone and style: Storytelling techniques

One of the key criticisms of television news is that it is very formulaic, a reference to the fact that it tells most of its stories in similar ways. To measure this, I recorded the different storytelling techniques used by each programme; for example, interview, traditional television report or graphic sequence. In Figure Six, I have concentrated on the frequency of the traditional television ‘package’; a style of report which is voiced by a correspondent and tends to be quite formal in its delivery. Usually around two to three minutes in duration, it is likely to contain soundbites from a range of people to illustrate different elements of a story. By recording the frequency of this kind of report, we can go some way to measuring the extent to which each programme has moved away from the standard style of TV storytelling.

Figure Six: Stories told using ‘traditional’ style report



Interestingly, nearly three-quarters of the stories featured on the BBC News at Ten are told in this way. Of course, this data set does not measure the frequency with which other programmes use different storytelling techniques; perhaps they also rely heavily on a single method, so could also appear formulaic. However, the frequency of the most traditional style of television reporting is perhaps the most noteworthy for this paper, given the focus on innovation in television news.

Format, tone and style: Language and formality

If a reliance on one storytelling format can make a programme feel formulaic, the serious language used in television news can make it feel formal. For consumers who spend much of their time in the digital space, this style of delivery can be bemusing, creating an invisible barrier before the viewer has even had a chance to experience the substance of the programme. For those working on the three 'new-style' programmes in my study, this is one of the biggest changes they are trying to make. I did not find a structured way to record the language or tone used in each programme, but broadly speaking we do find a less authoritative and more naturalistic style on the three new programmes, compared to the News at Ten. For example, in a report about the French president's state visit to Washington, a Vice News Tonight reporter refers to Donald Trump as Emmanuel Macron's "buddy". The language used in Outside Source and NewsGrid generally falls somewhere in between the informality of Vice News Tonight and the more serious tone of the News at Ten.

Discussion

According to some of the measures in my content analysis, the three 'new-style' programmes provide a mix of stories which does not appear significantly different to what we might expect from traditional television news. For the two programmes with a focus on global news, Outside Source and NewsGrid, we must recognise the difficulty of finding stories which are not overtly political, but which will still resonate with an international audience. This could explain why there is such a high number of stories about the political situation in various countries, whether it be a revolution in Armenia, an election in Egypt or the French president's visit to Washington. These are stories which have meaning to people beyond the countries where events take place, perhaps because of their geopolitical significance or because they resonate with similar political situations at home. These stories should, therefore, continue to play an important role in global news coverage. However, there are other issues which appear not to be getting the attention they deserve. Stories about technology and artificial intelligence, climate change and other environmental issues were scarce in all these programmes, despite being of great international importance. It is

true that these stories can be more difficult to tell, particularly in the time-pressured environment of television news. Nevertheless, these results serve as a reminder that we need to think carefully about the mix of stories in our coverage, and ask if that mix fairly represents the most important, significant issues in the world today.

Vice News Tonight has a primarily American audience, so covers a lot of US politics. This is all the more understandable given the ‘Trump-bump’⁸ currently being enjoyed by some American news organisations; it is clear that audiences want news about the president and his administration. Nevertheless, I was surprised by the high number of political stories in this programme. Cheryll Simpson, the Vice News bureau chief in London, told me that there is not a concerted effort in her newsroom to move away from political stories, but that there is an attempt to tell them differently. As an example she cites a fly-on-the-wall style report produced by her team about Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator. She says her team were given unfettered access to him for two days, and the resulting material certainly feels different to traditional television news; more of a mini-documentary. As discussed above, we also find examples of political stories told through the eyes of real people (see Figure Five), which again gives these stories a different feel to more traditionally told political stories. So although when measured by story type Vice News Tonight looks quite traditional, the new ways in which they tell political stories makes the programme feel quite different.

As well as their focus on international news, Outside Source and NewsGrid are also similar in another important way; they do not have direct control over the same level of resources as Vice News Tonight or the News at Ten. As small teams working within larger organisational structures, they have little commissioning power of their own. They therefore must rely heavily on interviews with guests or correspondents if they want to cover stories outside of the organisation’s main news agenda. If, for example, a producer working on Outside Source discovers a great story from Russia which is not being covered by another BBC programme, it is unlikely that they will be able to commission a correspondent in Moscow to spend time making a report bespoke for their programme. It is more likely that they will cover the story by simply interviewing a Moscow-based reporter or a BBC journalist in

⁸ The phrase ‘Trump-bump’ is used here to refer to the public’s increased interest in news during Donald Trump’s presidency, rather than to the improving US economy.

London, as this uses less resources. It is questionable whether or not these interviews are the best way of connecting with the audience, but it is often the only method these programmes have of covering a wide range of stories. I have no doubt that the teams behind NewsGrid and Outside Source would like to be able to commission more of their own material, allowing them to stand out further both in terms of which stories they tell and how they tell them. Certainly, the programmes show real creativity in presenting the material provided to them in fresh and engaging ways, but it seems possible that this originality would lead to even greater impact if the programme teams were given their own commissioning and reporting resources. Vice News Tonight and the BBC News at Ten *do* have this commissioning power, which means they are more able to influence the kind of stories they tell and the way they are told.

Interestingly, the supposedly more traditional News at Ten has, by many measures, a mix of stories which could be quite attractive to new audiences. A lower number of political stories, a good range of voices and a willingness to give prominence to 'positive' stories all point to this. It may be counterintuitive, but these are all changes that can be made by programme editors and commissioning editors who are aware of these criticisms, and who have the resources and influence within an organisation to respond to them. However, the News at Ten appears less responsive to the more stylistic criticisms of television news. It uses a single, traditional, storytelling technique to tell most of its stories, and its presentation style is more formal than the other programmes. These changes at the overall-programme level, as opposed to the level of individual stories, are more difficult for a long-running programme to make. They require a large number of people to buy into the changes, including the presenters and all the producers, picture-editors and correspondents who work on the programme. There are also many good reasons why television news is presented in the way that it is. The serious tone adopted by many broadcasters in their main news programmes is designed to give them authority, and it seems reasonable to suggest, for example, that this authoritative tone is one reason for the traditionally high level of trust we find in television news. It should also be pointed out that the traditional TV package discussed earlier in this chapter has many benefits; it allows a lot of information to be condensed into a short period of time, and it ensures that all sides of a story are given equal emphasis. Any new approach to telling news stories should aim to replicate these positive aspects of television reporting.

In contrast, the 'new-style' programmes in my study do feel truly different in the way in which they are presented. They use fewer traditional television news reports, and all three programmes put an emphasis on their use of language in an attempt to feel more 'authentic', i.e. to connect with the audience by talking like the audience. They use different story telling techniques to draw in the viewer, whether it is Outside Source's touchscreen, NewsGrid's frequent references to social media or Vice News Tonight's focus on character-led stories.

The people who work on these programmes appear passionate about the need to change the way that television news is presented. For the host of the BBC's Outside Source, Ros Atkins, the language used by TV journalists can lack authenticity:

"Over the last few decades TV has built up its own language and style, which at some point had been seen to be a plus, but increasingly feels like a minus. It could alienate consumers who are chasing down authenticity in lots of other places but don't see it in TV news."

Atkins describes Outside Source as an attempt to strip away some of the constructs of television news, which he says he found difficult to do in a traditional TV studio. Al Jazeera NewsGrid's Kamahl Santamaria agrees, describing the language and tone that he uses as "massively important":

"It is not uncommon for me to start a broadcast by saying '*you know that time we talked about*' ... because that is how normal people talk. I have no problem going really quite chatty. If something is cool, I'll say it is cool. Because that is how a normal person talks... That's authentic in my opinion.

This idea of authenticity is critical, and addresses one of the key problems facing the media today; that of trust. I outlined in Chapter One how television enjoys relatively high levels of trust from the public, but only in the context of low levels of trust in the media overall (Newman et al. 2018: 9). With specific reference to public service broadcasters (PSBs), David Levy, Director of the RISJ, says that in order to rebuild trust with the audience, PSBs must move beyond relying on trust borne wholly of authority, to a trust based on authenticity

(Levy 2018). That is, broadcasters must form a connection with the consumer through conversation and dialogue, rather than appearing distant and aloof.

By talking like a “normal person”, broadcasters can go a long way to making that connection. However, it is important to remember that a more authentic style of presentation will only go so far in solving some of the problems around television news. In their qualitative study of young people’s disconnect with television news, Wayne et al. warn against focussing too much on issues of style, without also changing the content:

Where news producers and presenters see the perceived crisis largely in terms of language and visuals - and certainly these aspects were raised as part of the problem - there are other more pressing and fundamental gaps in news provision (Wayne et al. 2010: 210).

The pressing gaps which Wayne et al. refer to relate to the perception that television news covers too much politics. It is therefore incumbent on television news journalists to ensure that they not only make stylistic changes, but also consider the mix of stories they tell.

In my opinion, all four programmes in my study have made real, tangible changes to the way television news is made, and yet all have some way to go before they feel truly different. The challenge is to find a way to combine the important, story-level changes made by the News at Ten, with the stylistic, more immediately visible changes made by the three ‘new-style’ programmes. Without doing this, all of the programmes can only go some of the way to creating a truly new television news format.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Audience feedback*

It was important for this study to get some sense of how the audience feels about the four programmes in my content analysis. I was able to do this by surveying the BBC's 'Global Minds' panel, which consists of people around the world who have pre-agreed to answer online surveys from the BBC's audience research team. In order to reach as many people as possible, the survey was sent to individuals in a wide range of countries; of the 394 people who responded, just over half were from the United States, the other half were from Europe, Canada and Australia combined. Because the focus of this study is young audiences, the survey was sent to people aged 18-44 only. For some of my analysis I have broken the responses down into two age-groups; 18-34 and 35-44.

It should be noted that there are some limitations with this method of research. For example, as a group of consumers who have a pre-existing agreement with the BBC, the respondents may show a bias towards BBC products. Also, given the different television news environments from one country to the next, it can be difficult to draw conclusions from data collected in several countries. Nevertheless, the data show some interesting findings which help to form an understanding of the audience's reaction to these programmes. This chapter will first explain my methodology, before presenting my findings and a discussion of their significance.

Methodology

The survey consisted of two parts and took less than fifteen minutes to complete⁹. First, respondents were asked a series of questions about television news in general. Second, each respondent was asked to watch a video featuring an excerpt from one of the four programmes, before agreeing or disagreeing with a series of statements about the clip¹⁰. There was also an 'any other comments' question, giving respondents the opportunity to detail what they like or dislike about the video they watched.

⁹ For the full survey see Appendix Two, page 56

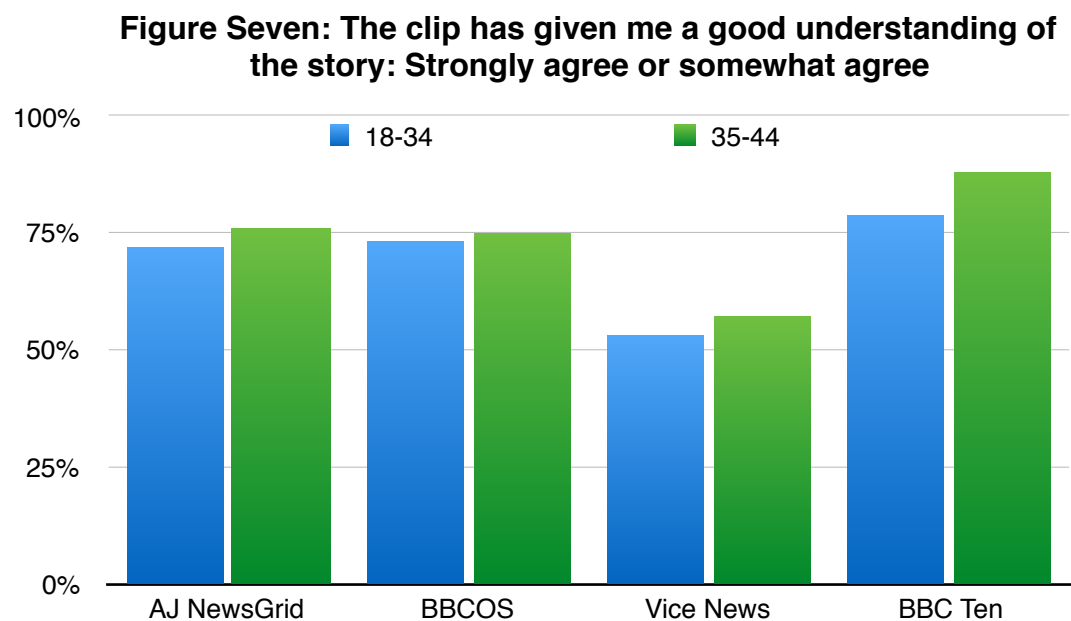
¹⁰ Each respondent was randomly allocated an excerpt from one of the four programmes.

The clips were all less than five minutes long, and featured the same story about gun control in the United States. They were all first broadcast on the 22nd February, a few days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. Of course, there were some differences in the information that each programme included in their story, but there was also much in common between them. For example, they all referred to Donald Trump’s tweet stating his belief that some teachers should be armed. The clips are therefore similar in *content* but differ in *style*, which means I was able to analyse whether any one programme’s delivery method was more attractive to the respondents than others.

It is important to note that many of the key criticisms of television news detailed in earlier chapters are not tackled in this part of my research, for example story type and negative framing. Clearly, in order to get audience feedback on these issues, the respondents would have to watch multiple episodes of each programme which was not feasible for this study.

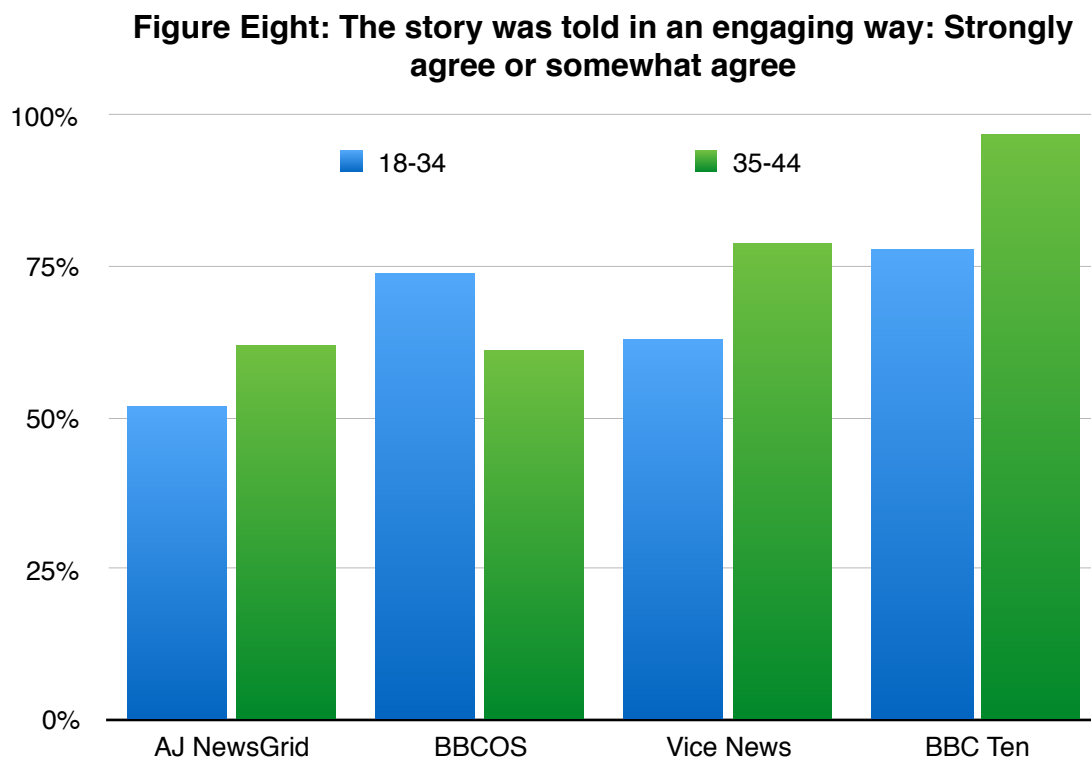
Findings

In order to find out how well respondents understood the story, I asked them to agree or disagree with a series of statements about their level of comprehension of the clip. Generally speaking, most people agreed that the clip gave them a good level of understanding of the story in all programmes, with a lower score for Vice News Tonight (See Figure Seven).



This result is interesting because Vice News Tonight says it makes an effort to explain the background to stories. It is also notable that there is no significant difference in comprehension levels between the under-35s and over-35s for all programmes.

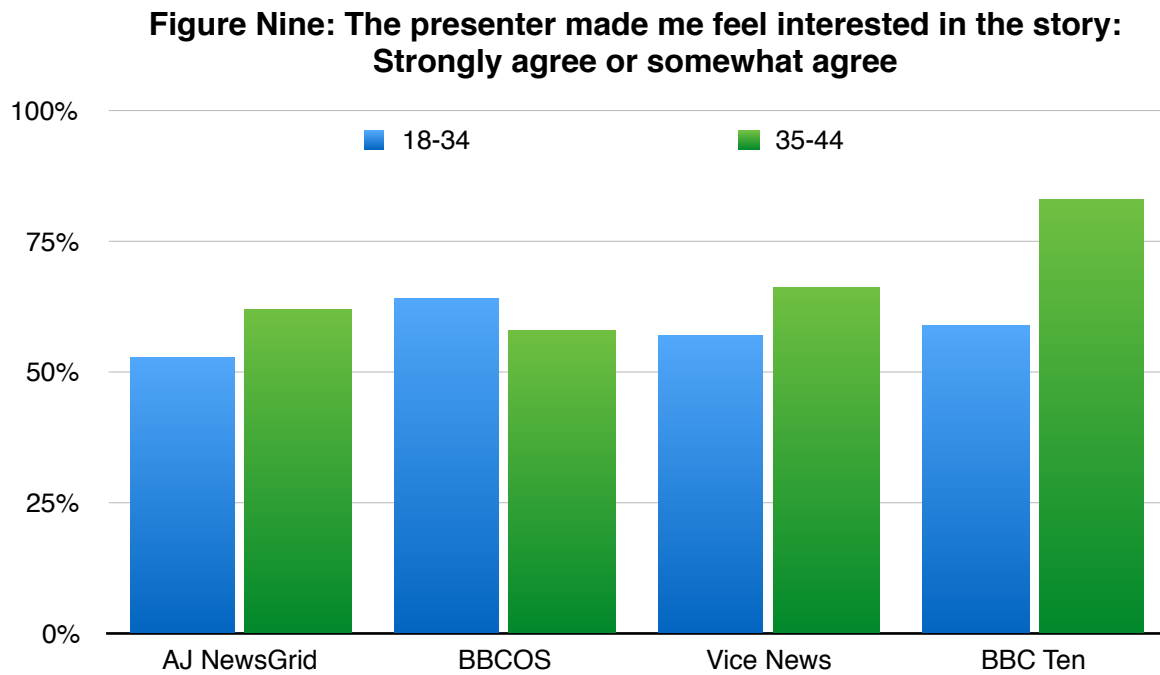
Next, I was keen to measure engagement levels, to see which clips best captured the respondents' interest. Again, the results were generally positive, with Al Jazeera's NewsGrid a little lower than the others (see Figure Eight).



More people agreed that BBC News at Ten told the story in an engaging way than in any other programme. This is interesting, particularly given the fact that the respondents are generally young. However, it should be noted that this group of people may have a particular affiliation for the BBC's style of storytelling. It is also interesting that the BBC's Outside Source was particularly engaging for the younger age group, suggesting that its style of presenting a story might indeed be particularly attractive to a younger audience.

My survey also included a set of questions specifically about the presentation style. Again, all programmes performed quite well, with most respondents agreeing that the presenter (or

reporter in the case of Vice News Tonight) made them feel interested in the story (See Figure Nine).



Notable here is the high number of people who feel the BBC News at Ten’s presenter made the story interesting, particularly amongst the older age group. Again, the BBC’s Outside Source is the only programme to perform slightly better with younger viewers¹¹. These patterns are seen more clearly when we consider only those who *strongly agree* that the presenter made them interested in the story (see Figure Ten).

¹¹ It is possible that there is a pro-BBC bias towards Outside Source and News at Ten in these results, because those sampled tend to be existing BBC consumers.

Figure Ten: The presenter made me feel interested in the story: Strongly agree

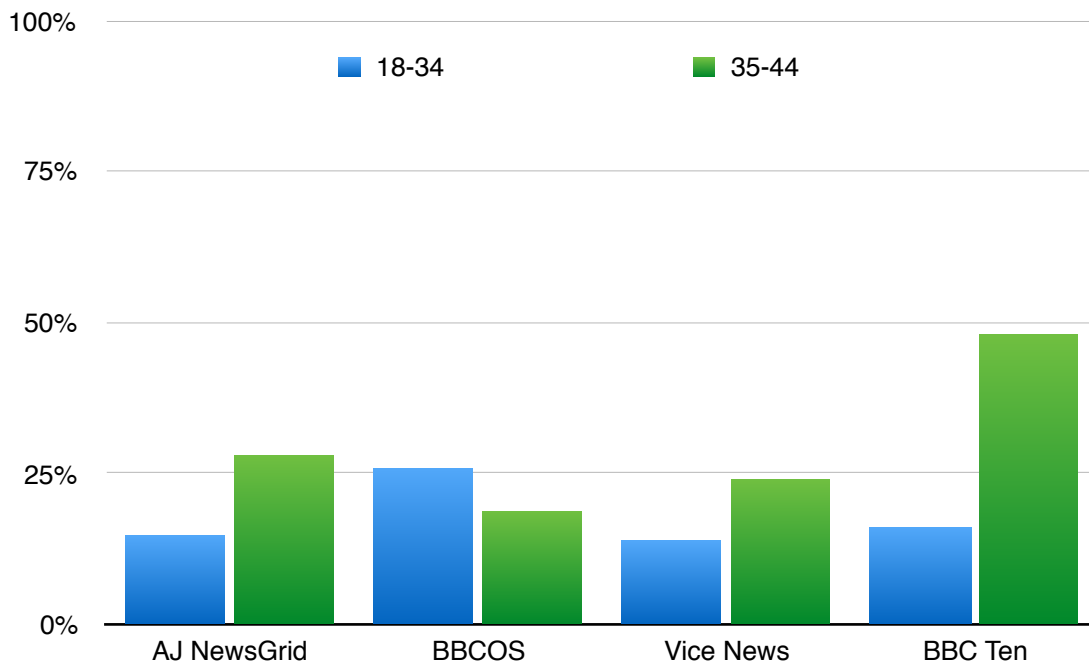
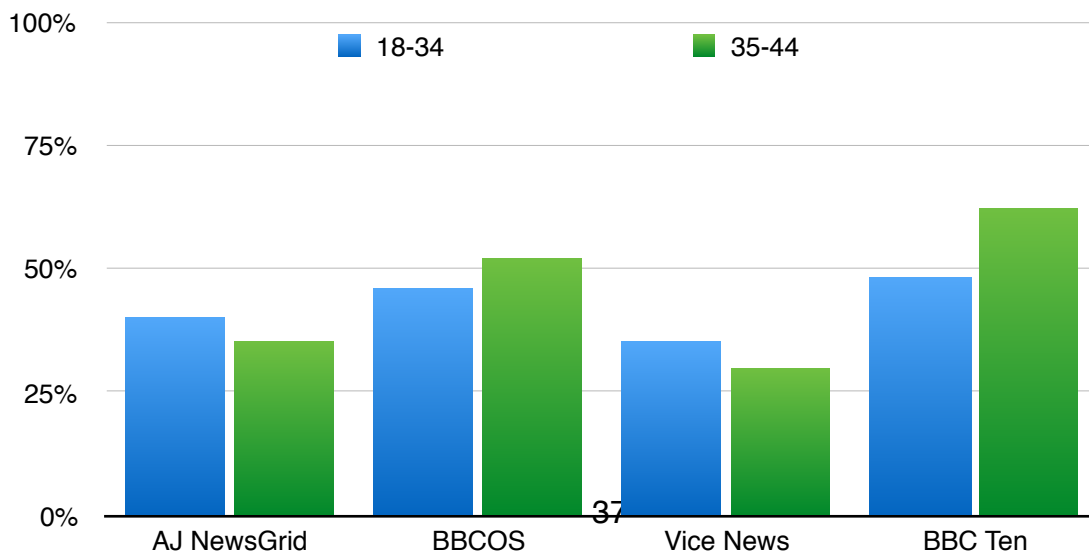


Figure Ten shows a big difference between the younger and older age groups for the BBC News at Ten. BBC Outside Source shows a mixed picture; a significant percentage of the younger age group strongly agree that the presenter made them interested in the story, while the older age group prefers the style of other programmes.

I also included a question about the studio design and on-screen graphics. This is one of the most visible differences between the programmes, so it was interesting to see if the audience has a preference (see Figure Eleven).

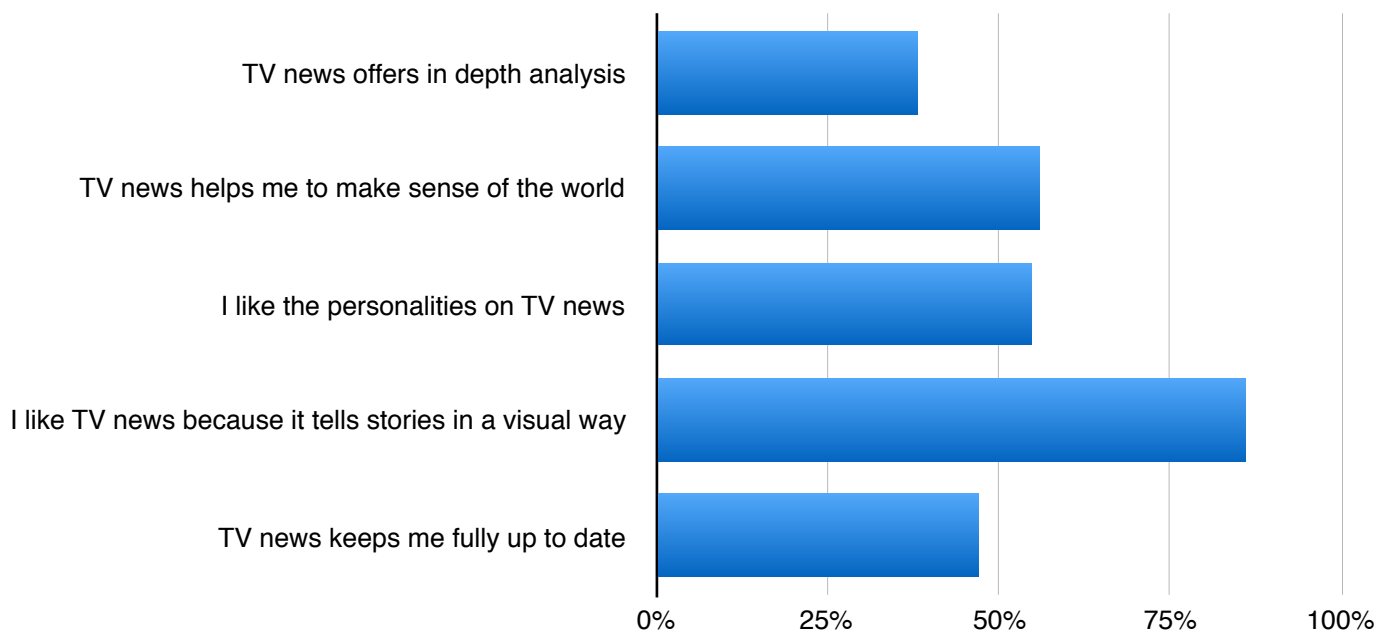
Figure Eleven: The studio and on screen design helped me to understand the story: Strongly or somewhat agree



Given that Vice News Tonight does not use a television studio, and that in this particular story there was very little use of graphics, I do not consider its lower result particularly significant. Perhaps more surprising is the high score given to the BBC News at Ten, which consisted of a very simple introduction to a traditional television package using no graphics or other visual aides.

As well as asking for responses to the four programmes in this study, I also asked questions about television news in general. I was particularly interested in finding out if the respondents consider television news to offer anything which other media do not, and if so, what? To do this, I asked respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements about television news, based on the ideas discussed earlier in this paper about its potential value. Figure Twelve shows the percentage of people who strongly or somewhat agree with these statements¹².

Figure Twelve: What specifically does TV news offer that you can't get from other news sources: Strongly agree or somewhat agree



¹² For this analysis I have pre-selected only those who *do* think that TV news is valuable in some way. There is, after all, little point in asking people who don't agree with this premise to consider what television news can offer them.

The stand-out figure in this chart is the high number of people who like television because it is a visual medium. It sounds obvious, but it is a reminder that in a crowded marketplace, television journalists must keep in mind that their greatest strength is the visual element of TV. The idea of personalities on television news also scored quite highly, reminding us that television can connect with the audience through personalities. Audiences also appreciate the idea of television helping to make sense of the world, which offers some support for the idea of TV news as a curator of information.

Discussion

Although the analysis in this chapter focusses mainly on areas where my research showed some difference between the programmes, it is important to acknowledge that in many ways the data show no clear preference for one programme over another. The question about studio design, detailed in Figure Eleven, is one example of this. Questions about the level of background information, the tone of the presenter and impartiality also found little difference between the programmes¹³. We should not attach too much weight to this finding, given that respondents only watched a short clip of one of the programmes. However, I think it does suggest how difficult it is for a television programme to stand out. Changes in style or design which seem radical to the programme teams may not seem so radical to the audience. As soon as the key features of a TV programme are in place, e.g. a presenter, a studio, or a live-link to a correspondent, television news looks a lot like television news. The challenge of breaking away from this mould and creating a genuinely new product should not be underestimated.

The results relating to audience engagement with the storytelling and with the presenter (Figures Eight, Nine and Ten) suggest differences between the younger and older age-groups, particularly for the two BBC programmes. Both programmes have high engagement scores, with the News at Ten doing particularly well amongst the older age group, and Outside Source doing better amongst younger people. This could suggest that viewers who

¹³ The impartiality score for Vice News Tonight was lower than the other programmes, but this is likely to be because of the high number of respondents from the USA, where Vice News is considered to be a broadcaster with a liberal bias.

are not attracted to more traditional news formats might be willing to tune in to something which uses a different technique. The most significant difference in responses between age-groups is amongst those who *strongly agree* that the News at Ten presentation style is engaging. Whilst the older age group shows a great preference for this style, the younger group finds it significantly less appealing. This poses a challenge for the programme, in that a change in style to accommodate the preferences of younger audiences puts at risk the high level of engagement amongst slightly older audiences.

Another difficulty of change is highlighted amongst the respondents' open comments on each programme. During live interviews with correspondents, Al Jazeera NewsGrid shows tweets on the screen which change every few seconds. The idea is to better integrate the world of social media into the programme, but several of the respondents complained that the tweets were distracting. I believe this is a reminder of the importance of ensuring that any new features are of real benefit to the audience. I understand and agree with NewsGrid's desire to show an awareness of social media throughout their storytelling, but from an audience-centric point of view this particular method appears to detract from the overall viewing experience.

Finally, my research goes some way to suggesting what the audience values most about television news. From a list of statements about television news, I found that above all else the audience appreciates the visual nature of television news. Anyone who has worked in a TV newsroom will know the importance already attached to telling a story through pictures, but given the audience's response to this part of my survey, how much further should we take the idea? Cheryll Simpson, the London bureau chief for Vice News, says that her programme's production values are higher than in more traditional TV newsrooms she has worked in. Every piece, for example, goes through detailed post-production and colourisation. Another example of a 'new-style' news programme which places great importance on the visual aspect is 'The Project' on Network Ten in Australia, which has a younger than average audience and takes a slightly irreverent look at the news. One of its presenters, Hamish Macdonald, told me that part of the show's attraction lies in its very high production values; he describes it as being graphic rich with a "beautiful" set, more like the X-Factor than the nightly news. These examples suggest ways that traditional television news could go even further in its commitment to creating a visually powerful product.

There was also some support for the ideas that television news is attractive because of the presenters, and also because it helps to make sense of the news. Taken together, I believe these ideas suggest that the audience still finds worth in the idea of having a story explained to them by somebody who they trust and connect with. This is no doubt an opportunity for television news. Ros Atkins, the presenter of *Outside Source*, explains that “if we accept that there is a role for personality and delivery in journalism, then TV news is a potent way of doing that”. This view is not universal, though. *Vice News Tonight* does not have a presenter at all, a role which Cheryll Simpson of *Vice News* describes as “a hangover from the days of ego television”. She says the lack of presenter allows *Vice News Tonight* to be “more about the journalism and storytelling” than about “celebrity journalism”. Certainly, the idea of a presenter earnestly telling you everything you need to know from behind a desk feels anachronistic, but a reimagining of the role of presenter as somebody who helps to cut a path through the chaotic, noisy world of online news may still be valuable to today’s news consumer.

This audience research is a small step towards understanding what the audience perceives as worthwhile and attractive, compared to what journalists themselves think. There is evidence here to support the idea that a new style of presentation could attract a new audience, but also warnings that the changes made by these programmes either do not make a huge difference to the audience’s perception of the programme, or actively detract from the viewers’ experience. Perhaps above all, it is a reminder that journalists cannot take it for granted that the audience will agree with their own interpretation of how to make television work for new audiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: *Conclusions and recommendations*

I began this paper by arguing that there are two good reasons why television news is still valuable to society: trust, and defining the public debate. However, there are several areas of tension between these two core values and the ways in which I have suggested television could change. For example, if TV news becomes more emotive or authentic to emulate the digital world, will it still maintain the high level of trust it currently enjoys? And if a product is aimed too squarely at a young audience, will it alienate all other demographics, thus failing to reach out to the broadest possible audience and helping to define the public debate? Indeed, in a world of increased personalisation, for how much longer is it possible for any single product to reach a mass audience? Any new TV programme will have to resolve these contradictions in its own way; prioritising one concern over another depending on the remit and focus of the programme.

It is also important to recognise that even the most successful new product will not be able to repeat the successes of TV news in the past. With the vastly increased choice of places to get information, it is inevitable that many people will feel that their needs are better served elsewhere. Perhaps, ultimately, the act of sitting down to watch the news will simply become too alien to the contemporary news consumer. However, I do not believe that this is an argument to immediately limit innovation in television news, or to focus only on existing audiences without making changes in an attempt to attract new ones. Even if, in the long term, television news as we know it declines further, some of the new ideas and storytelling techniques we will discover by innovating are likely to live on in the digital world.

However, as we have discovered in this paper, innovation in television news is difficult. Perhaps the most surprising finding from my content analysis is the similarity in substance between all four programmes, independent of whether or not they are 'new-style' or 'traditional' bulletins. Three of the four programmes I analysed look very different to a typical news programme, but my results suggest that none of them are significantly different in substance based on measures such as story type, person type, and the balance of positive and negative news. I did, however find big differences in style and tone between the programmes, and my audience research gave some reason to believe that a less traditional style may indeed be more attractive to a younger audience (while potentially alienating an

older audience). It is important to note that by making this distinction between 'style' and 'substance', I am not suggesting that one or other programme could be negatively described as '*style over substance*'. In fact, I believe that the way in which content is presented is as important as the content itself. The two elements must work hand in hand; a programme which changes its editorial agenda but looks and sounds like it always has done will not be perceived differently enough to attract a new audience. Similarly, a programme which has a fresh, new style but has not significantly changed its content will only get so far in its attempt to be different. So why is it so difficult to change television news, and how can those difficulties be overcome? The remainder of this chapter will focus on these questions, offering recommendations on how changes can be made.

Recommendation One: Innovation needs resources

For some programmes, the key difficulty is resources. This is not to say that innovation is only possible at an organisation with lots of money. Rather, it means that in order to make something truly different, a programme must have full control of its own resources. As discussed in Chapter Three, two of the programmes in this study suffer from this problem; Al Jazeera's NewsGrid and BBC's Outside Source. Both are produced by a team of people who are reliant to a great extent on the larger organisational structure providing them with the raw material for their programme. They can choose which of this material to use or discard, but they have limited power to gather their own stories, or to deploy their own team.

An example of a product which took a different route is Kioski, a youth-oriented news brand which was created by the Finnish public service broadcaster, YLE. It began under the direction of YLE's former Director of News and Current Affairs Atte Jääskeläinen, as an attempt to attract younger audiences. He took the decision to separate it as much as possible from YLE's mainstream news production, even going so far as putting team in a different building. It was a small team but critically they had the skills and remit to produce their own content, with a mandate to, in Jääskeläinen's words, "do totally crazy things". The team made a daily TV programme and produced content for social media. The best of their material was incorporated into the broadcaster's main news bulletin, and the brand became popular amongst its target audience. In explaining his decision to separate the team from the

rest of the newsroom, Jääskeläinen joked that when a talented young person would arrive in the television news division, within a few weeks their broadcast voice would “drop by three pitches” and they would start talking in “this news language”. The joke rings true, in that a small team trying to do new things within a larger organisational structure is in danger of inheriting the habits of the bigger team surrounding it.

Ros Atkins and Kamahl Santamaria, the presenters of *Outside Source* and *NewsGrid*, also talk about the difficulty of being innovative while working within a larger structure. They focus on the consistency of the programme team, i.e. having the same producers working on the programme for an extended period of time. Atkins tells me that there is a direct correlation between having your own team and levels of creativity. Santamaria says that producers often rotate through his programme, and it takes time for them to change their way of thinking to be more in tune with the style of *NewsGrid*. This makes sense for two reasons: First, a team which works consistently on a programme is more likely to buy into the concept, and second, it will learn through experience what makes a story or storytelling technique particularly suitable to that programme. Perhaps even more importantly, though, a consistent team is much better equipped for further evolution, which should be a priority for any programme trying to be innovative. It is one thing to come up with a new format which feels fresh and exciting on day one, but quite another to make sure that the product continues to adapt in response to today’s fast-moving media landscape.

Recommendation Two: Consider the balance and format of ‘on the day’ news

Another key difficulty when trying to change television news is the fact that it is constricted by strict deadlines with very little room for failure, a problem which is at its most acute in the production of ‘on the day’ stories. If a report is not ready on time or contains an inaccuracy, the results can be serious and embarrassing. A live news bulletin also tends to have a very rigid time structure, which means that a key priority of any editor will be ensuring the programme runs to time. In fact, editors often have to prioritise time constraints even when they are in direct conflict with what is editorially best for the programme. For example, a brilliant live interview might be brought to an end unnaturally early if the time on the programme is running out. This extreme, deadline-driven environment encourages conservative decision making, because any change to the normal

way of doing things risks missing deadlines or disrupting the programme timings, which could put the whole bulletin in jeopardy.

This time pressure leads to one of the key criticisms of television news; that it is too formulaic. The traditional approach to storytelling is dictated in part by the infrastructure in place to tell stories in a certain way. When a story breaks, a news editor knows that there will be reporters, cameramen, editors and technology available to them, which are all primed to produce television news quickly and accurately. This is obviously extremely important, but with transmission just hours away, there is seldom time to discuss in any great detail *how* a story will be told. Instead, conversations about the editorial content take priority. The tried and tested storytelling techniques are therefore used by default. In an environment where just a few seconds delay can be the difference between success or failure, it is easy to see how creativity and risk-taking can be a low priority when making decisions.

One way to deal with this is to limit the number of reports made 'on the day'. These are the stories which have not been planned for so there is very limited time to produce them, making it very difficult to find a creative way to tell the story. It is also worth noting that these stories are the most likely to be purely factual - retelling the news of the day without adding anything new. They are therefore likely to simply repeat what the audience has already learned from online news sources.

Vice News Tonight tries to deal with this problem by focussing less on 'on the day' reports, and more on highly-produced 'feature' pieces. Its London bureau chief, Cheryll Simpson, says that she feels no pressure to send a reporting team racing out the door as soon as something happens, because their priority is to find a way of adding value to any particular news story. This might mean coming back to a story a week after it first broke, or previewing a story a week in advance. Simpson believes that her programme's storytelling is different enough to the standard news format that it doesn't feel out of place when they do this. When the reports in Vice News Tonight are linked to the news of the day, they have often been produced in advance, offering a particular angle on a news event.

I believe there is some value in the Vice News Tonight approach. I was impressed, for example, by the compelling report it broadcast on the day Scotland introduced minimum

pricing for alcohol. It was a character-led report focussing on a paramedic crew in Glasgow as they were called out to a number of alcohol-related incidents. It was obviously produced well in advance of the transmission date, but was relevant to that day's news which made it feel timely.

There is, however, a potential contradiction here; less 'on the day' news could be in tension with my assertion that one of the unique selling points of a television news programme is to condense the stories of the day into digestible chunks. Therefore, TV news cannot simply be a succession of nicely produced features with no connection to the day's news. There is no easy solution to this contradiction, but I would start by trying to limit the number of stories in a programme which are told using a traditional television package. In the case of the BBC's News at Ten, it is nearly 75% of stories (see Figure Six). If this could be reduced by finding a greater variety of ways to tell 'on the day' stories, would that go some way to making it feel less formulaic?

*Recommendation Three: Adapt existing products, **and** start something new*

Another difficulty for television news is the danger of alienating its large, existing audience. In this study, this issue really only relates to the BBC News at Ten, as the other programmes all set out to be different from the start. To some extent, my audience research confirms that this is a concern, best illustrated by the older age group's marked preference for the more traditional presentation style of the News at Ten (see Figure Ten). This may help us to understand why the changes made by the News at Ten are more at the individual story level, while the look and feel of the overall programme remains the same. In fact, the BBC's recent audience research did take the existing audience into account, and found it was broadly supportive of its suggested changes around story type and presentation style. What we don't know, and would be worthy of further study, is the extent of change that existing viewers are willing to tolerate before they feel the product is no longer right for them.

This difficulty leads us onto the question of whether it is better to adapt an existing product, or try to create a new one from scratch. Existing products have the advantage of brand recognition and a loyal audience, whereas an entirely new programme must carve out its own niche and starts with an audience of zero. On the other hand, starting a new

programme means that you don't have to worry about a potential negative response from loyal audiences, and with good marketing and a strong product, a brand could be created which feels fresh and different to traditional television news. Ideally, both options should be put into practice. An existing product needs to evolve to ensure that its storytelling and story choice reflects the world around it, but it may not be able to change significantly enough to attract a completely new audience demographic. For this, a new new product is necessary, perhaps using a similar process to Kioski, the Finnish youth brand. However, Kioski also offers a warning. Although the product did reach its target younger audience, this demographic consumed the product on its YouTube and social media channels, while the audience for the TV programme remained quite old. Atte Jääskeläinen says that this is because the channel defines the audience demographics, not the programme; an important point which leads on to my next recommendation.

Recommendation Four: Be on the right platform

With the example of Kioski in mind, there is a big question about *how* young people consume television. However good a new product might be, it will not be watched by the target audience unless it is available on the right platforms. There is, in fact, plenty of evidence to suggest that television is still a popular medium amongst all ages. However, in the UK there is a big split between younger and older audiences when it comes to the way in which they prefer to watch it; via linear television or video on demand (VOD), i.e. Netflix-style interfaces. Young people are the most likely to prefer VOD, and like people of all other ages they express a preference for consuming it on a television set rather than devices like mobile phones or laptops (OFCOM 2016: 7). Does this suggest that in order to future-proof a television news programme, the programme makers must assume that the majority of views will be on VOD, rather than linear TV? And if so, what does it mean for the product?

It could be argued that news fits into the category of 'event TV', which viewers of all ages prefer to watch live in order to avoid spoilers and to be part of the conversation surrounding the broadcast (OFCOM 2016: 7). This line of thinking would suggest that television news could rely on linear television as its primary platform, with people tuning in at the same time each evening to ensure that they are not out of the loop, and to engage with the programme on social media. However, I believe this is simply asking too much of a daily

television news programme. It seems unlikely that a news bulletin could consistently be so engaging and so unmissable that people will watch them in the same way as they do sporting events or 'X-Factor' style entertainment programmes. For this reason, I think it is necessary to consider television news in the future as something people will watch through a VOD interface. It is true that the number of people watching news in this way is currently very low. However, programmes are generally not made with VOD in mind, and they are rarely promoted on front pages. Atte Jääskeläinen describes this as a chicken and egg situation; news viewing on VOD is low so it is not given prominence, but because of this low profile very few people watch it. He argues that bulletins should be prioritised in this way if news is important to your brand image and mission. It is surely true that as more and more people use VOD as their primary method of selecting content, the only way they will even be aware of the existence of a television news programme is if it is made visible on the VOD interface.

This is only one part of the issue though. A programme made primarily for VOD must also consider the motivations which would lead the viewer to select it over all the other material available to them. In this respect, I believe that television news needs to consider itself to be competing with *television* more than it is with *news*. This sounds concerning, because it could be construed as making the case for turning television news into info-tainment. However, I do not think this is the case. In fact, it is yet another argument for making television news less about the headlines and more about adding value. It means finding the as yet untold angle, the surprising interviewee, or the innovative solution to the big issue in the news agenda. It is also a further argument for making television news as visually rich as possible, as the product is in direct competition with some very highly-produced current affairs and factual content. That does not mean that everything needs to be perfectly shot on the very best cameras; indeed, a small camera with a rough-and-ready approach to filming can create an engaging and authentic experience for the viewer. But it does mean that as much material as possible should introduce the viewer to new environments, new people, or new ideas in a way which optimises the audio-visual experience of television.

Creating a product primarily for VOD also has one major benefit for television news; the programme would be less restricted by time constraints. There is no reason that a VOD bulletin should be exactly thirty minutes long for example, which means that an editor could

decide how much time is dedicated to a story based on how important or exclusive it is, rather than how long the programme is. Some days the product could be a little shorter; a recognition of a quiet news day. Some days it might be longer because a particular topic requires extra background and context. This slightly more relaxed approach to timing would also help the product to feel more authentic, in that the structure of the programme could change to reflect the news of the day, instead of the current model where each programme looks the same regardless of the day's news. Consider, for example, the headline structure of a typical television news bulletin. Whatever the story, the dramatic music and picture sequence is designed to suggest that it is of great importance. In fact, on some days the stories may be less significant, an idea which clashes with the way they are presented. This creates an inauthentic feel at the very beginning of the programme. If, once, the creation of artificial drama helped to draw viewers in, it now feels bemusing to an audience which is in search of authenticity. A more flexible structure would mean programme makers could be more experimental in how they introduce the programme and the stories which it features.

Recommendation Five: Understand where to emulate the digital world, and where to add value

Whatever the preferred platform, a truly novel product must also be designed with an understanding of the news environment in which it exists. With this in mind, broadcast journalists must find a new space for television news, one which learns some lessons from the digital world, whilst simultaneously making a conscious effort to differentiate itself from it, thus offering the consumer something unique. To some extent, the key criticisms of television news outlined in this paper can be seen as areas where it should better emulate the digital world. Too often, online media offer an alternative to television news which is more representative of an individual's lived experience in terms of the range of stories, the people who tell the stories, the balance of positive and negative stories, and the tone and style used. In these areas TV news must recognise its shortcomings and better reflect the world around us. On the other hand, television news should focus on the unique selling points of television news introduced in Chapter Two, i.e. its audiovisual richness, its role of information curator, and its ability to deliver original journalism in a high-impact way. This is where we find opportunities for creating a product which adds value to the audience's news consumption.

It is also important for television news to recognise the role that online media play in consumers' lives, without attempting to fulfil the same function as them. For example, in Chapter Four I discussed the negative responses in my audience research to the social media featured on screen during interviews on Al Jazeera NewsGrid. Several of the comments suggested that this distracts viewers from listening to what the interviewee had to say. If the audience were coming to television news as an *alternative* to using social media, these tweets might have some value. But that is not the case. In fact, the audience is probably coming to the programme for some context to a story which they were already aware of, but they are prevented from getting that context because of the distracting on-screen text. The producers of NewsGrid should assume that their viewers already have access to social media, and that if they want to scroll through tweets relating to the story they will do it on other platforms. Instead, the team should do all they can to optimise the viewers' ability to understand and digest the information given by the correspondent.

This is not to say that the social media response to a story should not be *analysed* by a television programme; in fact NewsGrid does this very well elsewhere in the programme. This could be an area where television news can add value, i.e. distilling the messy and unfiltered opinions which exist on social media into a digestible chunk of information. Here we find an example of the space television news should move towards; adding value (in this case curation), but also reflecting the reality that much of the audience will already have seen the story online. Outside Source works in similar ways, often using its touchscreen to distill multiple sources of information into a single narrative, helping to turn disparate facts and opinions into a clear story. The programme's presenter, Ros Atkins, says that he is particularly interested in finding areas of disagreement or confusion online, because "there is some value in someone stepping into that space to help move the disagreement onwards...Where there is heat or confusion, we can step in and show some facts or context".

This consideration of how to build on the digital experience, rather than working in isolation from it, is a critical point for TV news to address. In my opinion, the need to add value should be taken into account with every decision about story choice or angle, every script written and every design feature in a programme. Any changes made without this in mind could appear pointless, or actively annoying, to the viewer.

By taking these recommendations into account, I believe that television news can continue to be valuable to society for many years to come. It would be naive to make too many predictions about the future of the news media, given how many unexpected changes we have seen over the last ten years. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that there will continue to be a place for an entertaining, visual and contextualising daily product which helps the consumer make sense of a sometimes overwhelming barrage of competing information online. TV seems a good platform on which this product can exist. The challenge, then, is how to make this product feel relevant and worthwhile, without compromising the core values of trust and appealing to a mass audience. In an ever more personalised and polarised news media landscape, this challenge will become increasingly difficult, but it is increasingly important to find the answers.

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Appendix One: Table of interviewees

Name	Position	Date of interview
Kamahl Santamaria	Presenter, Al Jazeera NewsGrid	01.05.2018
Ros Atkins	Presenter, BBC Outside Source	14.05.2018
Katherine Hardyment	BBC Head of Youth Audiences	15.05.2018
Nina Goswami	Senior producer, BBC News at Ten	17.05.2018
Emma Theedom	Research Manager, BBC Audiences	17.05.2018
Richard Sambrook	Professor of Journalism, Cardiff University & former Director of BBC News	21.05.2018
Atte Jääskeläinen	Visiting Fellow, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism & former Director of News and Current Affairs at Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE	22.05.2018
Hamish Macdonald	Presenter, The Project (Network Ten Australia)	22.05.2018
Cheryll Simpson	London Bureau Chief, Vice News	06.06.2018

Appendix Two: Audience research questionnaire

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism/ BBC World News research study

[SINGLE RESPONSE]

Q1: Thank you for taking this survey about television news. This survey will take about 5 minutes, and you will be asked to watch a short video before answering some questions. Please make sure you're able to watch and listen to a short video before proceeding.

To begin, are you male or female?

1. Male
2. Female

[SINGLE RESPONSE]

Q2: Which of the following best describes your age?

1. Under 16 [SCREENOUT]
2. 16-17
3. 18-24
4. 25-34
5. 35-44
6. 45-54 [SCREENOUT]
7. 55+ [SCREENOUT]

[SINGLE RESPONSE]

Q3: In which of the following countries/regions do you reside?

1. Australia
2. Austria
3. Belgium
4. Canada
5. Denmark
6. France
7. Germany
8. Hong Kong
9. India
10. Indonesia
11. Ireland
12. Italy
13. Latin America (e.g. Brazil, Mexico)
14. Liechtenstein
15. Luxembourg
16. Malaysia
17. Middle East (e.g. KSA, UAE, Qatar)
18. Monaco
19. Netherlands
20. Nigeria

21. Norway
22. Portugal
23. Russia
24. Singapore
25. South Africa
26. Spain
27. Sweden
28. Switzerland
29. USA
30. Vatican City
31. Other (Please specify)

[SINGLE GRID]

Q4: How often do you feel that you read or watch news?

1. On Television?
2. On the web or mobile?

SCALE:

1. Multiple times a day
2. Daily
3. A few times a week
4. Once a week
5. A few times a month
6. Once a month
7. Less than once a month
8. Never
9. I don't know

[SINGLE GRID, RANDOMISE]

Q5: The following statements are about news on TELEVISION. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following:

- Television is my main source of news
- Television news is easy to understand
- Television news is usually relevant to me
- Television news has a wide range of opinions
- Television news is the best way to be informed about the world

SCALE:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Somewhat Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Somewhat Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

[SINGLE RESPONSE]

Q6: Do you feel that TELEVISION news offers you anything that you cannot get from other media sources, such as online, social media, newspapers, and radio.

1. Yes, definitely
2. Yes, somewhat
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat not
5. Definitely not

[SINGLE GRID, RANDOMISE]

Q7: The following statements are about TELEVISION news. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following:

- Television news gives me in-depth analysis which I cannot get from other media sources
- Television news helps me to make sense of the information I get from other media sources
- I like the personalities on television news
- I like television news because it tells stories in a visual way
- I feel like I am fully up to date after watching a television news programme

SCALE:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Somewhat Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Somewhat Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

NOTE TO SCRIPTER: Each respondent to now be randomly allocated to one of four exposure cells:

1. VIDEO 1
2. VIDEO 2
3. VIDEO 3
4. VIDEO 4

[HIDDEN QUESTION]

QX: Exposure Cell (to be populated based on allocated exposure cell)

1. *Video 1 – Outside Source*
2. *Video 2 – BBC News at 10*
3. *Video 3 – Al Jazeera Newsgrid*
4. *Video 4 – Vice News Tonight*

Q8: We would now like you to watch a short news clip. This is a news clip covering some US politics from earlier this year. The clip will last less than 5 minutes, and you then will answer just 5 quick questions.

When you have watched the video in full, press NEXT to continue to the final questions.

[SINGLE GRID, RANDOMISE]

Q9: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- The clip has given me a good understanding of the story.
- There was enough background information in the story.
- The story was interesting to me.
- The story was told in an impartial way.
- The studio and on screen design helped me to understand the story.
- The story was told in an engaging way.

SCALE:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Somewhat Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Somewhat Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

[SINGLE GRID, RANDOMISE]

Q10: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- The presenter (the first person who appears in the clip) was clear and easy to follow.
- The presenter made me feel interested in the story.
- The presentation style helped me to understand the story.
- The tone of the presenter was about right for the story.

SCALE:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Somewhat Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Somewhat Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

[OPEN TEXT]

Q11: Please write here any other comments you have about the clip you have just watched.

- [OPEN TEXT BOX]
- No comment

Survey complete. Thank you for your responses!