



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Making news in multinational states

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Introduction

The challenge for broadcasters in multinational states is in serving different audiences and information requirements. Even with the best will in the world, it's not an easy task. But it is a vital one: giving audiences accurate information with which to make the best choices for their own lives, to understand the administration of public services, and to hold their national politicians to account.

I chose to explore the production and consumption of news in multinational states not only because it's of academic interest but because it's a very practical one as well. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the information provided by Public Service Broadcasters is a vital part of UK infrastructure.

I started from the premise that news is public knowledge and that it is also a key component of national cultures. News does not magically emerge; it reflects a social world, as well as the structure and values of journalism practice.

In territories such as the United Kingdom, with multiple nations and regions, news therefore finds itself at the intersection of political economy, geography and identity.¹

In my own work at the BBC – first as a journalist and now in policy – I have had to look both ways: towards my home nation, Wales, and towards the rest of the UK.

My work is not designed to be a comprehensive look at this enormous challenge. Rather, in the short period of time available to me, I have looked at how three of the farthest-reaching UK Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) – BBC, ITV and Channel 4 – deal with it.

Since news helps shape national identity, my work also looks at the difficult question of who should control national news: should it be at the unitary state level or at a lower level?

¹ Schudson, Michael. *The Power of News*. Cambridge, Mass ; London: Harvard UP, 1995.

The question of control is a fundamental one – and materially shapes what our broadcasters do and will provide in future – but it is not unique to the UK. The interaction around journalism, identity and state is played out across the world, which is why I looked at two other Public Service Broadcasters in territories with distributed powers: ARD in Germany and CBC/Radio-Canada.²

This strand of my research will suggest that the challenges facing UK broadcasters are not wholly exceptional when considered in an international context. What is unique to the UK, in this context, is the level of intensity around the debate.

As part of my research, I've interviewed a range of journalists, policy-makers and politicians from various parties, and in different countries. They've all spoken candidly to me and what comes through is that there are some very different views on what the future should hold.

More worryingly, I also uncover deep hostility towards public service journalists in Scotland – victimised just for doing their job.

The tentative conclusions that I draw are designed to foster better journalism and policy-making overall, and are not directed at one specific broadcaster nor any single government.

My work at the BBC requires me to be impartial at all times. Not only is it a requirement, I genuinely view it as an undervalued currency in these messy times. Those expecting my views on the appropriateness of current constitutional arrangements in the context of UK broadcast policy should look away now for fear of disappointment. I should also add that the choosing of my specific research topic was my decision alone and not that of my employer. The same principle applies to the ownership of the report's conclusions.

I have cast my net wide in the hope of facilitating an honest, impartial debate. Those diverse views reflected in my report are not mine but, rather, those of the numerous

² For the sake of clarity, I looked at news production in states with sub-state units – in this case, states with nations and regions within them. Whilst nations and regions are not synonymous by definition, I have taken the liberty of looking at these issues on a horizontal plane, given some of the commonalities surrounding this issue.

interviewees, journalists, policy experts and legislators who have given of their time so generously and spoken so honestly to me.

A small number of interviewees' names have been withheld on the basis of source confidentiality since, otherwise, they would not have spoken at all.

The contested isles: a changing United Kingdom

Before we look at the culture and practice of journalism, we need to define what the United Kingdom is, and the complex nature of identity.

Despite its formal title, the United Kingdom is not, as Vernon Bogdanor puts it with masterly understatement, a standard unitary state.³ Rather, as the UK enters its centenary year, we find a union state, created not as the result of conscious decision-making but a constellation of forces. These range from the union of Wales and England in the sixteenth century under Henry VIII, the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707, then the 1801 Union of Great Britain and Ireland, before that latter Union's truncation in 1922 to form the present iteration of statehood – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

From its inception, therefore, the United Kingdom has been a “union without uniformity”, based on three nations, England, Wales and Scotland and a fourth territory, Northern Ireland.⁴ There is also a fifth dimension to this multinational state, and that is the British state itself. In 1998, legislation was enacted establishing devolution to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This was the first explicit acknowledgement that the United Kingdom was a multinational state.

There is no uniformity either around how many people live in the United Kingdom's constituent nations. The UK has 67.1 million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom reside in England. As the largest nation, England (56.6m) accounts for approximately 84% of the UK population, followed by Scotland (5.4 million), Wales (3.2 million), and Northern Ireland (1.9 million).⁵

³ Bogdanor, Vernon. *Beyond Brexit : Towards a British Constitution*. First Paperback ed. London, 2021.

⁴ Madgwick, Peter James, and Richard Rose. *The Territorial Dimension in United Kingdom Politics*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

⁵ ONS mid-2020 estimates

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/mid2020>

Within this union of unions, there are also national identities. Here (and somewhat counter-intuitively), changes in national identity have largely pre-dated devolution. Devolution, in many respects, was the recognition of a distinct sense of national identity in Scotland and Wales, reflecting the desire of those living in those nations to have devolved institutions; for Northern Ireland, devolution was an attempt to appeal to two very separate identities.

In the case of Scotland, by the time devolution arrived, the country viewed itself as predominantly Scottish in “forced choice” identity surveys. Throughout the intervening years, a combination of being equally Scottish and British has been the most popular identity choice in Scotland. There is, therefore, no simple shift in national identity across those years, “rather one of trendless fluctuation”.⁶

In the case of Wales, identity has historically been linked to a large, though not universal degree, with the question of the Welsh language. Wales shows lower levels of exclusive or mainly Welsh identity compared with Scottish identity in Scotland and higher levels of exclusively British identity.⁷

In Northern Ireland, there are long-term demographic changes in train with the Nationalist community growing at a faster rate than the Unionist community. In the case of England, British identity and English identity are inter-linked with new research suggesting that English identity is on the rise.

Finally, the longitudinal evidence regarding Britishness suggests that it is very much in the eye of the beholder with Britishness meaning different things and to varying degrees of intensity in different parts of the UK.⁸ In sum, we are looking at four parts of the United Kingdom that have had different identities for at least 20 years.

This has given rise, as Prof Sir John Curtice puts it, to two challenges. The first is how broadcasters provide fair and impartial coverage of the United Kingdom. The second is who provides that information. Independence, particularly in Scotland (and to a lesser extent in Wales), has become a more popular but polarising

⁶ McCrone, David. "Nationality and National Identity." *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*. Oxford UP, 2020.

⁷ Keating, Michael. *State and Nation in the United Kingdom : The Fractured Union*. First ed. Oxford, 2021.

⁸ Henderson, Ailsa, and Richard Wyn Jones. *Englishness : The Political Force Transforming Britain*. Oxford, 2021.

constitutional option. In Northern Ireland, Brexit, along with the prospect of a Sinn Féin First Minister, point at substantial support for Irish reunification.⁹

⁹ Interview with Professor Sir John Curtice, 20 December 2021. I am also grateful to Sir John Curtice for his assistance with this section overall.

Devolved journalism (1997-2014)

We now turn to the history and the present of devolved journalism and we do so by looking at three distinct chronological phases.

For the purposes of this paper, the first two outlined phases are, by design, short contextual overviews; the third part of the chronology is a deeper dive to some of the more salient, current issues.

The “Oh shit” moment: Devolution, journalism and the UK State (1997-1999)

The first phase of devolution in terms of impact on broadcast media (with online barely in existence) can be broadly summarised as the period between 1997-1999. This is the period between the two devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales and the opening of the Scottish Parliament, as well as the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies.

From the outset, devolution posed immediate challenges for UK-wide broadcasters, journalism and wider civil society. The basic challenge was the nature of the new constitutional settlement developed by the Labour Government of 1997-2001. Devolution was not the same as federalism and it was asymmetrical devolution. Whilst parliaments and assemblies were created in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, no such powers were offered to England. There was, and there still is, no such thing as a separate government of England. The function of government specific to England remains the preserve of the United Kingdom Government.

The other practical difficulty, which would pose immediate challenges for journalism, was a basic numbers issue, unique in devolved territories. As Bogdanor notes, England represented 84% of the population but there is no other federal system in the world in which one of the units represents over 80% of the population. The nearest equivalent is Canada, where 39% of the population live in Ontario.¹⁰

This was a genuinely new beginning for the UK state as well as for British journalism. As Mark Damazer, former BBC Radio 4 Controller put it to me, the

¹⁰Bogdanor, op. cit.

question of Britishness hadn't been such a pressing issue before 1997. "The debate about what Britishness consisted of was less intense and probably even less contested than it appears to be now," said Damazer. ITV was also wrestling with the challenge of getting "their heads around [devolution] in a practical sense in the late nineties".¹¹ This sense of emerging complexity was deepened by the fact that Culture was a devolved policy issue, but Broadcasting policy was (and remains) a fiercely-guarded, reserved, UK-wide matter.¹²

However, despite the structural challenge of the new territorial settlement, the UK PSBs – and the BBC in particular – devoted significant time and money to the new constitutional dispensation.

Mark Thompson, former BBC Director-General (2004-2012), puts the problem in comparative perspective. He found that Whitehall took "many, many years" before the seat of British administration experienced an "oh shit" moment, and realised that devolution was to be more complicated than they had previously thought. In contrast to "the British establishment" who thought that they had settled devolution ("done it") in 1997, Thompson believed the BBC to be taking its responsibilities very seriously, not least because it was so visible.¹³

The BBC's responsiveness was reflected at the level of news production in the respective nations and UK-wide network news.

John Boothman, later to be BBC Scotland's Head of News of Current Affairs, recalls "a very, very, very kind of positive attitude in terms of trying to engage with the issues that devolution threw up".¹⁴ In a similar vein, Leighton Andrews, former BBC Head of Public Affairs and, subsequently a Labour Minister in the Welsh Government, remembers "an intense period of preparation".¹⁵ This was bolstered by specific training for BBC journalists to enhance constitutional understanding and the accurate labelling of devolved functions.

¹¹ Interview with Michael Jerney, Director of ITV News and Current Affairs

¹² Schlesinger, Philip. "The New Communications Agenda in Scotland." *Scottish Affairs* 47 (First Series).1 (2004).

¹³ Interview with Mark Thompson, former BBC Director-General (2004-2014).

¹⁴ Interview with John Boothman, former BBC Scotland Head of News and Current Affairs. 22 November 2021.

¹⁵ Interview with Professor Leighton Andrews, former BBC Head of Corporate Affairs and Welsh Government Minister.

For its part, ITV established a Political Unit in what was then called the National Assembly for Wales under the HTV Wales franchise with STV in Scotland leading on the Channel 3 licensee obligations there.

These arrangements were supplemented by the print media. In Wales, a range of regional newspapers invested in additional coverage of the Assembly, alongside a short-lived Welsh edition of the *Daily Mirror*. Scotland already had a highly-developed communicative sphere before 1998, whose history and focus was significantly different from south of the border. Nonetheless, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament also saw an extensive range of newspapers with Scottish readers enjoying access to the full range of London titles, many of which had created or “editionised” bespoke Scottish versions.¹⁶

But the most difficult issue at the time proved to be the most totemic and enduring in terms of its symbolic longevity. An attempt to develop a devolved Scottish *Six O’Clock News* by BBC Scotland was prevented by the then BBC Director-General, John Birt. Throughout 1998, a ferocious battle was fought over what, on the face of it, seemed to some the arcane matter of who produced a single news bulletin. It involved not only the BBC mandarin class but also the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, with other, senior Westminster politicians enjoined against swathes of Scottish society. At the height of the battle, things became so heated that a Scottish priest prayed for divine intervention to protect the Scottish nation from John Birt. He did so in the Director-General’s actual presence whilst saying grace before dinner. Ostensibly, it was a battle about one television news bulletin but, in reality, it had much greater significance. This was about control and identity. Opting out of the UK-wide Six, thought John Birt, “would be a powerful symbol of Scotland moving away from UK-wide institutions”. To him, it was an issue of such importance that it could have had “...dire consequences for the BBC, and unintended consequences for the United Kingdom”.¹⁷

¹⁶ Neil Blain, ‘The Scottish Media and Politics’ in Blain, Neil, and Hutchison, David. *The Media in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008.

¹⁷ Birt, John. *The Harder Path : The Autobiography*. London: Timewarner, 2002.

The next phase: Devolve and forget? (1999-2014)

The next broad phase takes us from the opening of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies through to the Referendum on Scottish independence in 2014. During this period, the key challenges can be broadly summarised as those of news supply, accuracy of UK-wide news coverage, and political literacy in UK political journalism.

Let's take news supply first. One of the striking paradoxes of this period is that as new polities were created, there were optimistically high expectations of a renaissance in political journalism across the three devolved nations. The reality, however, is that by the end of this period, traditional sources of political news, particularly in the print sector, came under serious economic pressure.

In Wales, the *Western Mail* newspaper – the only self-styled ‘national’ newspaper – saw its circulation decline by 30% between 1997 and 2005 to 61,541 copies. This reduction was the continuation of a structural decline in circulation dating back to at least 1979.¹⁸

Scotland was not immune to these changes, either. Despite its far stronger indigenous press and its venerable claims to be a national ‘fourth estate’, there were similar long-term losses in the print sector. To take two examples, the *Daily Record's* circulation fell by 63% between 1973 and 2015 whilst that of *The Scotsman's* fell by 72%.¹⁹ Those London-based titles which had “put a kilt on it” and produced Scottish editions (for example, *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*), provided important additional Scottish-focused content. However, none was immune from what Scottish political commentator, Iain Macwhirter, calls “a crisis” as “readers turned to Facebook, Google and Twitter for their news (much of which, of course, was recycled from the pages of the print press)”.²⁰

Underlying market trends were similar in Northern Ireland as the richly diverse local press experienced a similar commercial decline with early digital gains proving

¹⁸ Thomas, James, “The Regional and Local Media in Wales”, in: Bob Franklin (Ed.), *Local Journalism, and Local Media: Making the Local Media*, London: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁹ McCrone, David. *The New Sociology of Scotland*. London, 2017.

²⁰ Macwhirter, Iain, *Scottish affairs*, 2018-02, Vol.27 (1), p.27-35.

nugatory. This decline was accelerated by the success of the peace process. As the new entente matured, the Belfast press corps – drawn from international and London-based newspapers – gradually left. This, in turn, significantly diminished the amount of coverage afforded to Northern Ireland’s more peaceful, if not entirely harmonious, domestic affairs agenda.²¹

Print news is, of course, part of a wider political information environment. In the early part of this century, emerging digital content produced little measurable compensatory benefit (and to the extent it did, it tended to amplify existing offline news content).

My key argument here, therefore, is that the importance of PSB News – particularly UK-wide broadcasts – in terms of access to available news about devolved functions, disproportionately increased during this period as the print sector declined. But availability and volume of content weren’t the only challenges. Now, PSB also had to cross a much higher bar in terms of the accuracy and framing of its content so that it properly differentiated between UK-wide functions and those which were now devolved.

Those at the sharp end of devolved politics recall the early struggles around how UK-wide PSBs struggled with reporting accurately and appropriately as policy divergence developed. Kevin Pringle, Director of Communications to the SNP’s then leader, Alex Salmond, told me political literacy was a key issue during this period, with “personnel based in London, very often producers [...] finding it hard” to think beyond the 85% of their audience living in England. Pringle found that London-based journalists struggled with the “added layer of complication” posed by policy divergence.²²

Others go further in their critiques and see the PSB failings of this first phase as inherently institutional. Alun Davies, a Labour Member of the Welsh Parliament and former Deputy Culture Minister, told me: “UK PSBs didn’t have the first idea what devolution was and the way it would change the United Kingdom. I think they saw

²¹ Devenport, Mark. "The Media in Northern Ireland: A Stormont Correspondent's View." *The Political Quarterly* (London. 1930) 83.2 (2012): 287-91.

²² Interview with Kevin Pringle, Former Scottish National Party Director of Communications.

[the parliaments] as super councils, and that the ‘and finally’ spot would be sufficient so that you would have ‘the Scotland spot’ or ‘the Welsh spot’, every couple of weeks, or every couple of months, to suggest that something else was happening in those places.”

The enduring legacy of this failure, Davies said, is that in Wales there is still “a significant portion of the population who don’t know how they’re governed”.²³

The Welsh Assembly election of 2003 was seen as a particular nadir with a low national turnout of 38% reflecting a disengaged and uninformed electorate. At this point, attention began to turn toward the media’s role – and perceived failure – in creating a better-informed electorate.²⁴

These informational challenges weren’t confined to Wales. Constitutional lawyer and former Conservative Member of the Scottish Parliament, Professor Adam Tomkins, found a gap between journalism and a nascent national political culture in Scotland but for somewhat different reasons. Tomkins found that “most” London-based political journalists hadn’t thought “at all” about devolution or Scotland, in the period between the creation of Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the run-up to the Scottish independence referendum, starting in 2011.

Professor Tomkins calls this “12-year gap of ignorance” forgivable, on the basis that “largely nothing happened”. Between 1999 and 2007, both the UK and Scottish Governments were run by Labour with the only Labour Scottish First Minister of any significant duration, Jack McConnell, particularly “dull” in his aversion to using legislative powers. The increasingly febrile atmosphere around Scottish politics leading up to the Referendum of 2014 did, Tomkins claims, foreground Scottish issues to an extent but only when there was “a crisis”.

This, he thought, had important civic consequences beyond Scotland too with people in England not having any understanding at all what “the routine quotidian

²³ Interview with Alun Davies MS.

²⁴https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/electoral_commission_pdf_file/NationalAssemblyforWales2003OpinionResearchReport_9987-8063_W_.PDF

experience of devolution is”. Which, in turn, he argues, is “definitely leading to a fracturing of the cultural union” between the four nations.²⁵

Scrutiny without the necessary cultural understanding was also an issue for some beyond the devolved nations. One senior UK Government interviewee told me that the SNP skilfully exploited the lack of journalistic knowledge by London-based media in the period up to 2014. In particular, UK Government sources perceived that the level of challenge to Alex Salmond in interviews for London-based media was far lower than what it would have been in interviews conducted by Scotland-based presenters. This trend, the same interviewee claims, has continued up until very recently.²⁶

Broadcasters – and the BBC in particular, given the uniqueness of its regulation and funding – were under growing scrutiny around the quality of PSB news supply during this period. In 2007, a Broadcasting Commission was established by the Scottish Government. Its creation stemmed, “in part from the general feeling that [...] whether in the shape of the broadcasting companies or the independent production sector, [Scotland] was inadequately represented at UK level on-screen and in terms of commissions”.²⁷

Similar inquiries would be conducted in Wales by the National Assembly for Wales’ Culture Committee.

PSB journalists were caught at the centre of these pressures around supply and territorial control. Those who held leadership positions during this period point in the direction of mundane challenges, in addition to cultural and structural ones. John Boothman, former Head of BBC Scotland News told me there was a “genuine desire” to apply “the right approach” which meant that “much was done but much more needed to be done”. In particular, he believes that coverage of the devolved nations did not get the significance it deserved, but that the fundamental issue was, in the BBC’s case, “the size, the scale, the complexity of the organisation”.

²⁵ Interview with Professor Adam Tomkins.

²⁶ Interview with UK Government representative

²⁷ Blain, Neil, Hutchison, David, and Hassan, Gerry. *Scotland's Referendum and the Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016.

The seminal, longitudinal body of work to have looked at this question is that conducted by Cardiff University between 2007 and 2015. It considered the performance of BBC Network News, alongside ITV, Channel 4 and Sky News. The first Cardiff University study – commissioned by the BBC’s then governing body, the BBC Trust, in 2007 –raised the possibility that the focus on UK/English politics was potentially “a source of confusion and misunderstanding”.

The Cardiff University research also uncovered a risk to democratic understanding with audiences potentially not only ignorant of the various policy options being pursued in different parts of the United Kingdom but “an additional risk that they may incorrectly assume that English policy initiatives apply to the United Kingdom as a whole”.²⁸

This research was corroborated for the BBC Trust by political scientist, Professor Anthony King. He found that the “network and current-affairs programmes, taken as a whole, are not reporting the new UK with the range, clarity and richness that might reasonably be expected. The BBC’s reporting [...] was quite often unclear or vague”.²⁹

The follow-up work by Cardiff University, conducted between 2009 and 2016, found that signposting the relevance of English policy news items – while by no means automatic or routine – improved on BBC outlets. In 2009, 62.1% of all BBC news items about devolved issues in England signposted its geographical relevance; in 2016, this had increased to 78%. The improvement followed a series of policy initiatives within the BBC to address this issue. A much more limited improvement was found on commercial television.

However, across the totality of PSB output (BBC, Channel 4, ITV), even in the best year (2016), only around half of the items that only applied to England were signposted as such.³⁰

²⁸ Cushion S, Lewis J and Groves C (2009) Reflecting the four nations? An analysis of reporting devolution on UK network news media. *Journalism Studies* 10(5): 1–17.

²⁹ BBC Trust Impartiality Report: BBC Network News and Current Affairs Coverage of the Four UK Nations, (2008).

³⁰ Cushion, Stephen, Lewis, Justin, and Kilby, Allaina. "Why Context, Relevance and Repetition Matter in News Reporting: Interpreting the United Kingdom's Political Information Environment." *Journalism: Theory, Practice, And Criticism* 21.1 (2020): 34-53.

From referendum to pandemic (2014-2021)

The penultimate phase of our story takes us from the September 2014 Scottish independence referendum to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the testimony of some of the key UK PSB Network reporters, producers and leaders working in the devolved nations, I explore a number of the most pressing issues.

This discussion focuses on five current areas of journalistic practice and culture, starting with the commissioning process.

1. The art of the sell: Getting news on air

The manner in which news from the Nations is commissioned and then ultimately broadcast reflects what is best described as a “community of practice” between journalists in the Nations and the gatekeepers – those Network producers and editors who decide what gets on air.

The starting point of news supply is the commissioning process. This process usually involves two types of story. The first type of story is the planned story: either a policy or update story drawn wholly from a specific nation; or, a more general UK-wide policy story substantially portraying that nation.

For example, a feature broadcast by Channel 4 News on the non-availability of ambulances in Wales took circa three weeks in the planning, and involved a number of detailed conversations between Channel 4 News’ Wales and the West Correspondent, Andy Davies, and the Home News Editor for Channel 4 News, Becky Emmett.³¹

³¹ Interview with Becky Emmett, Home News Editor, Channel 4 News. The final broadcast piece can be accessed here: <https://www.channel4.com/news/on-the-road-with-the-welsh-ambulance-service-facing-intense-pressure>

The other category of story is the dynamic deployment of “on-the-day” resources. These types of stories will be key policy-related developments or “blue light” stories, involving the emergency services.

The receptiveness of UK network centres to receiving and broadcasting stories generated by Nations’ correspondents also depends on those centres having sufficient cultural and political literacy to understand the particularities of each nation.

Channel 4 News’ Becky Emmett explained that not only had the news service invested in the nations and regions of the UK by embedding journalists in those communities, but that its London-based editorial centre was aware of the requirement for it to properly understand the whole of the UK. In practice, this involved continuous conversations with its reporters as to what should be covered. Again, this emphasises the importance not only of a peer-to-peer relationship between centre and periphery, but also the role of the gatekeeper.

Another feature of this continuous discourse is the interventionist editorial role of nations’-based correspondents in ensuring that UK-wide coverage does not create inadvertent perceived bias by omission. Sarah Smith, former BBC Scotland Editor, told me she had won “most” of her editorial “battles” around which stories should be covered by the main BBC Network television bulletins. Such an approach required her to intervene judiciously and to refrain from offering unimportant stories. This calibrated strategy, Smith explained, ensured that a story such as the Scottish Government budget (“not always that exciting”) would be covered by BBC Network News, with Smith having explained to colleagues that BBC News would be making a “huge mistake” by not covering such an important fiscal set-piece. Scottish audiences, she predicted, would be “rightly furious” if such a moment were ignored.

For correspondents working in the nations, a keen appreciation of the public interest also looms large. Channel 4’s Andy Davies spoke of the challenge of knowing that 86% of Channel 4 News’ audience on any given night would be based in England and that the programme risked losing audience share if the bulk of the channel’s audience deemed content from the other three UK nations to be of

“marginal interest”. Whilst sensitive to this challenge, Davies counters that the bigger risk is of self-censorship leading to “a pretty awful situation” where programmes would confine themselves to covering England-only stories.

Again, the directional corrective provided by senior nations correspondents, such as Davies, is crucial here: “...that’s when we have to have a voice straight to the programme editors and make the point that you’ve devoted X amount of time to covering this issue in England, and that has no relevance for three nations where you also have viewers”.

Whilst there are commonalities, not all of these editorial transactions are the same. The art of pitching a story to a UK-wide broadcaster is markedly different in Northern Ireland, compared to Scotland. The BBC’s Emma Vardy is now one of just two full-time UK Network news correspondents based in Northern Ireland. Both are employed by the BBC. Vardy describes a paradoxical situation with a highly politically motivated society in Northern Ireland but is also acutely aware that some “people actually in England” wouldn’t, potentially, “really care” if Northern Ireland became part of the Republic of Ireland. Voters in, for example, Birmingham, wouldn’t necessarily care, she claimed, about “Sinn Féin and DUP battles”.

This pragmatic appreciation of newsworthiness compels her to pitch appropriately. For the bigger stories, such as Brexit or the legacy of the Troubles, the barriers to being carried on the Network are lower than for other, more general stories. Vardy, however, emphasised the importance of this other category of story – universal stories that are not necessarily unique to Northern Ireland – as a means of ensuring that the region would not be continuously equated with the travails of Brexit or paramilitary activity. An example of this was the high level of cancer operations being delayed in Northern Ireland due to COVID-19 – a specific story but with universal resonance.

Another important component of successful pitching is an appreciation of the intended audience. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, PSB TV audiences are “double served” by the BBC and ITV/Channel 3 licensees with news from their respective nation and the Network. ITV’s Peter Smith sees this as a “balancing act”:

keeping Scottish audiences engaged but not speaking “above the heads” of people in the rest of the UK with an assumption of prior knowledge. This delicate equilibrium, Smith believed, was best achieved in the context of television news packages where pictures could explain the story in an universal way, in addition to an original news line which had the potential to appeal to all.

2. Knowledge gaps

Whilst the commitment to delivering public service journalism is shared and uncontested, there are difficulties and cultural constraints around successful editorial negotiation. The biggest constraint, arguably, is the London-centric nature of UK journalism, including print. This runs the risk of making the UK nations invisible to each other.

Channel 4 News’ Andy Davies spoke of the challenge of persuading London-based media that certain stories from Wales mattered. “They are operating in a London newsroom, and they are all travelling in from London boroughs,” he said. “And [...] sometimes it is difficult to convey the importance of a story in Wales when they have no traction on it whatsoever.” This lack of “traction” he attributed to the fact that salience and perceived newsworthiness was only achieved by London-based producers and editors if a story from Wales had appeared elsewhere already on other UK media: “They’ll say, ‘Well, well, hang on. Actually I haven’t seen it on Sky. I haven’t seen it on ITV or [BBC] news 24.’ And it’s not registering on their radar. So that’s when it becomes quite difficult to give them a sense of how this story is playing or will play in the next 24 hours.”

In addition to the structural imbalance of UK journalism, there was also a clear feeling amongst a number of current practitioners that there is a need for all journalists to be better trained in understanding the UK’s constitutional wiring, as well as its culture. A number of my interviewees spoke about how important this was, so as to avoid – as Channel 4’s Andy Davies put it – “drifting from one email to another”, reminding people of the need to consider devolution. This continuous training should, he suggested, employ a variety of means to achieve its objectives,

including devolution training for new entrants, style guides, and a culture of continuous critical thinking around devolution.

Another suggestion relating to professional development was around the rotation and deployment of journalists. Mark Devenport, until recently one of the BBC's long-standing journalists in Northern Ireland, stressed the value of London-based journalists "coming over" and reporting on the region: "I think anyone in London who was tempted to think, 'that's the Good Friday Agreement, it's all over and done with' has been proven wrong on so many different occasions."³²

ITN's Peter Smith is a case in point. He told me he had personally benefited from working across the United Kingdom, gaining knowledge of its constituent parts. Ensuring that London-based journalists worked for extended periods in different parts of the UK would improve knowledge and meaningful portrayal. Developing such a culture would mitigate the risk, he said, of treating devolved policy implementation as "quaint things the nations have got wrong or done differently from England" and instead recognise that devolution involves "long-standing and established practises".

There was, however, a recognition that, even with the best intentions around accuracy, journalists are hindered by governments not being clear about which tier of government is responsible for what – UK, or devolved government. As we will see later, this was to become a serious issue during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the lack of inter-governmental understanding has created problems with other major policy issues, too.

One remedy, suggested by BBC Wales Network News correspondent, Hywel Griffith, was for the respective governments themselves to publish guidance to assist journalists. Such an approach, he suggested, would be helpful for journalists whilst recognising that there are some policy areas – for example responsibility over legacy coal tips in Wales – where there is no inter-governmental agreement over legal responsibility.

³² Interview with Mark Devenport, former BBC Network News Northern Ireland Correspondent and former BBC Northern Ireland Political Editor

3. News is “where the journalists are”

The other key element in ensuring that UK-wide broadcasters represent the whole of the country is the permanent location of newsgathering resources and staff.

The UK PSBs examined here have all expressed a firm commitment to ensuring that the nations and regions are covered by their main outputs and have moved in different ways, reflective of their funding and regulatory models.

ITV News, for example, cited its intention to invest in journalists to reflect the totality of the UK’s experience. This intention was confirmed in January 2022 with the announcement that its evening news programme would be extended to an hour. This would allow the broadcaster to provide a greater focus on reporting from outside of London in order to reflect the whole of the UK. This move was to be accompanied by new appointments, including correspondents in Wales, Scotland and the north of England.³³ In September 2021, Channel 4 opened its national headquarters in Leeds, designed to be a base for 200 staff and for key programmes, such as Channel 4 News, to be broadcast from there.

The biggest play was that of the BBC, which recently made two major strategic moves. The first, in 2017, was significant additional investment in the Nations themselves; in Scotland, this included a new channel, whilst Wales and Northern Ireland benefited from additional journalistic resources, again primarily aimed at news in and for those nations.

Then, in March 2021, the BBC announced a major rebalancing of its UK-wide journalistic and creative resources. The new policy, [Across the UK](#), sought to move a large number of creative roles out of London and to recreate “the BBC as a genuinely UK-wide organisation with a much stronger presence across the length and breadth of the country”.³⁴ In News, the BBC committed to basing half of its UK-focused specialist or “story teams” across the UK. This shift was more than solely industrial

³³ Interview with Michael Jerney, Director of ITV News and Current Affairs. See also <https://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-releases/itv-national-and-international-evening-news-become-hour-long-programme-march-2022>

³⁴ BBC, March 2021. The BBC across the UK.

or economic policy. It would also, according to the Corporation, “move the creative and journalistic centre of the BBC away from London to a much more distributed model that moves not just people, but power and decision-making to the UK’s Nations and regions”.³⁵

The process, controversial in parts, has started, with London-based BBC roles being relocated across the UK. In addition, flagship television news programmes, such as the *Ten O’Clock* news bulletin and *Newsnight*, are broadcast from the UK’s four capitals. In explaining the BBC’s *Across the UK* philosophy, Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director, BBC Nations, makes an explicit reference to the BBC having to mediate a new type of Britishness: “Being British means a commitment to telling it as it is across all four nations of the UK. I think if there were a time when British was conflated with a purely sort of London-centric, Westminster view of the world, then those days are gone. And so the challenge, journalistically, for us now, is to ensure that the diversity of the UK and the plurality of democratic institutions are reflected within that British focus, if you like the all-UK focus.”³⁶

4. Editorial policies and oversight

Given the contested nature of accuracy in the context of devolved journalism, it is unsurprising that there has been, and continues to be, a sharp focus on ensuring that policy functions are correctly attributed to the correct government. From a normative perspective, accuracy matters since it’s about giving audiences the right type of information to make informed choices as citizens. It is also an important driver of ensuring that audiences trust the journalism that they consume.

Within the UK PSB broadcasters themselves, there is a continuous emphasis on eliminating mistakes which, at their most serious, fail to differentiate between UK-wide and devolved responsibilities, and therefore give unintentionally false or partial information.

³⁵ <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/the-bbc-across-the-uk.pdf>

³⁶ Interview with Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director, BBC Nations.

At the most basic level, journalists proactively intervene by checking programme running orders to ensure that stories are now accurately labelled.

But merely labelling a story as applying to England only, for example, is seen by key practitioners as insufficient. John Boothman, former Head of BBC Scotland News and Current Affairs, describes the focus on descriptive accuracy to the exclusion of more nuanced comparisons across the nations as an important shortcoming.

Focusing rigidly on accuracy – for understandable reasons – has also created additional problems in certain contexts. According to the BBC’s Sarah Smith, the unintended consequence of better descriptive accuracy was that it ran the risk of telling viewers and listeners in Scotland “not to bother paying any attention to this news” since it “isn’t for you” and risked creating the perception that “we are making a bulletin that is aimed at our audiences in England”. The solution to this problem, Smith observed, was to ensure that Scotland would either be represented in additional coverage within the same bulletin or referred to in the same piece.

At the end of the editorial process, there is the question of regulatory oversight. The Cardiff University report, referred to above, was commissioned by the BBC’s then-regulator, the BBC Trust. Whilst the report had an undoubtedly salutary effect on UK PSB journalism for a period of time, there is by now a range of views on the optimal way forward in measuring post-broadcast accuracy and sufficiency of coverage.

Boothman claims that the time is now ripe for a similar analysis to be conducted. Looking back at the BBC, he believes that, following a concerted effort to improve standards, there was a feeling that “it was job done”.

Current BBC senior leaders take a different view about the best way forward. Rhodri Talfan Davies from the BBC claims that recognising the need for accuracy and the devolved nature of the UK is now part of the “bloodstream” of the BBC’s daily editorial conversation and that “whilst not perfect” the broadcaster is “significantly ahead of all other news, broadcasters and publishers – as we should be”.³⁷

³⁷ Interview with Rhodri Talfan Davies.

From a regulatory perspective, the UK PSBs' regulator, Ofcom, has the last word on these issues. In 2019, Ofcom looked in detail at the BBC and compared it to other broadcasters. Its analysis found that, whilst the BBC did better than its competitors in explaining policy differences in devolved fields, "the BBC did not make any such reference in almost half of cases (45.5%) where such a reference could have been made".³⁸

Interviewed for this report, Ofcom's Director of Content and Standards, Vikki Cook, said one of the main challenges for UK PSBs in recent years was to better represent the totality of life outside of London. Cook credits the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 for having "done an awful lot over the last couple of years" to migrate their staff out of London in order to achieve "a much richer diversity of thought and input" into their storytelling.³⁹ As a former television news editor herself, Cook expresses sympathy at newsrooms having to cover news in a multinational arena balanced against the need for news to be newsworthy: "You have to deliver the stories," she said, "you have to go where the stories go."

Ofcom also has regulatory oversight of impartiality and accuracy. Cook's Ofcom colleague Adam Baxter emphasised that Ofcom is a principles-led regulator. In practice, this means giving broadcasters significant latitude to achieve due impartiality across all subjects using a range of editorial means, consistent with their right to free expression.

The other, perhaps more reductive, prism through which Ofcom considers this multifaceted audience question is audience complaints. Here, Adam Baxter states that complaints relating to the mislabelling of devolved policy responsibility have become "much rarer".⁴⁰

³⁸ Ofcom Review of BBC News and Current Affairs (2019).

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf

³⁹ Interview with Vikki Cook, Director of Content and Media Policy, Ofcom

⁴⁰ Interview with Adam Baxter, Director of Broadcasting Standards, Ofcom.

5. Devolved journalists as targets of harassment

Hostility toward the press is not a new phenomenon. However scholars have only recently begun to persistently explore the nature of harassment toward journalists in democratic countries widely considered to have a “free press”.⁴¹

This issue has had different trajectories within the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, since the start of “the Troubles” in the late 1960s, there have been a number of incidents involving physical threats against journalists. These could take the form of generalised threats during incidents of civil disorder or more, rarely, targeted harassment of journalists.

At the height of the Troubles, abuse would come from both sides of the sectarian divide. According to Mark Devenport, Nationalists had a tendency to see the UK media as “the establishment”. However, conversely, Devenport also told me: “Republicans tended to be a wee bit more sophisticated about their relationships with the media, and most reporters [...] would say that they felt slightly more comfortable operating on the Nationalist side of a police line than on the Loyalist side of a police line.”⁴²

Even after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, newsgathering in Northern Ireland was not without its serious risks, as evidenced by the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in 2019, shot dead whilst observing riots in Londonderry.

The rise of social media has fundamentally changed the nature of targeted harassment within other, contested territories. Scotland, I would argue, is a case in point here with clear evidence of growing media harassment akin to “mob censorship” both before and after the 2014 Referendum.⁴³ The period leading up to the poll was a difficult one, with “an agreed referendum on an agreed question and a long period of intensive debate”.⁴⁴ It culminated with what is arguably the most significant moment in the UK’s territorial history since the secession of the Irish

⁴¹ Miller, Kaitlin C. “Hostility Toward the Press: A Synthesis of Terms, Research, and Future Directions in Examining Harassment of Journalists.” *Digital Journalism* (2021): 1-20.

⁴² Interview with Mark Devenport.

⁴³ Silvio Waisbord (2020) Mob Censorship: Online Harassment of US Journalists in Times of Digital Hate and Populism, *Digital Journalism*, 8:8, 1030-1046.

⁴⁴ Keating, Michael, and McEwen, Nicola. “The Independence Referendum of 2014.” *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*. Oxford UP, 2020. *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*

Free State in 1922. For a short period of time, it looked to many as though Scotland would leave the United Kingdom.

The declining print sector helped frame many of the referendum issues (almost invariably from a pro-Union perspective); social media, too, played an important role. However, despite the increasing reach of the respective online Yes and No campaigns, the broadcast media (BBC and Scottish Television) still delivered the biggest reach. The BBC, in particular, faced numerous accusations of editorial bias and partiality, culminating in a large crowd of pro-independence campaigners [protesting](#) outside the BBC Scotland offices in Glasgow, days before the vote.

The contested question of the referendum, and a legacy of abuse directed at some journalists in its aftermath, should not be underestimated. Sarah Smith was the BBC's first Scotland Editor, in post from 2016 until late 2021. Whilst careful not to identify a specific section of the political community, she recounts a difficult experience, having been “demonised quite heavily [...] amongst certain parts of the population”. Most of these critics, she noted, were contradictory in claiming not to watch the BBC (to the extent that they wanted to stop paying the Licence Fee) “but seem to know an enormous amount about what I say and do on television and on the radio nonetheless”.

Smith also felt that her personal position – as daughter of former UK Labour Leader, John Smith – made her uniquely vulnerable to criticism. “He was a very well-known politician, he was a Unionist, people like to therefore assume that my politics must be the same as my father's despite me being, one, a different person, and him having been dead for 27 years.” The abuse was not confined to Sarah Smith's antecedents. Smith also suspects that her gender was an aggravating feature behind her experiences.

This “deeply unpleasant” abuse manifested itself in professional and domestic contexts. Smith would turn off her notifications on Twitter and tell herself that only a small minority of the population would read online abuse directed at her. However, in a “small country” like Scotland, she felt herself to be a visible target. People, she said, would “...roll their car windows down as they drive past me in the street to ask

me, ‘What fucking lies you’re going to be telling on TV tonight, you fucking lying bitch.’” This “vitriolic attention”, Smith told me, happened “most of the time” if set up to do a live television contribution. Smith also told me she has “pretty much stopped tweeting” for fear of attracting the “shit I can live without”.

Sarah Smith’s ITV counterpart in Scotland, Peter Smith, also speaks of having experienced online abuse. “I think,” Peter said, “anyone covering Scottish politics experiences it.” And whilst he thought each devolved country had its specific challenges around journalistic culture, “In Scotland, if you give too much to one side or the other, the abuse will quickly follow.”⁴⁵ The abuse directed at Peter was “mainly online” and he suspected it to be orchestrated by “a handful of people with multiple accounts”. He also believed the online abuse to be organised with “certain lines, certain patterns of phrases” being repeated. This, he claimed, was deliberate and “designed to put pressure on journalists in Scotland on the constitutional question”. Some of the messages he received accused him of “being Satan, the devil” and having “sold his soul to the devil”. Most of this abuse, he noted, came from the pro-independence side, but he would also be the subject of “absolutely horrendous” abuse from those who were pro-Union.

For Peter Smith, however, direct shouted abuse was rarer and less intense than it was for Sarah Smith. He suspects that one reason why he has received less abuse than Sarah Smith is that he is a male journalist. He told me that his coping mechanism for general incivility was to try and shrug it off – “water off a duck’s back” – but that when the abuse came, it was no less shocking for it. On one occasion, he was shouted at and accused of being “a traitor” and “selling out”.

One of the other accusatory tropes levelled against Peter Smith was around his loyalties. Peter Smith believes that, unlike the BBC, not having ‘British’ in ITV’s trading name made the broadcaster’s work easier. Nonetheless, he was still the subject of abuse accusing him of being in the employ of “London paymasters”, and that he was “taking his orders from London”.

⁴⁵ Interview with Peter Smith, ITV News Scotland Correspondent.

Other Scotland-based journalists speak of mixed experiences in what they describe as an “extremely engaged” political communication space. Ciaran Jenkins, Channel 4 News’ Scotland Correspondent recounts, on the one hand, being congratulated by members of the public on his probing journalism.⁴⁶ However, on the other hand, that praise has been tempered by pervasive hostility from across the political divide. A 2021 election interview with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon drew online insults calling Jenkins “vile”, “a fucking moron” and a “nasty little rat”.⁴⁷ On social media, he was also told to “go home” to Wales after asking a question to the First Minister at a press briefing. After this particular incident, Ms Sturgeon was compelled to intervene in his defence.⁴⁸ Jenkins’ response to an overt effort by some to “other” him for not being Scottish has been to cultivate a reputation for being “an even-handed outsider without a dog in the fight”. This, he believes, appears to have been successful in garnering respect from across the political spectrum for his work.

As the face and voice of the BBC in Scotland, Sarah Smith, however, feels that she was in a significantly different position. Smith told me of her fears that the online harm directed at her has damaged the BBC’s reputation for impartiality – despite the “huge” amount of time she spends every day ensuring her reports are impartial. “I worry a lot that the criticism, bile and hatred [...] that I attract from some quarters is damaging the reputation of the BBC,” she told me. Even more serious is the final, personal impact reporting in Scotland has had on Smith herself. In November 2021, she was appointed the BBC’s North America Editor. She describes her sentiment at leaving Scotland as being one of “relief”. Despite the prospect of reporting on the polarised politics of the United States, she notes with satisfaction that she “won’t be famous at all” in the US and will be “gloriously anonymous”. Whilst viewing complaints about reporting as an inevitable consequence of her vocation, Scotland being her home made things different for her. By contrast, in the United States, “Nobody will have any idea who my father is. So, the misogynistic idea that I can't

⁴⁶ Interview with Ciaran Jenkins, Channel 4 Scotland Correspondent.

⁴⁷ <https://twitter.com/c4ciaran/status/1382828435723149317>

⁴⁸

<https://www.thenational.scot/news/18749044.nicola-sturgeon-defends-welsh-channel-4-reporter-told-go-home/>

have any of my own thoughts anyway, or rise above my family connections to report impartially will no longer be part of the discourse.”

Looking ahead, Smith predicts “enormous scrutiny” of the BBC were there to be a second referendum on Scottish independence. She depicts a potential situation where the BBC would be “actual players” in any such referendum with news reports “politicised and weaponized by both sides”. In such a situation, she warned, the BBC would attract “such an enormous amount of incoming criticism that it would be almost a full-time job to manage that, never mind trying to cover events”.

Reporting COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest story for UK journalists since the Second World War. Much of the reporting, in the UK and elsewhere, focused on the efforts of national governments to protect their citizens. Nations across the world were used by governments as frames of interpretation, with citizens urged to exercise caution in the name of national solidarity and moral responsibility.⁴⁹

COVID-19 also shone a light on the robustness of federal and devolved policy delivery as never before. In both formal federations and hybrid federations around the world (home to around 40% of the world's population), there would be immediate questions around the coordination of systems.

As Nico Steytler summarises in his book about federal system responses to the pandemic (*Comparative Federalism and COVID-19*): it placed an emphasis both on coordination and cooperation between governments vertically and horizontally, and on the democratic accountability of each of them.⁵⁰

Most faced fundamental questions about responsibility over national emergencies and coordination; the autonomy of states over critical areas such as disaster management and healthcare services; public health and control of public spaces. The other major intergovernmental question was the fiscal one and the eye-watering cost of COVID-19 management.

Here at home, the United Kingdom and devolved governments cooperated closely during the first weeks of the crisis, leading up to the first pan-UK lockdown of 23 March. But the key decision, which framed later developments, was the creation of the four-nation Coronavirus strategy and Coronavirus Act. This Act conferred enormous powers not only on the UK government but on the devolved governments as well. It would also foreground the reality of four separate National Health Service

⁴⁹ Kunelius, Risto. "On the Overlap of Systemic Events: Covid-19, Climate, and Journalism." Social Media Society 6.3 (2020).

⁵⁰ Steytler, N. C. *Comparative Federalism and Covid-19 : Combating the Pandemic*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY, 2022. Routledge Studies in Federalism and Decentralization.

systems. It is no exaggeration to claim that COVID-19 transformed the role and visibility of the United Kingdom's devolved governments.

It also illustrated the asymmetry of UK devolution, with the United Kingdom Government performing two functions: governing the UK in certain areas and being in effect the government of England in others. This asymmetry would have major implications for UK-wide journalism.⁵¹

For journalists working in the field, there was a dawning realisation that this would be the biggest story of their lives and, as such, they had a moral responsibility to bear witness. Andy Davies, Channel 4 News' Wales correspondent said he felt a moral and ethical responsibility to get the story of Wales, his home country, told on its own terms to a UK-wide audience. "The weight of responsibility," he said, "to accurately reflect and make a record of what was happening to the people of Wales – to my country – during that period was like nothing I'd experienced before."

The other responsibility felt by journalists was for the accuracy of the knowledge they had at their disposal. The first UK-wide lockdown, confirming stringent restrictions on liberties, was announced to an audience of 28.2 million by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 23 March 2020. This pre-recorded broadcast was in the top tier of most-watched British programmes, alongside the 1966 World Cup final and the funeral of Princess Diana. It was only some time later that many journalists began to realise that the United Kingdom had four lockdowns, not one.

Hywel Griffith, the BBC's Network News correspondent in Wales, describes himself and other colleagues having to "process" the implications of this major shift in policy. This realisation saw a change from one to four nationally-controlled lockdowns with some major implications for how the story would be told.

Griffith adds that this situation was never explained to him at the time by either the UK or Welsh Government, and that the Welsh Government seemed surprised, in the first instance, at the array of new powers it now wielded.⁵²

⁵¹ See Anderson, Paul, 'The Covid-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom : a tale of convergence and divergence' in Steytler, op.cit

⁵² Interview with Hywel Griffith, BBC News.

This element of surprise at the role of devolved governments was also felt by the UK Government, according to a senior UK Government interviewee. In its defence, a UK Government interviewee described having to contend with the first major national emergency since devolution and that “there was an assumption at the centre, who feel the full responsibility of everything, that we’ve got to go on with it”.⁵³

The early stage of the pandemic saw extraordinarily high numbers for news provided by the Public Service Broadcasters. Their role was fundamental to the UK’s information infrastructure and, according to Ofcom, “reinforced the importance of public service broadcasters as trusted providers of news and information”.⁵⁴ During 2020, BBC services were the most-used source of news and information about COVID-19, with eight in 10 people (82%) saying they used them for this purpose in the first week of lockdown – well ahead of other broadcasters, social media and other sources. The BBC, ITV and Channel 4 were also each rated by Ofcom research as “trusted sources of news and information” by more than eight in 10 people at the start of lockdown.⁵⁵

May 2020 brought about the major turning point in the “four nations” approach, when the UK Government’s move to change its core “stay at home” messaging. Until then, the injunction had been accepted by all four nations, but a proposed relaxation of “stay at home” rules could legally only be applied to England, and the devolved governments were disinclined to adopt such a change at the same time.

The Welsh Government claims that it first heard of this policy change in the media. The issue, according to a Welsh Government interviewee, “... was not consulted on with the devolved administrations in any way beforehand”. Rather, they claim that the change was “sprung on ministers when it was in the *Sunday Telegraph* that morning, and this was then sprung on devolved ministers at the Cobra meeting on a Sunday afternoon, as the changes [were] being announced in England”.

⁵³ Interview with UK Government representative

⁵⁴ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/200503/media-nations-2020-uk-report.pdf

⁵⁵ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/200503/media-nations-2020-uk-report.pdf

Such breakdowns in communication were not, according to the Welsh Government, solely attributable to carelessness. They suspect it would have been “difficult, psychologically, for UK ministers standing in front of the Union Jack to talk about England” and that they would have been “diminished” for doing so. This, according to the Welsh Government, was the type of cultural issue that would never have been picked up in a civil contingency exercise because any attempt to highlight differences within the UK nations would have been “just weird for [the UK Government]”.⁵⁶

Looking back at this early period, Andy Davies of Channel 4 News attributes the difficulties of the situation to a “Prime Minister [...] not making it clear, in some of his Downing Street press conferences, that a large amount of what he was saying is exclusive to England”. It created a real problem around accuracy in the middle of a public health emergency, according to Davies. The issue was felt particularly in Wales, he said, given most people there get their media from UK-wide sources. During this period, with “two governments who are clearly at odds”, Davies viewed the role he and other journalists were performing as invaluable: “We had a real duty to ensure that whatever we were saying was the absolutely accurate version.”

Inaccurate or partial communication was not the sole preserve of the UK Government, according to journalists who covered the pandemic. In Scotland, there was a real lack of clarity around who was responsible for key issues, such as COVID-19 testing and providing vaccines, according to Channel 4 News’ Ciaran Jenkins. He concludes that, “It wasn’t in the Scottish Government’s interest to say, ‘Actually, the UK Government provided all this stuff’.”

Irrespective of blame or motivation, announcements that lacked specificity would have important consequences during the pandemic. A Northern Ireland Executive official who spoke to me tells a similar story to that of the Welsh Government, adding that wrongly attributing England-only policy changes around COVID-19 to the whole of the UK created “harm” and “confusion”.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Interview with Welsh Government Representative.

⁵⁷ Interview with Northern Ireland Executive Representative.

On 22 May 2020, Ofcom wrote to broadcasters reminding them of the need to “take particular care when broadcasting [...] statements about public health advice on the Coronavirus which may not apply to all four nations in the UK, given the variations in official guidance between the nations”.⁵⁸ The regulator’s advice was well-timed, since it seemed to chime with what some audiences were feeling during this period.

A news diary study conducted during this early phase of the pandemic suggested that UK network news audiences were “confused by the health guidance they were receiving and did not understand which government was accountable for the measures”. The study by Cardiff University’s School of Journalism, Media and Culture also uncovered a desire amongst audiences for “more clarity in news reporting about the relevance of different lockdown measures across the UK”.⁵⁹

As policy divergence around COVID-19 between the devolved and UK governments widened, so did differences in means of communication. The UK and the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales were staging regular press conferences which were carried live by a number of television broadcasters. This meant that broadcasters had to decide which of the governmental press conferences should be broadcast in the devolved nations on the basis of accuracy and audience relevance. Broadcasters, particularly the BBC in Scotland, would be [criticised](#) by some for giving the Scottish First Minister a disproportionately visible and regular platform.⁶⁰

With the pandemic continuing and summer turning to the autumn of 2020, it appears that inter-governmental communications improved somewhat. According to the Welsh Government, the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, Michael Gove, ensured better communication between the Cabinet Office and the devolved governments. According to the Welsh Government, “[Michael Gove] had more time than [Boris Johnson] to dedicate to it, but he made a genuine effort [...] to try and

⁵⁸ The Ofcom letter is referenced here: [Media Nations: Wales 2021 \(ofcom.org.uk\)](#)

⁵⁹ See [Media Nations 2020: Wales report \(ofcom.org.uk\)](#). I am grateful to Professor Stephen Cushion from Cardiff University for this reference.

⁶⁰ See, for example, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/11/19/douglas-ross-bbc-risks-distorting-holyrood-election-daily-nicola/>

find common ground”.⁶¹ This new cooperation bore fruit, with attempts to coordinate messaging and public information films.

COVID-19 resulted in the UK PSB’s nations’ based correspondents receiving more exposure than ever before, but prominence brought a number of challenges. One of the major editorial issues was around the structuring of stories and the need to tell the devolved nations’ stories in their own right, and not wholly on the basis of divergence from England. ITV News’ Scotland Correspondent, Peter Smith, explained how he would “push back” at such a commission on the basis that he “didn’t think that was the right way for us to be doing news because it gives too much credence to England over the devolved nations and put the devolved nations in as that sort of afterthought”. Other journalists, however, recognised the contextual value of the comparative frame on occasions. The BBC’s Emma Vardy, for example, explained that the “reference point” of comparisons with the rest of the UK was useful in telling Northern Ireland’s story to a wider audience.

Another issue was the amount of work involved in telling a whole nation’s story in a time of crisis. ITV’s Peter Smith tells of his personal “struggle” in having to contend with the sheer volume of work involved. He also describes the challenge of having to balance the need to provide updates on a dynamic story with the need to provide a holistic narrative for a UK-wide audience.

It is too early – if not futile – to predict with confidence what legacy, if any, will be left by COVID-19 for journalism and communications in the UK. But some practitioners are willing to suggest that there will be some enduring consequences. One of these, according to the BBC’s Sarah Smith, is that the pandemic was an awakening for “parts” of the London-based media regarding what devolution entails and “a very good lesson for them in how things are different”.

Whilst reflecting on the fact that the journalistic community has probably “done better for pointing out the differences in the four nations of the UK covering COVID than we have on any other issue”, she also recognises that editorial challenges should be acknowledged: “It’s very difficult, you know: you put up a Prime

⁶¹ Interview with Welsh Government Representative.

Ministerial broadcast on the television – probably correctly; take it live. But you are listening to the Prime Minister of England when you do that, and how you then give equal weight to what the First Ministers in three other nations are doing is a complicated question that has certainly been highlighted by COVID.”

International comparisons

International media comparisons are notoriously difficult in the field of journalism studies since the political economy of the media is different in each nation. Each will have its own particular institutional history, regulatory regime and public sphere. Attempts to distil national singularities into generalised theses of media systems have generated a long-standing and vigorous academic debate around their usefulness.⁶²

The United Kingdom is a case in point here. So far, we have looked at the concept of devolution as it relates to broadcasting. However, as constitutional expert Michael Keating notes, devolution is, “a peculiarly British term introduced in the 19th Century to resolve a problem that is characteristically (but not uniquely) British”.

Westminster, in theory, still reserves the right to change the devolved settlement of the UK unilaterally, and even to abolish the devolved parliaments. Devolution, therefore, sits at the middle of a spectrum of approaches to territorial self-government. The bottom tier is municipal government with federated states at the top enjoying the strongest level of self-government. In federations, there are clear constitutional limitations on what both levels of government can do; the centre cannot change the system without the consent of the constituent parts.⁶³

But whilst there are differences, there are also similarities between devolved nations and federations. Despite the legal entrenchment of territorial rights, in federations, too, we see a culture of journalistic negotiation and mediation between centre and periphery. It is to two of these federated countries – Germany and Canada – that we turn to next to consider how PSB news is made.

⁶² The classic text here is Hallin, Daniel C, and Mancini, Paolo. *Comparing Media Systems : Three Models of Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004.

⁶³ Keating, Michael. "European Devolution." *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics*. Oxford UP, 2009.

Germany

PSB background

Germany's media system was forged in the rubble of the Second World War. At the heart of the new post-war system was a determination by the victorious Western Allies that no single individual should wield central powers over state broadcasting. They envisaged a public-service broadcasting system with federalism at its core, as well as political and financial independence. Germany's post-war constitution was approved in 1949 and, a year later, several of the states or Länder formed an association called ARD. To this day, ARD remains the cornerstone of Germany's strong and well-funded Public Service Media system.

After the formation of ARD, there followed decades of close cooperation between Länder broadcasting corporations, as well as measures to rationalise ARD in terms of programming, production and technical issues. Länder broadcasting corporations also installed a system of financial equalisation (Finanzausgleich) between themselves which aimed to channel resources from the rich broadcasting corporations to the poorer ones.

It was the Länder governments and Länder-based public broadcasting corporations which were the main agents in the nationalisation of German media. A "nationwide approach" to mass media appeared to be "the imperative of common sense to many German decision-makers and academics" (Erk, 2003).⁶⁴

At this turn, it's worth pausing to note what broadcast historians describe as a key difference between the evolution of television systems in the United Kingdom and Germany in the middle part of the 20th Century. In Germany, the federal Länder structure of the German polity served "as an extremely fruitful basis for television regionalism" (Potschka, 2021).⁶⁵ In "centralised" England, however, the historic link between regional television and regional political borders is seen as "much less distinctive with London dominating as the political, economic and cultural

⁶⁴ Erk, Jan. "Federalism and Mass Media Policy in Germany." *Regional & Federal Studies* 13.2 (2003).

⁶⁵ Potschka, Christian, and Golding, Peter. "The Structural Developments of Regional Television in Britain and Germany, *Media History* 18.3-4 (2012).

metropolis”. This, it is argued by Christian Potschka and Peter Golding, “has had a lasting effect on the historical development of television”.

After reunification in 1991, Germany became a federal state with 16 Länder but despite the challenge of creating a bigger, national broadcaster, the basic principle remained: the federal states would be in charge of media policy and public interventions would be coordinated from Länder up to the national level.

Today’s federal system is reflected in the current decentralised broadcasting system, with three independent public service media organisations in the Länder broadcasting with a nationwide and regional range and nine broadcasting stations under the aegis of the ARD.

The federal regional networks contribute according to their size to ARD’s nation-wide TV channel, Das Erste (‘The First’).

ARD, by international standards, is well-funded and also maintains a network of regional broadcasting centres, studios and local correspondents to reflect the diversity of each region. They report for the television programmes broadcast by BR, hr, MDR, NDR, Radio Bremen (jointly with NDR), rbb, SR (jointly with SWR), SWR and WDR. About one third of the population in Germany tunes in on a daily basis.

The second other major publicly funded broadcaster is ZDF. It only broadcasts nation-wide television programmes.

There is a third organisation for radio, the national broadcaster, Deutschlandradio.

PSB consumption

Up until the pandemic, television news watching in Germany was in long-term structural decline.⁶⁶ However, there was a considerable uplift between January and April 2020, with the 12-point decline in reach for television news since 2013 partially reversed as many people turned to trusted sources of news. But even before

⁶⁶ Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Digital news report 2020. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

the COVID bump, public service providers such as ARD and ZDF remained the most-trusted news brands in Germany along with regional newspapers.

The most-watched evening news programme on German television by a long margin is ARD's *tagesschau* programme. It gets an audience of around 9.3m to its 8pm programme – almost double the 4.07m audience to ZDF's competitor *heute* programme. At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, *tagesschau* reached over 17.4 million viewers and had a market share of over 46 % (15 March 2020), around double its average. ARD's total weekly offline reach stood at 54% of Germans in 2021.

Tagesschau is also the most trusted news brand with a 70% trust score. In addition, *tagesschau* has a digital presence with the *tagesschau*-app and the hourly-updated news streams *tagesschau24* and *tagesschau 100 seconds*. ARD's online reach was at 18% in 2021 with Spiegel online at 16%. Following a protracted row with commercial operators, ARD and ZDF are prohibited by law from providing “press-like offerings”. German Public Service online media – known as ‘Telemedia’ – must, therefore, be designed with a focus on video or sound, with text as an incidental element.

In practice, this has had a particular effect on ARD's ability to provide local online news coverage. Notwithstanding this limitation on digital growth, ARD is particularly conscious of the pivot from Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media. At this inflection point, ARD, according to Albrecht Bischoffshausen sees a “huge opportunity” to reach and serve “very different audience groups with different expectations and interests, whether that be regional interests, or age groups, related interests”.

The final, important element, in the content bundle provided by ARD is radio. ARD has 64 different radio stations with a very strong regional presence. In total, ARD reaches over 7 million people every day on radio, almost one in 10 Germans, with a range of news and general programming.

How ARD makes its news

The federal nature of ARD's news starts with the location of its editorial decision-makers and leaders. It is not based in Germany's capital, Berlin, but rather

in the country's second city, Hamburg. And its location is no accident, since history weighs heavily on ARD's senior editorial team. In explaining the way ARD News works, Michael Wegener refers to the historical basis for establishing broadcast policy in Germany and that no single state or individual should have disproportionate influence.⁶⁷ Being in Hamburg, he emphasises, is also good in that the news team is distanced from the seat of German high politics in the capital.

Whilst the senior ARD editorial team is based in Hamburg, ARD itself has very few directly-employed correspondents or reporters; instead, all the reporters are based in ARD's regional affiliates. The regional affiliates also service their local news services making for a situation where the ARD centre describes itself as "very weak" with the regions seen as "very strong". This structural inversion of journalistic norms around centre and periphery, however, works in a "very easy way", according to Wegener. The regional affiliates themselves will suggest the topics for the bulletins, supplemented by planning from the ARD News centre.

On a practical level, this involves a weekly planning meeting at ARD that brings together all of the broadcaster's regional affiliates. In that meeting, they will receive content offers for the coming week from the correspondent-affiliates. This means that around 80% of *tagesschau's* planned content is already commissioned from regions before the day of broadcast. Reactive or dynamic events are covered under the same principle, with the affiliates receiving requests to provide content and cover developments.

Trust, based on senior editorial experience, is at the centre of this continuous dialogue between Hamburg and the regions. Those on-air staff whom the affiliates provide to ARD are usually very senior with sufficient credibility to broadcast on Germany's main evening news programme. This also ensures that qualitative issues around consistency are ironed out.

The other, significant issue is that of unnecessary duplication. The process of pitching stories from regional affiliates to the ARD centre is described by Wegener as "competitive" but, in the end, ARD decides who is best placed to provide an item of

⁶⁷ Interview with Michael Wegener, ARD News Head of Content.

content in order to serve its editorial requirements. This requires care – particularly around giving the same type of story to the same regional affiliate – with senior management used as a back-stop for conflict resolution, but it is claimed to be the exception rather than the norm. Even when structural inefficiency and regional duplication does occur, it is seen by ARD senior corporate leaders like Albrecht Bischoffshausen as a price worth paying, and an outcome of the country’s federal history: “It’s not the most effective [...] and efficient solution to a problem, but at least it reflects many different views, geographically, politically, economically.”⁶⁸

Despite the way regionalisation has been mainstreamed by ARD, there is still a vigorous debate around equity of geographical coverage and portrayal. In Germany, all mainstream media have been accused of inadequate coverage of the former East Germany. Trust scores in the East are significantly lower than in the West and there has been a reluctance by some states to increase the licence fee.⁶⁹ Inevitably, given its share of the market, ARD is not immune from these criticisms. In response, ARD has used its other news programme, *Tagesthemen*, to offer further context around under-represented communities, particularly those from the former East.

The other longstanding cultural friction point in Germany is between the more liberal North and the more conservative South. This sense of separateness is particularly evident in Bavaria and means that the broadcaster there, Bayerischer Rundfunk, does not broadcast the nationally-available version of *Tagesschau*. The same is true of broadcaster Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. Instead, they broadcast their own version of the news at 8pm, combining local, national and international news.

Canada

PSB background

As in the case of Germany, Canada is a formally constituted federal state. But that’s where the federal commonalities end. Whereas neither modern German identity nor

⁶⁸ Interview with Albrecht Bischoffshausen, Head of ARD International Relations.

⁶⁹ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/germany>

governance has ever been in any real dispute, Canadian identity and the existence of the state itself are heavily contested concepts.

Geography – physical and human – dominates the question of Canadian public service broadcasting. Spanning nearly 10 million square kilometres and 41 times larger than the United Kingdom, communication and media remain at the heart of the country’s ongoing nation-building and cultural efforts. With six different time zones and a shared border with the United States, the question of Canadian-ness continues to “profoundly structure” the country’s communication and media system.⁷⁰ Some of the other major challenges have been around the country’s internal workings, including the meaning and character of community, nationhood and federal governance.⁷¹

Federalism and the psychology of distance aren’t the only major socio-political issues. The question of Quebec and its 8.6m people – of whom 85% speak French – continues to loom large. Two divisive referendums, in 1980 and 1995, tested the question of national loyalties to their limits. Being French-speaking in Quebec is about much more than a means of communication; being Québécois is a fundamental matter of culture, identity and, for some, as evidenced in two referenda, independence from the rest of Canada.

Unsurprisingly, the question of territorial control over broadcasting has been a live one from the start. It was contested until the beginning of CBC’s creation in 1936 with both the Canadian federal government and provincial governments believing themselves to be responsible. The federal government won this crucial battle over control and laid the foundations for what is the current Canadian public broadcasting system today. Serving the different anglophone groups within Canada was a major challenge. But policymakers and politicians had to contend with an even bigger issue at the same time: the question of services in English and French. Early attempts to establish bilingual services collapsed and, in 1934, the decision was taken to create two distinct broadcasting systems. This led to today’s current

⁷⁰ Taylor, G., & DeCillia, B. (2021). Canada: A strong foundation with an uncertain future. In J. Trappel, & T. Tomaz (Eds.), *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How leading news media survive digital transformation* (Vol. 2) (pp. 43–84). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855428-2>

⁷¹ McDowell, Stephen, *Canada’s Media Industries and Cultural Policies*. 2001. In *Media and Globalization: Why The State Matters*, eds. N. Morris and S.Waisbord. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

arrangements with CBC (English language) and Radio-Canada (French language) sharing the same mandate, funding and corporate structure but evolving into two very distinct entities with different audiences.

These are not the only variables with which the Canadian broadcasting system has had to contend. Canada, today, is also a profoundly diverse nation having experienced significant immigration, as well as a belated recognition of the cultural needs of its indigenous, First Nations peoples.

PSB consumption

As in Germany, overall Canadian television news consumption up to the pandemic was in long-term decline across all broadcasters.⁷² Unlike Germany, however, television is the second most-used source of news, reaching 61% of all users.

However, there are important differences in relative consumption and perception between the Anglophone and Francophone news markets. CBC is the third most-used English language news service as measured by weekly reach. In 2021, 22% of Canadians turned to CBC for news at least three times a week.⁷³ By contrast, the weekly reach of Radio-Canada stood at 49% of Canadian French speakers, second to its main competitor, TVA/LCN Nouvelles. Online, CBC News is the current market leader, reaching 27% of Canadians whereas CBC-Radio Canada reaches 34% of Canada's French speakers.

It is perhaps the trust metrics which suggest the most interesting differences between Anglophone and Francophone news consumers in Canada. Across all media, 51% of all Canadians trust the news that they use but this feeling of trust breaks down into 49% of Canada English speakers trusting news media compared to 61% of Canada French speakers.

This difference is replicated in attitudes toward trust more generally with 45% of Canadians trusting news overall, and 44% of Canadian English language consumers trust the news overall compared to 54% of Canada's French media consumers.

⁷² <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/canada>

⁷³ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/canada> (Reach as measured across TV, Radio and Print).

In radio, CBC/Radio-Canada, with 14 AM stations and 52 FM stations across the country, attracts big audiences, capturing a total share of 18% of the country. CBC's local services lead the market in 23 out of the 26 markets they serve with morning-radio programmes.⁷⁴ The public broadcaster's radio services are often the only sources of information for minority-language communities across the country.

But whilst Canadians can avail themselves of a kaleidoscope of media services, both from within and outside the country, there is evidence of real fragility around PSB. Per capita spending on public service broadcasting in Canada is in the lowest amongst Western democracies,⁷⁵ and there are challenges around identity and platform change, too. The pandemic exacerbated these pressures; one year after the pandemic began, 40 Canadian outlets had folded.⁷⁶ CBC/Radio-Canada has experienced a significant real-terms decline in its revenue.

This situation led to the broadcaster's previous President, Hubert Lacroix, to decry the reluctance of the global PSB community to publicly communicate what was happening to it: "It's happening in Australia, in France, in the UK, in Brazil and in virtually every service represented in this room. And I can say with considerable sadness, it's been happening in Canada." Lacroix also said that public broadcasters have been too slow to react to changing technologies and a changing political environment: "Like the proverbial frog put in cold water that is slowly heated, we've resisted telling people that we risk being boiled to death."⁷⁷

In June 2018, the Government of Canada launched a review of the Broadcasting Act, as well as its Telecommunications Act. As part of that process, CBC/Radio-Canada made a number of recommendations to strengthen public broadcasting, faced with the prospect of "global digital giants flooding Canada with foreign content". That same pitch also placed a heavy emphasis on CBC/Radio-Canada's unique ability to unite the country with its English language and French news services – in aggregate,

⁷⁴ Interview with Heaton Dyer, Executive Director, Strategy and International Relations, CBC/Radio-Canada

⁷⁵ PSB Spend, Nordicity for CBC Radio-Canada.pdf (2018)

⁷⁶ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/canada>

⁷⁷ *Huffington Post*, September 19, 2015

https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/cbc-hubert-lacroix-public-broadcasting_n_8159668

Canada's most trusted news service.⁷⁸ A decision on a new mandate for CBC/Radio-Canada is still pending.

One of the country's foremost experts in media policy, Professor David Taras, describes the country as going through a series of "media shocks", including: "a crisis in the traditional media, a crisis in public broadcasting, a crisis in news and journalism, and a crisis in citizen engagement". But whilst some – if not many – of these issues are universal ones for the PSB community, Taras finds the threat to be particularly acute for Canadian nationhood since so many of the country's transmission lines depend on newspapers and broadcasting. Whilst some of the country's major institutions may endure this shock, he predicts that the "whole architecture" of Canadian media policy could "come crashing down" faced with the collective might of new and unaccountable digital gatekeepers.⁷⁹

How CBC makes its news

The starting point for both CBC/Radio-Canada is their joint mandate, which tasks news leaders with providing equal service to French and English consumers across the country. From the very start, this creates clear editorial separateness between the services. CBC, according to its Head of News, Brodie Fenlon, has its English language reporters; Radio-Canada has its French speaking reporters, serving Francophone communities, primarily in Quebec but dispersed across the whole of Canada.

CBC and Radio-Canada enjoy must-carry status in those parts of the country where the language of their broadcast is the minority language. In other words, CBC News Network (the English language all-news television network) is regulated as a "must carry" service for cable/satellite systems in French-speaking Canada. This arrangement is mirrored on the French language side of the equation with RDI (the French all news television network) regulated as a "must carry" service in parts of Canada where French is the minority language – this being most of Canada outside

⁷⁸ <https://site-cbc.radio-canada.ca/documents/vision/strategy/submission/january-2019.pdf>

⁷⁹ Taras, David (2015). *Digital mosaic : media, power, and identity in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.

of Quebec City. The reality, therefore, is that most Quebecers' natural relationship is with Radio-Canada, given its French language offering.

CBC's English language news service is composed of two elements: the national network news service and the regional news service, designed to work in lockstep. The investment in regional and local is commensurate with the considerable challenge of covering Canada geographically. CBC News has 27 television stations, 88 radio stations and one digital-only local service.

The operational model is based on leveraging the local through to the national. A locally-branded service, such as CBC Vancouver, Fenlon explains, would have reporters and journalists who are there to tell the stories of that local market, as well as contributing content that speaks to CBC nationally. This strategy, according to Fenlon, is seen as a "twin-track approach", combining "national to national and local to local and then a lot of intermingling of the two".⁸⁰

Nearly two years ago, CBC restructured its news operations to strengthen its delivery from national through to local. This effectively merged local and network teams into one, more coherent, service and overturned a culture of siloed working. Whilst this brought efficiency benefits, CBC's Heaton Dyer claims that it has brought significant pan-nation portrayal improvements and helps diminish accusations of being Toronto-centric: "Today, there are many, many more heads that are inputting into that decision-making than there were two decades ago, because while there is still national dedicated resource in given areas, they are so integrated into the local operation, including under the direct control of the local leadership, that you can't have that kind of this person thinks this is it".

The decision to devolve decision-making is also pragmatic recognition that local news is the main pathway into CBC's pan-platform news offer. CBC chiefs admit that there is still much work to be done to counter Toronto-centricity and that most of CBC's audiences connect to the broadcaster through their local offer and their local station.

⁸⁰ Interview with Brodie Fenlon, Editor in Chief, Executive Director of Daily News at CBC.

At the apex of CBC's national presence sits the 10pm pan-Canada news. The bulletin's commissioning model is based on continuous dialogue between the programme's editor, based in Toronto, the Canada-wide national assignment desks and then content offers from the regional bases. Ultimately, however, editorial control is vested with the programme editor. The same principle is also applied to CBC News' digital services with a senior producer at any point in the day receiving commissions or looking at what it is surfacing on local sites and pulling the best into a national homepage.

There is, therefore, a high degree of editorial consciousness around the challenge of representing the whole of Canada. CBC are candid about some of the tensions created by geography, particularly the competing realities of the country's vastness, balanced against the distribution of its population, with an estimated 80% of Canadians living within 100 miles of the US border. There is also candour around geographical "gaps", particularly more sparsely populated provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan which have been looked at by CBC so as to ensure that the service offered to the broadcaster's audiences is both credible and consistent.

These issues of geography and identity are, understandably, seen as being of fundamental importance for CBC. However, despite their singular importance, these matters are considered by CBC leaders to be subordinate to an even bigger issue. That issue is the paradigmatic shift from broadcast PSB to digital media. Brodie Fenlon sees these changes as "irrevocable" and that the pre-digital model of viewers prioritising flagship, scheduled news bulletins is coming to an end – even if regulation and Canadian politicians haven't yet caught up with the change that's happening. Fenlon describes this transition in consumption patterns from flagship programmes to digital in a pragmatic manner; there's no elegy for the past and, instead, he prefers to see this change as an "opportunity" to deliver content which brings relevant content to audiences which are fast-changing.

Part of CBC's transition has already happened, with a re-think around the digital benefits of local or regional content within the national context. CBC's Kenny Yum explains that online, CBC has increased the amount of regional content appearing on the national line-up. In other words, CBC, as he puts it, "recast" the traditional

disinclination for some local content as part of the national offer. According to Yum, audience engagement increased and reading “skyrocketed” since Canadians valued the universal nature of additional, local content.⁸¹

How Radio-Canada makes its news

Whilst Radio-Canada shares the same mandate and governance structure as CBC, there are major cultural and operational differences between the two organisations.

The first difference is that of institutional history. Radio-Canada, from its inception, has been there to serve Canada’s French speakers. Despite this pan-Canada remit, the service has, inevitably, been a key player in the contested politics of Quebec. The so-called “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s saw a resurgence in a more confident, secular brand of Québécois nationalism. The audience success of Radio-Canada saw it criticised by federal politicians for fanning the flames of more strident Québécois nationalism. During this period, it is claimed by a former Radio-Canada executive that the then Canadian Premier, Pierre Trudeau, “seriously considered shutting down” the broadcaster.⁸²

Ultimately, this led to a Canadian government-commissioned inquiry by the broadcast regulator into Radio-Canada’s impartiality in 1977.⁸³

The other major difference between Radio-Canada and CBC is its editorial and operational independence. Despite the preponderance of French speakers in Quebec, Radio-Canada is mandated to provide a news service to all Francophones across Canada, it does this with a range of programming in each region with syndication allowing it to integrate regional and national news. The editorial offer, despite its corporate name suggesting radio-only coverage, is on all three platforms. Radio-Canada also has its own international correspondents with bureaux in Moscow, Washington, Paris and Beijing.

⁸¹ Interview with Kenny Yum, Senior Director of Innovation and Partnerships, CBC News.

⁸² Saulnier, Alain *Losing our voice : Radio-Canada under siege*, Toronto, 2015.

⁸³ Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique, December 1994, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 699-716.

Radio Canada's Jean Francois Rioux acknowledges that funding is an issue. "The fact that we don't have stable and pluriannual funding does have an impact on our planning," he says. But economic pressures and the wider constitutional debate doesn't affect Radio-Canada's approach towards providing impartial news and information. At the heart of this is Jean Francois Rioux's view that the broadcaster's "journalistic rules" give it the "the tools" to ensure that impartiality is always maintained. In practical terms, this meant that during his time as station chief in Canada's capital, Ottawa, "you're doing a fine job" so long as Radio-Canada got an equal number of complaints from sovereigntists and Canadian federalists. Culturally, he believes that Radio-Canada's norms and journalistic practises protects it from "sliding in one way or another".⁸⁴ This seems to be borne out by quantitative data showing that during 2020/21 only a very small number of Radio-Canada's editorial complaints were upheld by the external regulator.⁸⁵

The emphasis on impartiality is well-understood. Jean Francois Rioux makes a direct comparison between Quebec and Scotland and recognises in both cases how "explosive" issues of identity and constitutional control can be. The practical remedy, as he sees it, is to reinforce Radio-Canada's impartiality. "That's why," Rioux explained, "we're staying away from the political." Radio-Canada's fundamental purpose in terms of news, he claimed, is to give audiences the "information so they can make the choice they feel is theirs".

The question of striking the appropriate editorial balance between weighting coverage towards Quebec, on the one hand, and offering proportionate coverage of the rest of the country on the other, is also a very live one. Radio-Canada recognises that – while CBC will focus on bigger population centres like Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary (the main markets for them and their commercial competition) – they will always draw their main audience from Quebec.

Nonetheless, Radio-Canada is also acutely aware of its responsibility to serve the whole of Canada and does so using its network of news reporters across the country. Collaboration with CBC is vital here. Radio-Canada's Jean Francois Rioux stresses

⁸⁴ Interview with Jean Francois Rioux, Director General for Regional Services, Radio-Canada.

⁸⁵ TABLE DES MATIÈRES (radio-canada.ca). Out of a total 1,552 complaints received relating to news coverage, 4 were upheld by the Ombudsman for French Language services in 2020/21.

that it wouldn't be able to function were it not for the much larger CBC's input. Collaboration here encompasses a range of functions, from newsgathering and content to shared offices. Tensions in the CBC/Radio-Canada relationship do emerge occasionally, according to CBC, particularly around funding priorities. That, according to CBC's Heaton Dyer, is seen as "the reality of most organisations", but particularly in "a public media organisation where everybody here gets up in the morning to actually try and serve audiences".

In addition to the regulatory imperative of having to cover the whole of Canada through the medium of French, news judgement also shapes editorial decision-making. As Radio-Canada's Jean Francois Rioux explained: "A car accident doesn't become interesting [by virtue of involving] a French passenger." This openness to portraying life beyond Quebec, according to Rioux's Radio-Canada colleague, Nathalie Riel, has been an area of strategic focus during the last three years. In practice, this has meant broadening the range of its stories and case-studies in order to portray the whole of Canada.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Interview with Nathalie Riel, Director of Operational and Strategic Planning, Radio-Canada.

The future of national communication spheres

Any debate about journalism practice and public service broadcasting eventually reaches the vexed question of statehood.

While public service broadcasting systems should be, by definition, independent entities – there to serve their respective publics – there is no avoiding the interplay with state control. Indeed, national public service broadcasting systems have traditionally been legitimised and regulated by their respective states.

The classical ambition, as Philip Schlesinger has previously noted, is for the politico-communicative space to be coextensive with the territorial space.⁸⁷ The problem considered in this paper is what happens when nationhood and statehood do not coincide, or when unitary states change with the emergence of sub-states – through federalism or devolution.

Surveying the current juncture in the United Kingdom evidences this issue. Throughout its 100-year history, the BBC has unquestionably defined a large part of Britishness and created a national British public sphere with journalism and other content that brought people together.

At the same time, and without too much apparent contradiction, the BBC not only embraced the UK's devolved nations but helped define them, too. Wales is an example of this: 20th Century Wales, it has been argued, is a modernist construct made by the BBC through content that made a reality of an imagined, minority community.⁸⁸

The same general point could also plausibly be made around the role of independent PSB commercial television in the UK. ITV has served the UK and its constituent nations, together and separately.

⁸⁷ Schlesinger, Philip, *op.cit.*, in Morris and Waisbord (eds).

⁸⁸ Davies, John. *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales, 1994.

The issue now, however, is that the art of performing this Janus-faced role of creating dual spheres is increasingly contested. The first problem is around the challenge of reconciling views around the nationalisation of media space.

Former UK Culture Secretary John Whittingdale MP, for example, sees the BBC as having an instrumental role in producing bulletins for the UK as a whole – at 6pm and 10pm – alongside its regional and national bulletins. “The main news bulletin should be a UK bulletin,” he said. “To maintain a single bulletin, which is news for the whole of the UK is, in my view, part of what the government looks for from the BBC.” The motivation for his reasoning, he emphasised, is simple: “This government believes in the union”. He also made it clear that whilst the BBC has a duty to be impartial and to reflect all views, including the four nations, Britishness still matters: “It is the British Broadcasting Corporation; it’s not the English Broadcasting Corporation.”⁸⁹

From Scotland, the view is starkly different, as expressed by Michael Russell, the current Scottish National Party President and a former Culture Minister in the devolved Scottish Government. He sees the BBC as a “creature of the British state [...] and its interest is in preserving that state”. He rules out federalised broadcasting arrangements as an impractical remedy for what he sees as the current ills of UK PSB, since each component part of the UK would need to agree to such an arrangement. “There is no federated broadcasting organisation, just as there is no federated UK... but things are coming apart. And the BBC is now part of the attempt to glue it together and keep it together.”⁹⁰

These issues are not new ones for Mark Thompson, the former BBC Director-General and latterly of the *New York Times*. Looking back at his time in charge of the BBC’s Nations and Regions, Thompson wryly observes that one of the key wardrobe essentials was a “pith helmet”. Faced with the current situation, he takes the view that it is not the role of any broadcaster to attempt to triangulate competing views around nationhood and sovereignty. “The BBC cannot and should not be a Unionist

⁸⁹ Interview with John Whittingdale, former UK Government Secretary for Culture, Media and Sport (2015-16); Minister of State for Media and Data (2020-2021).

⁹⁰ Interview with Professor Mike Russell, Scottish National Party President and Scottish Government Culture Minister, 2009.

organisation. It's not its job. It's above its pay grade," Thompson said. He also sees the BBC as being constituted to serve the United Kingdom as it "currently stands" and that whilst it sits on "a long-established political settlement", that settlement "itself is disputed".

The only logical and pragmatic choice available to the BBC in the current situation, he said, is for the BBC to acknowledge that it is there "to serve the people who live in the United Kingdom, including those people who think that the United Kingdom should be adjusted, and or possibly abolished and replaced by a different constitutional settlement". The practical corollary of this is that the BBC has equal responsibilities towards "Nationalists" and "Unionists" and "cannot make itself part of the debate".⁹¹

Beyond these questions of who should control national communicative spheres there is, perhaps, an even bigger and more problematic question: are such public spheres viable – and, for some, even desirable – any longer? The idea that globalisation erodes state power and diminishes sovereignty is a commonplace one. And whilst reports of the death of the nation-state are exaggerated, there is also no doubt the ability of nation-states' ability in liberal democracies to mediate their own national media space is changing. The final tectonic plate is the future of Public Service Broadcasting. If there is no clear consensus on the need for such an intervention then what happens next to "national journalism" as we have known it?

Public Service Broadcasting ranks as one of the most efficient and benign liberal democratic interventions of the 20th Century. As Public Service Broadcasting now gives way to Public Service Media, and as the long 20th Century in broadcasting ends, the immediate challenge is to go beyond the digital turn and to deliver the core mission within a new landscape. Regulation, allied to sufficient funding, will be critical in ensuring that the component units of future public media have the necessary digital prominence. That is the legislative and regulatory question.

Linked to this debate is a set of questions for journalism and its wider culture to consider. Public Service Media can only operate on the basis of democratic and

⁹¹ Interview with Mark Thompson, former BBC Director-General (2004-2014).

legislative consent. Whilst journalists have no business garnering support for a particular constitutional outcome, journalists do, however, have a role in ensuring that audiences are well served and it is to the question of how we can improve things that we now finally turn.

Making better news in multinational states: a starter for ten

The unvarnished truth is that there is no single, easy answer to providing good public service journalism in countries with multiple levels of governance, even more so in contested states. An array of forces and influences shape territorial journalism, as both inputs to and outputs of the process.

But, in the hope of informing what journalists, policy-makers and practitioners should consider (and what audience should reasonably expect), here are some pointers:

1. National identity is messy: Don't think in binaries. People very often have multiple identities and journalism needs to consider how to reflect these horizontal loyalties across regions and nations.

2. Expect change: There's nothing inevitable about history, but all countries change. In the UK, constitutional evolution has been the norm, rather than the exception.

3. Be culturally literate: If you are telling the story of the UK, you are now in the business of telling the story of four nations, as well as that of the UK. Recognise that you're dealing with a number of mature parliaments and governments each of which requires public scrutiny.

4. Make better journalists: Vocational training has a key role to play here, both at journalism college and at university level. Current pre-employment provision is patchy and continuous on-the-job training would also bring significant benefits.

5. Accuracy matters: It sounds obvious, but getting the location of your story right – all of the time – is essential. Getting it right some of the time isn't good enough and mistakes erode public trust.

6. Paint a rounded picture: Locating a story in one country to the exclusion of others can be a turn-off. People very often need the full picture and within an editorial frame that doesn't package divergence as a quirk.

7. Evaluate how you're doing: It is vital to measure and analyse performance and results to understand what is and isn't working. There's more than one way of achieving this.

8. Move around the UK: There's no substitute for direct, lived experience with journalists either based across the country or rotated out of centres of power.

9. Recognise abuse of journalists: The abuse of some journalists – particularly women – working in polarised countries is a serious issue. It needs to be called out and all journalists need to be supported.

10. Support Public Service Media: The social capital created by public service broadcasting in the UK's nations has been invaluable but don't take it for granted. It's a costly business requiring political consent, stable funding and regulatory support.

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