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House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the future of Channel 4

For almost 40 years Channel 4 News has broadcast original, impartial, hard-hitting journalism that holds power to account. In the past five years alone, it has won 228 industry awards for its work, including exposing the Cambridge Analytica scandal, investigating systemic electoral bias against black American voters, and revealing ExxonMobil's lobbyists attempts to water down climate change regulation. It was even nominated for an Oscar for its documentary film co-production *For Sama*, which reported on the brutal siege of Aleppo in Syria. Despite the characterisation of some critics, viewers find it both challenging and impartial. An Ofcom (2020: 32) representative survey of the UK public found Channel 4 was considered a more impartial broadcaster than its terrestrial competitors, including the BBC.

Recent academic studies have drawn attention to Channel 4's distinctiveness. An Ofcom (2020: 32) representative survey of the UK public found Channel 4 was considered a more impartial broadcaster than its terrestrial competitors, including the BBC. to the UK's broadcast news ecology, demonstrating its impartial, independent and informative journalism. An Ofcom (2020: 32) representative survey of the UK public found Channel 4 was considered a more impartial broadcaster than its terrestrial competitors, including the BBC. In 2019 Ofcom commissioned Cardiff University to examine the range and depth of UK news programming (Cushion 2019, 2021). The study categorised news according to whether it reflected a hard or soft topic. This was based on conventional definitions of these categories of news, which, broadly speaking, defined such politics, international news, education, and health were categorised as hard news, and crime, celebrity/entertainment, the royal family, sport, and weather were coded as soft news. The study found that while the editorial selection of news was broadly similar across TV channels, there were some subtle and significant differences that demonstrate the distinctiveness of Channel 4 news.

The findings revealed that the BBC News at Ten supplied a harder news agenda than ITV's and Channel 5's evening bulletins, with 85.7% of its time spent on topics such as politics, the economy and international affairs, compared with 80.6% and 79.4% for the respective commercial broadcasters. But, above all, Channel 4 dedicated the most time to these topics, with 93.5% of its total share of output considered to be hard news. International news made up 30.9% of airtime on Channel 4 News, whereas for BBC News at Ten it was 26.0% on BBC News at Ten and 25.1% on ITV News at Ten. Channel 5 spent just 6.7% of its total news agenda covering this category.

Compared to a previous study of UK television news in 2012 - which used the same definitions of hard and soft news and covered a five-week period (25 days) (Barnett et al 2012) - the findings also revealed Channel 4 increased its hard

news agenda compared to 2009 (Barnett et al, 2012). Its reporting of politics and public affairs, for example, rose by 12.2% over ten years. Overall, the Ofcom commissioned study demonstrated that Channel 4 provides a distinctive window on the world compared to other nightly news bulletins, with an emphasis on covering hard news topics including politics, public affairs, and international issues.

The importance of being distinctive was emphasised by the former long-standing Head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4, Dorothy Byrne, who said in an interview for the Ofcom study that

Everything we cover should be important, but they don't have to slavishly follow the same news agenda as other people. In fact, and you may have found differently, if they do the same stories every night as the BBC or ITV, we're not doing our job, because we are there to bring alternative ideas and alternative stories to light. And so in both our news and current affairs, we aim to cover stories that other people might neglect and groups who get neglected. So some of the stories will be whatever everybody else is covering and some will be nobody else is covering. I sort of judge it over a period - do I feel we've got a bit too mainstream, or do I feel we've gone a bit too far off a sort of core news that people need to know, so it's a balance (cited in Cushion, 2019).

In a study about UK television news coverage of Covid related reporting in April and May 2020, a comparative content analysis of 1259 items found Channel 4 also played a distinctive role in covering the pandemic ([Cushion et al., 2021](#)). In the nightly news bulletins on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, and Sky News, roughly a third of items included at least one instance of a journalist or source challenging or questioning a government decision. But Channel 4 had the highest amount with almost six in 10 items including some interrogation of policy. Moreover, the study found Channel 4 featured the most robust and explicit questioning of government decisions. For example, this live two-way with the Channel 4's Political Editor showed how directly they challenged government decision making:

The government is really quite reluctant to talk about exit strategy in part, of course, because there isn't one fully worked out, there isn't a file, it's not completed work. But mainly because they are deeply worried about the idea that if they go around talking about a relaxation...people will stop their compliance with the rules. And as they stood themselves accused of mixed messaging before the shutdown happened, they are acutely aware of the dangers of mixed messaging (Channel 4 News, 16 April. Cited in Cushion et al., 2021).

Overall, the study found that while most UK television news bulletins did not regularly feature any questioning or challenging of government policy by journalists or sources during a key moment in the first phase of the pandemic, the clear exception was Channel 4 News who most robustly held the government to account.

Given independent academic studies have demonstrated the unique democratic value of its journalism, the question then is not should Channel 4 News be saved – that is self-evident. But how can it best be protected should the government proceed with the sale of Channel 4?

The UK government's consultation document suggests that it is of the view that "Channel 4's existing obligations relating to a high provision of news and current affairs content, should be broadly retained in any potential reform". It is our opinion that this is too loose a definition and could lead to the high standards of Channel 4's journalism being undermined after privatisation.

Safeguards should be put in place to ensure that Channel 4 continues to broadcast no less than 208 hours of news per year at peak time, plus 208 hours per year of current affairs, 80 of those hours at peak. Channel 4 News's budget of just shy of £30 million a year should be protected, as should its remit for high quality television journalism, editorial independence, along with its prime-time transmission time. This could be monitored and regulated by Ofcom, which should be tasked with a specific responsibility for an annual review of the resources available and the quality of Channel 4's news provision, in addition to the more general ad hoc reviews of public service broadcast news, which it presently conducts.

There is a precedent for this. When Sky was bought by Comcast in 2018, the American company entered a legally binding commitment to guarantee the long-term funding of an editorially independent Sky News. It guaranteed a decade of inflation adjusted funding for the 24-hour TV news channel and established an independent editorial oversight board.

The government could choose to do something similar to protect the future of Channel 4 News. Given Channel 4 News's distinctive contribution to the UK's broadcast ecology, in our view, any buyer should be required to undertake a legal commitment to protect and enhance the news service both on television and online.

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