

## Written evidence submitted by Professor Justin Lewis and Professor Stephen Cushion

### RE: Evidence about the future of public service broadcasting

May 2020

Dear DCMS Committee,

We would like to offer evidence for the Future of Public Service Broadcasting Inquiry.

We are professors at Cardiff University who have produced research that has been commissioned by the BBC Trust and Ofcom to examine the comparative differences between public service and commercial news media, and we have also published evidence more widely in academic journals.

There are three areas we would like to bring to your attention. News generally, devolution reporting, and BBC impartiality in general.

1. We carried out a study commissioned by Ofcom in its review of the BBC's range and depth of programming - "The Range and Depth of BBC News and Current Affairs: A Content Analysis" - published in October 2019. The full report is here:

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/174205/bbc-news-review-content-analysis-full-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/174205/bbc-news-review-content-analysis-full-report.pdf)

Overall, we found that almost all BBC news outlets focused on 'hard' rather than 'soft' news, with a high proportion of news about political issues, such as the Conservative leadership contest, Brexit and international affairs. Of the evening television news bulletins, only Channel 4 had a harder news agenda than the BBC News at Ten. This contrasts with news sites such as the Daily Mail, the Sun and the Mirror, which had a much softer news agenda (stories about celebrities, for example). So, for readers of these newspapers, BBC news is a key source of news about public and international affairs. Similarly, the BBC News app had a harder news agenda than news apps on ITV and Sky News.

Across BBC broadcast, online and news apps, we found a broadly consistent editorial diet of serious and public affairs news journalism, although the style and range of topics varies across BBC outlets. So, for example, international news made up over a quarter of airtime on the BBC News at Ten, but just 1.4% of BBC Five Live Breakfast. Although Channel 4 contained the highest proportion of international news – 30.9% of its airtime – across all television news bulletins, *most BBC outlets consistently reported hard news topics* (protests in Hong Kong, for example). By comparison, for many broadcast and online commercial providers, there was a much greater focus on celebrity and entertainment stories.

We also found that the BBC was most attentive to its role as a UK broadcaster. This was exemplified by a case study of news about health and education in the three-week sample. These issues are devolved to the four nations of the UK, but the BBC was more likely to reflect this reality than other news outlets (many of whom used news about England as a default, without making this clear to viewers). In short, the BBC was more likely than other broadcasters to reflect the lives of people across all four UK nations.

When we examined the comparative use of hyperlinks in BBC and commercial online media, we found that the BBC's internal hyperlinking was highly distinct, providing a wealth of background and context to events and issues. So, for example, in its coverage of the Conservative party leadership contest and the day on which the government announced its target to cut carbon emissions to almost zero by 2050, many BBC outlets reported a comparatively high level of policy information and supplied useful background and context to these issues. In reporting the 2050 target, the BBC coverage stood out (along with Channel 4) for its detailed analysis of the government's plans. Likewise, during the election of the next Conservative leader, most BBC news outlets focused on the policy positions of the candidates rather than their personalities or campaigning tactics. Although most news coverage of Brexit was 'policy-lite', when substantive information was reported about the no-deal or future trade agreements, it was primarily by BBC outlets.

However, we also identified areas where the range and depth of BBC reporting could have been enhanced. During the Conservative leadership contest, for example, there were occasions when candidates were given brief soundbites without any challenge to their assertions. Here, Channel 4 News was most distinct, challenging candidates' positions robustly.

In their coverage of Brexit generally, the focus across all news outlets was on partisan, domestic concerns, with journalists often responding to internal UK political events and issues. Only the BBC outlets directly sourced the EU, although not extensively (they used only five sources to represent the 27 member states).

**Overall, however, our findings reveal that most BBC outlets featured a harder news agenda, and supplied a higher level of policy information and analysis than most commercial news providers** (with the exception, on some measures, of Channel 4).

2. We have carried out a range of studies on the media coverage of devolved issues in the UK, both for the BBC Trust and Ofcom. Our central focus was to explore how well UK news media reflect the reality of devolved responsibility for many areas – like health and education – of UK social and political life. In short, in our devolved democracy, how well do our news media communicate where power and responsibility actually lie?

A number of these studies were summarised in a peer reviewed academic study entitled 'Why context, relevance and repetition matter in news reporting: Interpreting the United Kingdom's political information environment' by Stephen Cushion, Justin Lewis and Allaina Kilby. It draws on research produced between 2007 and 2016 and includes some interviews with news audiences. The full study can be found here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1464884917746560>

Our study examines the United Kingdom's political information environment, where significant power is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with different political parties in control. Drawing on a content analysis of 17,765 news items, a representative survey of 3272 respondents and 15 semi-structured interviews, we examine the dominant information sources about UK politics by longitudinally tracing coverage of devolved issues from 2007 to 2016, as well as gauging how well it was understood by television news viewers.

Our results suggest that while BBC news is **more sensitive to communicating the devolved relevance of news than more commercial outlets**, there remains a democratic deficit in the supply of political information and audience understanding of where power and responsibility lies. If news

coverage more regularly communicated the relevance and context of devolved issues, we argue it could open up democratic opportunities for citizens to consider a wider range of policy options debated in all four political institutions.

Our research for Ofcom reported similar findings, summarised by Ofcom as follows:

Put simply, our analysis examined whether the news items that covered health or education-related issues clarified that public policy could diverge in these areas in the different nations of the UK.

The BBC did better than its competitors in this respect. However, in the stories our analysis covered that could have included a reference to the devolved aspects of health or education policy (taking into account the nature of the story and how relevant devolution was to the topic), the BBC did not make any such reference in almost half of cases (45.5%). Across BBC and commercial news, when some relevant devolved information was included, it was often based on implicit references, such as ‘in England’ or ‘NHS England’, rather than explicitly spelling out differences in devolved policymaking for audiences in each nation.

Audiences outside London and south-east England said they often found that there was a disproportionate amount of focus on those areas, and the politics of the ‘Westminster bubble’. Some believed the BBC did not give enough attention to how the lives of people across the country were affected by different types of news story. Audiences in the English regions felt that the BBC could provide more coverage of the places where they lived in its national news output. They commented that this would provide a wider range of viewpoints from around the country to which audiences could relate” ([https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf) page 25).

Ofcom recommended: “The BBC should better represent the whole of the UK with authentic news and current affairs content that feels relevant and engaging to all audiences” ([https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf) page 25).

**In short, the BBC does a better job than most news outlets in reflecting the devolved nature of the UK, but it is still often Westminster or England centric in its coverage.**

3. Our recent analysis about the news coverage of Covid-19 and audiences responses to it demonstrates the extent to which, during times of national crisis, the BBC is seen as a key and trusted news and entertainment provider - one that reflects life in the UK across all its programming in a way that global commercial providers – like Netflix – simply cannot. Relevant links to our COVID-19 analysis and preliminary research can be found here:

<https://theconversation.com/people-trust-tv-journalists-and-want-them-to-scrutinise-government-coronavirus-policy-new-research-137620>

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/04/28/research-suggests-uk-public-can-spot-fake-news-about-covid-19-but-dont-realise-the-uks-death-toll-is-far-higher-than-in-many-other-countries/>

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-bbc-news-is-uniquely-placed-to-serve-the-nation-how-it-does-so-will-define-its-future-135265>

On the whole, audiences want broadcasters like the BBC to hold their governments to account, and clearly value their public service mission to be accurate and impartial.

More broadly, we have conducted or reviewed the many academic studies that have explored issues of impartiality and accuracy on the BBC and other UK broadcasters. There is too much data here to

report in a brief submission, but overall we can say with confidence that **there is no systematic evidence to support the claims made (usually by vested interests) of a left-leaning bias in BBC reporting**. Indeed, over the last decade, there is more evidence to indicate the BBC has tended to favour Conservative or right-leaning politicians than Labour or those on the left. So, for example, purely in terms of weight of voices, conservative politicians have been *much* more likely to appear on BBC news outlets than Labour politicians. So, for example, during the Brexit campaign, Conservative/UKIP voices were more than four times more prominent than members of all other political parties combined.

While this is partly because they have been the party of government, we found a level of disparity that is far greater than during the Blair/Brown era, when Labour and Conservative voices were given much greater equality of access (the evidence to support this can be found in the following studies):

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1389295>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0267323117695736>

We conclude with the following observation. Our studies here raise an important and undeniable weakness in the current model of BBC funding in which the BBC is periodically dependent on UK Government approval for its licence fee settlement. Regardless of the BBC's undoubted commitment to impartiality, when it is under frequent attack by the Government of the day – who, at key moments, effectively determine its budget – this is bound to put it a public broadcaster on the defensive and weaken its ability to be robust in holding that Government to account.

If we combine all this evidence, we are drawn to two conclusions:

The BBC plays a key and highly valued role in UK culture and democracy, and on a variety of measures, outperforms most commercial broadcasters. This conforms to a body of international research that shows that countries with strong public service broadcasters have more informed populations than those that are more dependent on commercial outlets.

But while the BBC works hard to be accurate and impartial, the role of the UK Government in determining levels and sources of BBC funding is not compatible with this mission. For the BBC to be truly independent, we recommend that either:

- The Government plays no role in deciding levels of BBC funding, and this role be taken by an independent body;
- If Government is to play a role, it should be a decision taken jointly by all four devolved governments in the UK, which increase the chance of creating consensus and stability in BBC funding, and make political interference less pertinent.

Professor Justin Lewis and Professor Stephen Cushion