

Ofcom: BBC News and Current Affairs Review

Final report by **PwC Research**
October 2019



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1

Introduction

Project context: Ofcom are conducting a review of how BBC's News and Current Affairs output is delivering against Public Purpose 1

BBC Public Purpose 1

To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.

This should be fulfilled by...

- Providing duly accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming to build people's understanding of all parts of the UK and wider world
- Providing content to the highest editorial standards
- Offering a range and depth of analysis and content not widely available from other UK news providers, using the highest calibre presenters and journalists and championing freedom of expression so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, UK and global issues and participate in the democratic process at all levels as active and informed citizens.

As such, this taps into delivery in 3 key areas:

Relevance

Distinctiveness and quality

Trust

Objectives: explore perceptions of BBC News and Current Affairs output across platforms and different audience types

The overall aim of this research can be broken down into three specific objectives:

Understanding the news landscape, news repertoires and consumption choices in terms of; needs, interests, types, providers, platforms, and where BBC fits within this.

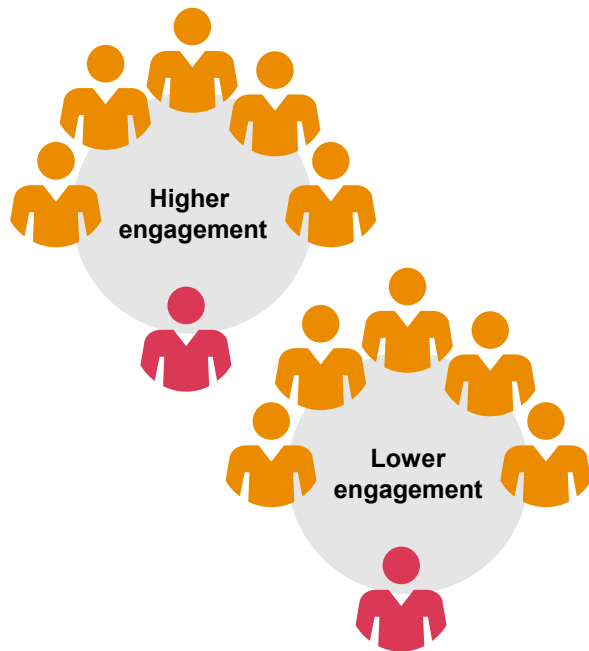
Exploring the BBC's delivery of news and current affairs in terms of; meeting needs, perceived 'quality' and competitive standout.

Exploring perceptions of the BBC as a provider of trusted, impartial news that informs the electorate, exploring; trust, quality, depth of coverage, impartiality, how well informed people feel about certain big issues and how they compare with competitors.

Sample: mix of workshops and friendship in-depth interviews, covering a wide range of audiences across the UK

13 x 2.5 hour workshops held across the UK including (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland)

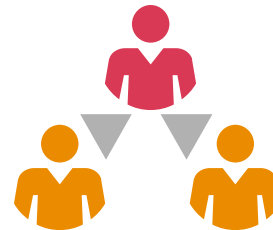
Each workshop had two tables, split by engagement with the BBC and lifestage/socio economic grading.



4 x 2.5 hour minority audience workshops covering Black British, British Muslim, Jewish and Eastern European (Polish) audiences.

Each workshop had two tables of 25-44 year olds, split by gender.

Mix of strength of religious faith across Muslim & Jewish workshops.



12 x paired friendship in-depth interviews (16-17 year olds; 18-20 year olds) held across the UK including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Across the workshops/depts, the following criteria was applied

- All consumed news daily/most days
- No BBC rejecters (screened out those with very low favorability scores) or advocators (screened those with very high favorability scores)
- Rejected those with strong opinions around Brexit.



Pre-task: this was focused on news & current affairs consumption, including a deprivation task ('for 2 days do not use your preferred news supplier – use an alternative').

Post-task: this captured reflections since workshops/depts.

Full sample structures – workshops

	London (pilot)	Scotland		Northern Ireland		Wales		England					TOTAL	
		Stornaway	Dundee	Belfast	Larne	Swansea	Bangor	Newcastle	Liverpool	Barnsley	Nottingham	Thurrock	Brighton	
Higher engaged, ABC1s, 21-34	1							1					1	3
Higher engaged, ABC1s, 35-54				1							1			2
Higher engaged, ABC1s, 55+		1				1								2
Higher engaged, C2DEs, 21-34									1	1				2
Higher engaged, C2DEs, 35-54			1									1		2
Higher engaged, C2DEs, 55+					1		1							2
Lower engaged, ABC1s, 21-34				1			1							2
Lower engaged, ABC1s, 35-54		1											1	2
Lower engaged, ABC1s, 55+								1			1			2
Lower engaged, C2DEs, 21-34	1					1						1		3
Lower engaged, C2DEs, 35-54					1				1					2
Lower engaged, C2DEs, 55+			1							1				2
TOTAL PER LOCATION	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	26

Minority audience workshops

- Birmingham – British Muslim
- Bristol – Black British
- Leeds – British Jewish
- Peterborough – Eastern European – Polish

* All recruits for the minority audience workshops were aged between 25-44

NB. 'Engagement with the BBC' was determined by the participant themselves i.e. whether or not they considered the BBC to be their main/preferred news provider

Higher Engaged: May use multiple news sources but considered BBC to be their main/preferred news provider

Lower Engaged: May use BBC for news but considers a different source to be their main/preferred news provider

Full sample structures – friendship pairs

	Age group	Engagement with BBC	Gender of lead participant	Higher Education
Belfast	16-17	Higher	Female	Intending to go into higher education
Birmingham	16-17	Higher	Male	Not intending to go into higher education
Dundee	16-17	Higher	Male	Intending to go into higher education
Leeds	16-17	Lower	Female	Not intending to go into higher education
Liverpool	16-17	Lower	Male	Not intending to go into higher education
Swansea	16-17	Lower	Female	Intending to go into higher education

	Age group	Engagement with BBC	Gender of lead participant	Higher Education
Bangor	18-20	Lower	Female	Higher Education
Brighton	18-20	Lower	Male	Higher Education
Bristol	18-20	Higher	Female	Working and not in higher education
Larne	18-20	Lower	Male	Working and not in higher education
Nottingham	18-20	Higher	Male	Higher Education
Thurrock	18-20	Lower	Female	Working and not in higher education

NB. 'Engagement with the BBC' was determined by the participant themselves i.e. whether or not they considered the BBC to be their main/preferred news provider

Higher Engaged: May use multiple news sources but considered BBC to be their main/preferred news provider

Lower Engaged: May use BBC for news but considers a different source to be their main/preferred news provider

Stimulus – Case studies used

Across all workshops and friendship pairs, we showed a mix of the following case studies to stimulate the discussion around News coverage from the BBC versus other news providers:

TV



- Brexit
- Breaking News
- Education
- Health

Radio



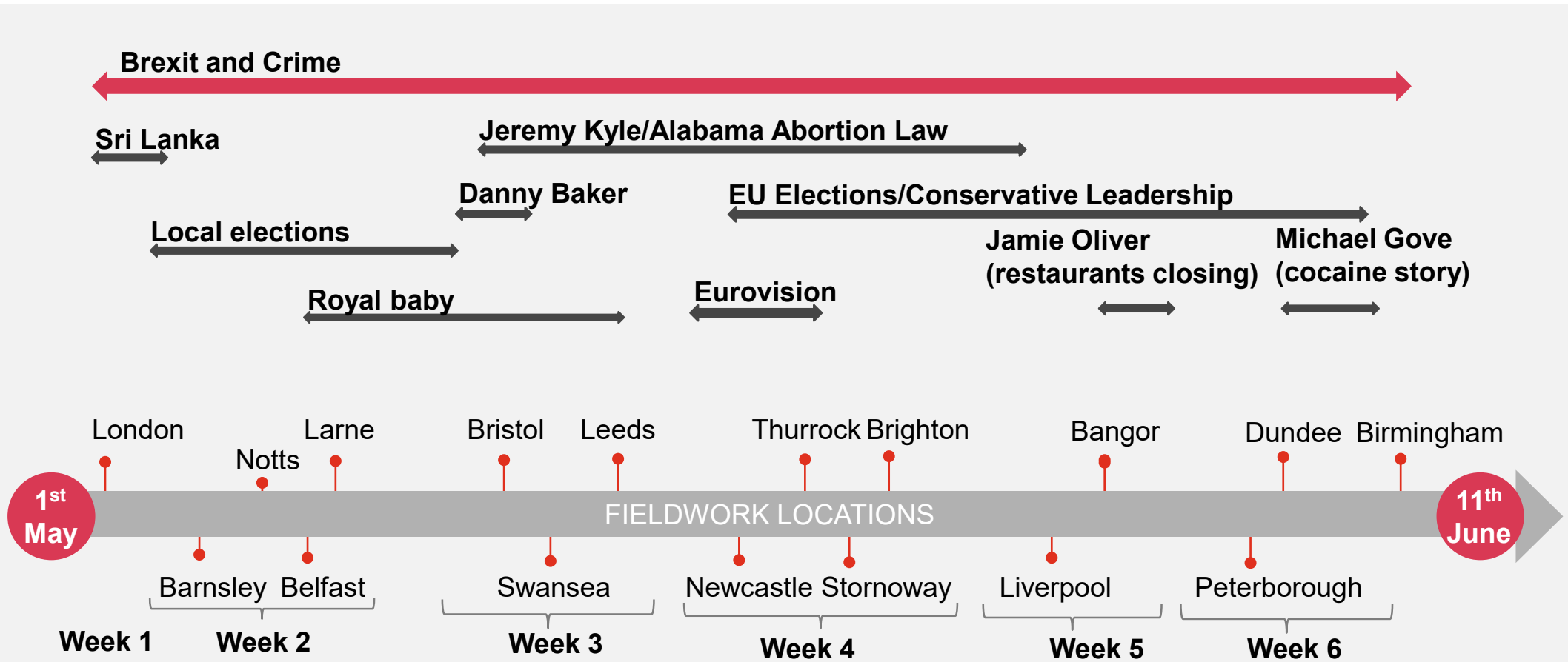
- Climate Change

Online



- Brexit
- Climate Change
- Education
- Health
- Breaking News

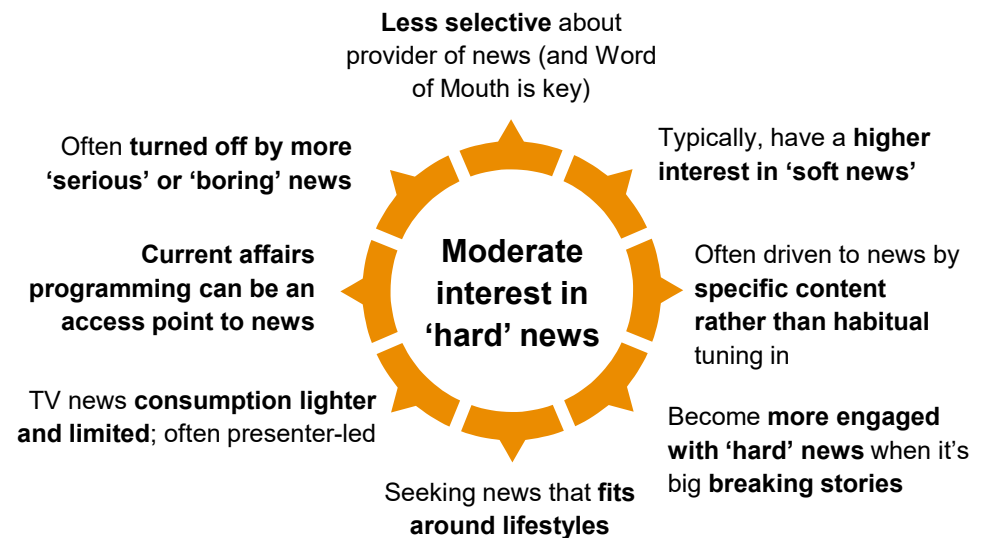
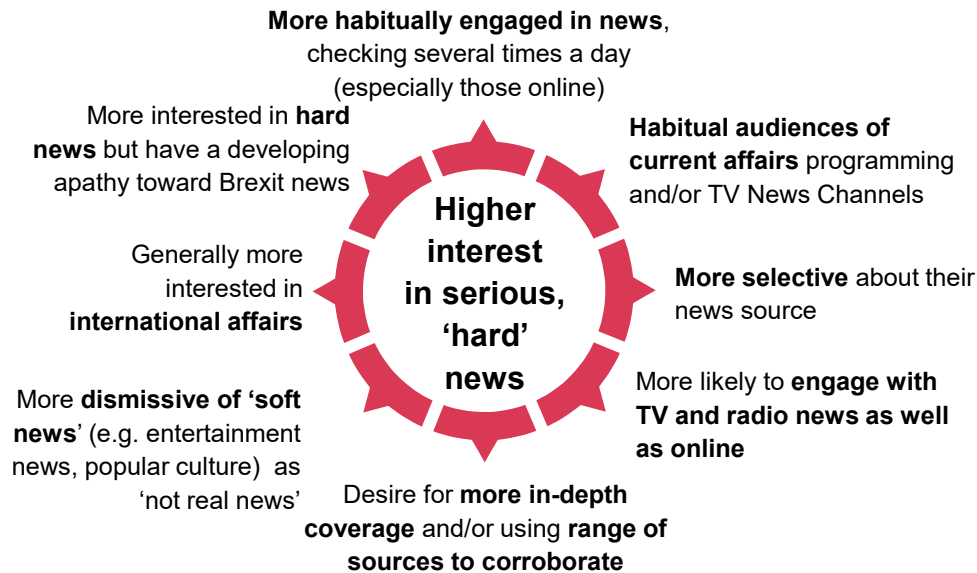
Stories in the news during our fieldwork time



2

Context: UK news audience behaviours

Interest in news varies with distinct behaviours and preferences emerging from those with a higher or a more moderate interest in serious and so-called 'hard' news



Implications for BBC News & Current Affairs

- Often looking for provider who is accurate, reliable and trustworthy – words often associated with BBC across all levels of engagement
- BBC's connection to government and establishment (in audiences' minds) can add trust for some, while for others, viewed with more scepticism.

Implications for BBC News & Current Affairs

- More content-led – but can end up at BBC News online if/when it appears (near) the top on Google or features in social media/aggregators and the content is of interest
- However, BBC's reputation for serious news and lack of 'soft news' can be a reason not to engage
- BBC often seen to be lacking 'personalities' (draw of other channels).

While some news 'needs' are universal and apply to both groups, some distinct needs also appear for those more and less engaged in 'hard' news

Regardless of their interest in news, audience needs correlate with BBC's pillars

Inform

Educate

Entertain

Those with a **Higher Interest** in 'Hard' News...

...Are looking for a news provider(s) that **INFORMS & EDUCATES...**

- Seeking depth & detail across a range of topics
- Accurate, reliable, impartial news are high priorities
- Balance in coverage is required
- Presented professionally
- Providing informed commentary
- Inclined to make time for news (i.e. fit in the evening news).

A number of distinct needs also appear according to levels of interest in 'hard' news

Those with a **Moderate Interest** in 'Hard' News...

...Are looking for a news provider(s) that **INFORMS & (IDEALLY) ENTERTAINS...**

- Breadth prioritised over depth (and detail)
- Interested in a mix of 'softer' and headline 'hard' news
- Relevant news to them more important than 'big news' stories per se
- Easily digestible news which isn't daunting to consume
- News more likely to fit round their routine.

In terms of news consumption, lifestages show a shift in both the platforms for news consumption and perspectives on what's important and engaging

Habits



- Some very ingrained and routine news behaviours – broadly consistent TV (and radio) with older audiences; online/social media with younger audiences
 - TV/radio – news is presented to them (i.e. passive receivers on news)
 - Online – they choose the news to consume (more active engagement).

News needs



- Needs range from more snackable news (quick, broad) vs. depth and detail – and BBC fits largely in the latter camp
- Different perspectives about what is important news through the lifestages:
 - Younger audiences are more engaged in international issues/coverage (a more 'global' mind-set – grown up with international news and internet)
 - Older audiences more traditional consumers (TV/radio) and drawn to local and regional/nation news.

News influencers



- Households they grew up in (style/feel of coverage and desired depth/detail)
- Views expressed by significant others (family/friends/colleagues)
- Newspapers they read/social media they follow.

16-20
year olds

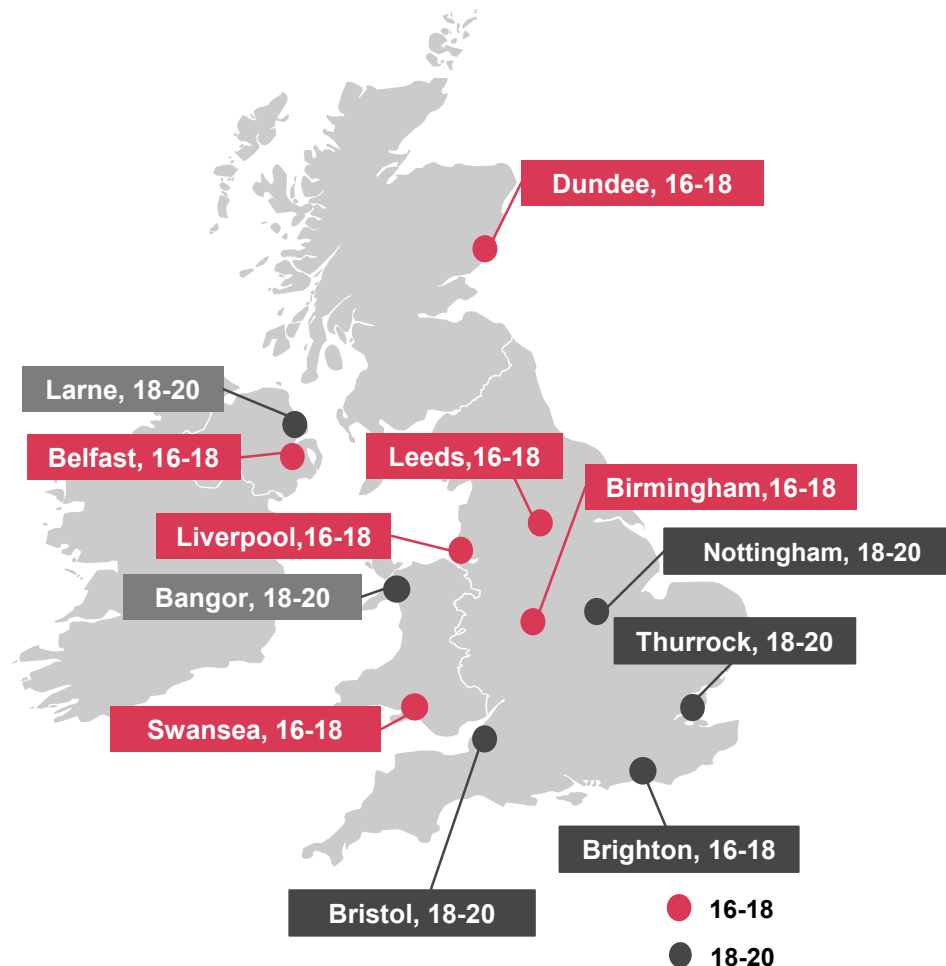
Tend to passively take in news through social media and online apps – but see it as important to keep up to date



Key sources: Social media – online throughout the day

Overview

- Lower interest in politics and current affairs, more interested in big stories/breaking news and 'soft' news
- Often BBC is the default, 'go to' provider when news articles are searched online, although not much consideration is put into their news provider choice
- Heavily influenced by what the family watches/listens to in home; if it's online, they are more driven by social media and news apps
- Some visit newspaper sites – The Guardian and Mail Online are prominent; These provide a clearer point of view which helps them form their own opinion
- Local news is low in importance – this age group are more interested in the bigger issues.



Any regional views?

Nations friendship pairs felt the BBC focuses mainly on London/England issues.

16-20
year olds

Family influence key in why they engage with BBC News

High BBC Engagement

Passive consumption of parents' BBC habits (TV/radio)

Visit **BBC News online** (mobile app or website) and through **links on social media**

BBC News familiar, convenient and accessible, with a high quality website and phone app – **good for serious news** e.g. natural disasters.

Feel **better served by social media** – Twitter and Instagram more 'relevant'

Prefer news with opinion (Instagram 'influencers' and twitter users)

Occasionally visit BBC News online e.g. for breaking news – but see it as aimed at older generations

Less positive view of BBC in family household (left/right bias).

Low BBC Engagement



I used to watch Panorama more before than I do now [since moving out of family home] – I don't have a TV licence anymore."

Higher BBC Engagement, 18-20, Nottingham



I'm realising how much I rely on social media for news. Facebook and Twitter. ... There's a lot on there that's not reliable, but it's fun and fast with news."

Lower BBC Engagement, 18-20, Thurrock

21-34
year olds

Online news is key, providing speed, breadth and depth where required – channel and use of aggregators can dilute perceptions



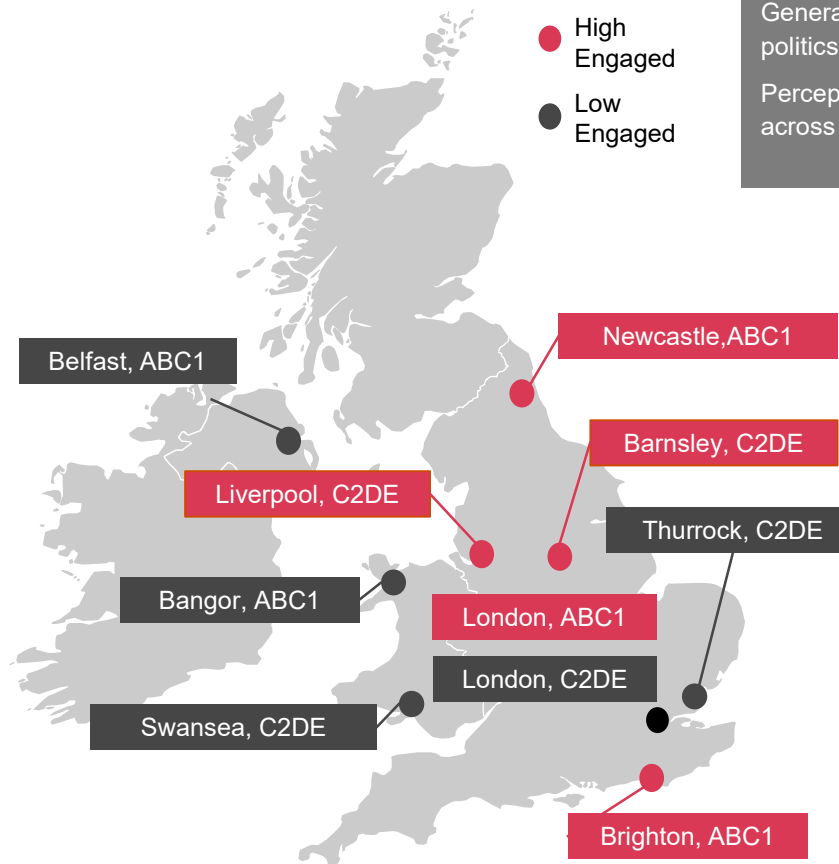
Key sources: Online throughout the day

Overview

- Higher interest in big societal issues (homelessness/poverty/climate change) and international stories, particularly among ABC1s
- Local stories and day-to-day domestic politics are often of less interest
- Online is their main channel for engaging with news
- Like to be up to date; mainly surface level headline checking throughout day
- Greater use of online channels, including aggregators such as Apple News, and social media (Facebook/Twitter) can mean that news provider attributes are less clearly defined – they like the real people interaction that social media provides
- Those more interested in news, use multiple sources online to corroborate stories.

Any regional issues?

Generally less interested in local/nations news and politics than older audiences
Perceptions of London/Westminster bias are evident across the country



21-34
year olds

Key difference between higher and lower engagement in BBC News is the degrees of interest in 'hard' and 'soft' news

High BBC Engagement

Website and app are key touchpoints – check throughout day/receive alerts

Some radio engagement, but more incidental (Radio 1, 2 or 6) – picking up the headlines

Limited TV engagement – if more interested in politics may watch Question Time. Stacey Dooley not perceived as Current Affairs but liked by some who feel it's a bit more relevant than typical Current Affairs content

Parental influence evident in preference of news provider (grew up in BBC household) – some living at home still engage with TV news for this reason.

BBC a reliable source, but **not for them**

Route into news can be **interest in 'softer' elements** e.g. celebrity news or sport – feel better served by others (Mail Online/Sky)

Use Facebook/Twitter/Apple News – may come across BBC this way, but not active seekers

Those with a greater interest in news often use specific sources (The Guardian/Times/FT/Telegraph) – more opinion/greater depth of analysis

Radio engagement similarly incidental, but listening to commercial stations (Heart, Capital, Cool FM)

Engagement with TV – prefer Sky/ITV as perceived as more relaxed, informal style with less political focus.

Low BBC Engagement

“

Usually I use the BBC news app as I don't really have time to watch the TV news in the evenings... it's generally on the go and on the trains and flicking through the main headlines.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, London

“

I check news daily on my phone. I like hearing about the celebrities I watch on TV or who I follow online. Brexit, politics, nah. Not for me.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea

35-54
year olds

Time poor (due to work/families) – but mix of habitual TV news and online to keep in touch throughout the day



Key sources: TV morning, evening news; online throughout the day

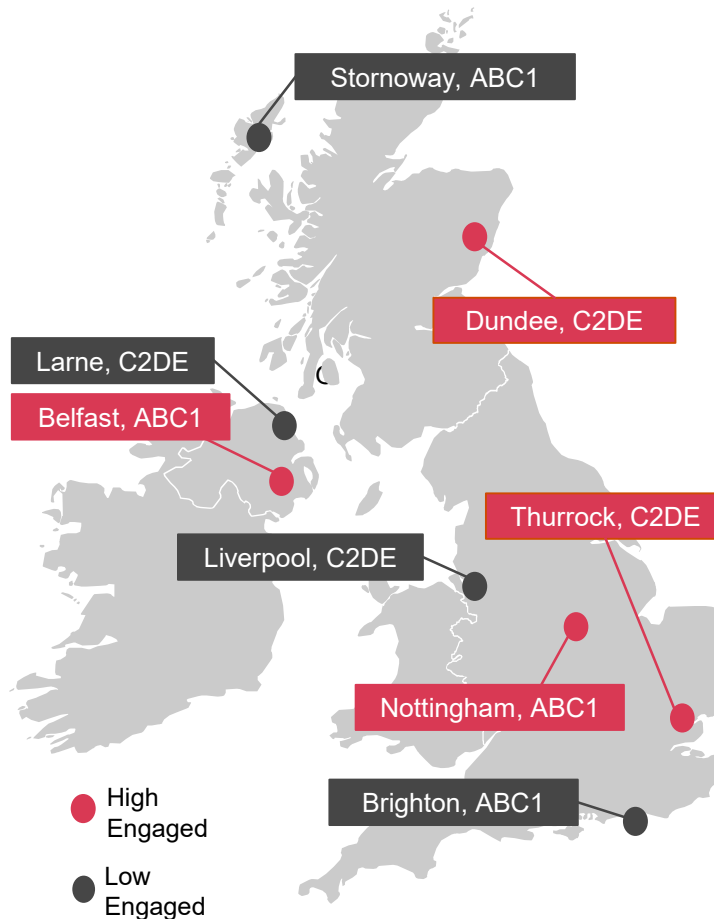
Overview

- Habit of TV news watching in morning and evening, historically driven by what their parents used to watch
- Some differing 'needs' in the morning vs. evening (softer/lighter news often desired in the morning)
- Online is used to keep in touch with news throughout day – videos/pictures valued for easy access to essence of story when very time poor.



"I've been brought up watching the news in the morning and evening, as it's what my family did."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Liverpool



Any regional issues?

NI: some feeling NI issues not given sufficient prominence by BBC compared to UTV

Scotland: Perception there is too much focus on English news on BBC (compared to STV)



"UK wide news for me is almost redundant. I'm just interested in what's happening in Scotland, as that affects myself and my community."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway

35-54
year olds

BBC or competitor news provider has simply become a habit for news consumption



TV news engagement driven by habit – often what parents watched

Also **liked BBC/Sky News Online** –breaking news alerts on their apps kept them informed

Sceptical of the **reliability of social media** (fake news).

ITV/STV and Sky News seen as a 'go to' news provider, but BBC was used alongside

Google often used to source news online – BBC could be visited but not sought out directly

Social media key to engagement – get news stories as they break

Preferred local sources for local news; STV/UTV mentioned as more relevant for local news than BBC.



I don't really look anywhere else for news as I'm sort of stuck in a rut."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Thurrock



I'm a big TV watcher, I get home from work, cook dinner and sit and watch the ITV news and local news."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Nottingham

55+
year olds

Habitual TV and radio listening with long established routines to news consumption



Key sources: TV morning, evening news; radio throughout day; newspapers (mostly weekend, but retired have more time in the week)

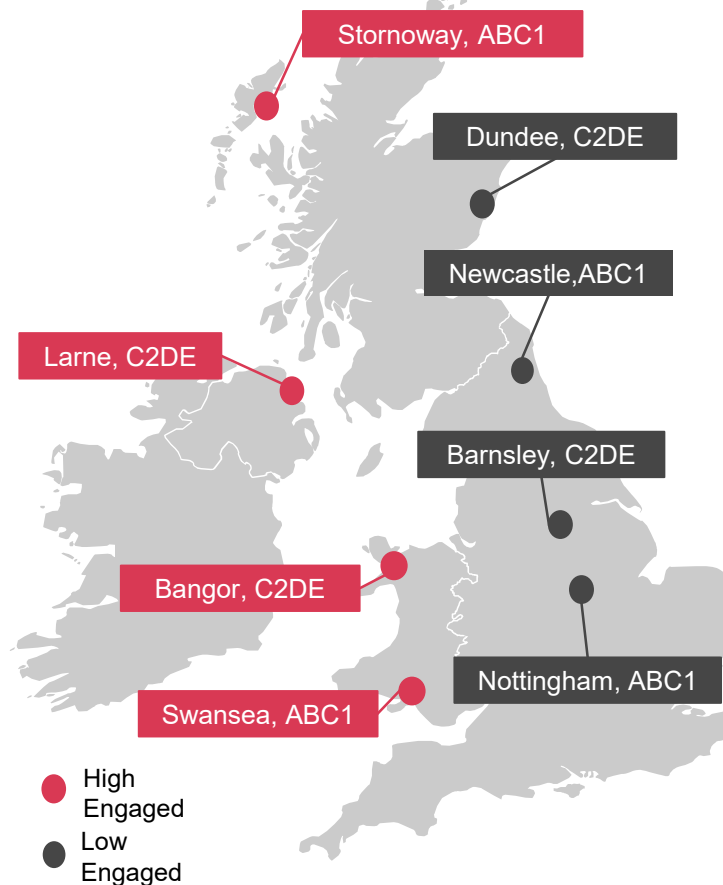
Overview

- Higher interest in and **prioritisation of local and national (devolved) news**
- The fact they have **more time** to scrutinise and a higher newspaper readership means they hold more nuanced views on the merits of BBC output overall.



I think people are creatures of habit, and we tend to go where we always have. It's partly what you grew up with. So I'm ITV as I grew up in an ITV news household."

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham



Any regional issues?

Wales: Local news not satisfying audiences outside South East of Wales

Scotland: Not enough local accents in the news



My husband always goes out and buys the papers on a weekend, it's like a little tradition for us."

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Stornoway

55+
year olds

Those more interested in news per se, typically more engaged with BBC News and Current Affairs

High BBC Engagement

More traditional morning radio listening – R4 (Today)/R2/5 Live

TV news consumed in evening – BBC is a **long established habit** (seen as professional, trusted)

Also some other long established habits (red button)

Local news sought from **newspapers/online** news

Those more interested in news/international events were **seeking news from multiple broadcasters** e.g. Vice, RT, Al Jazeera, CNN.

Again, **driven by habits** (ITV/Sky household); but also some prefer the lighter mood of ITV/Sky in morning – more irreverent, less formal

Higher focus on **local news on TV** – and ITV's local news is on before national news in the evening

BBC a bit **too serious/dry** by comparison

But this is also a cohort who are most inclined to **accuse BBC of political bias** (too left or right wing).

Low BBC Engagement

“

I think the BBC are one of the most trusted sources. this has a lot to do with the fact that this channel has been ingrained in me since I was a child, watching the Test Card. Reliable and well respected.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Bangor

“

I watch Channel 4 News at 7, because that's when it's quiet at home.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Barnsley

Across the minority audiences, there are a range of news interests and platforms used

Black British

Consumption/behaviour

- **Frequent 'high level' online consumption** through day
- Usually through searches/ aggregators or social media – BBC passively consumed online
- Radio used for headlines only
- TV used if they're in and in the mood (rare)
- Desire to see more people like them on mainstream broadcasters/channels.

British Jewish

Consumption/behaviour

- **Fairly engaged cohort**
- More interested in international stories
- Some TV watching (largely family habits)
- Online used for more depth
- Minimal engagement with radio other than to passively pick up headlines
- For younger end, BBC Newsbeat valued for helping them understand news.

British Muslims

Consumption/behaviour

- Mix of engagement with news and interest in depth of analysis
- **TV was primary source** of news & current affairs
- Some frustrations with how media in general portrays their culture.

Eastern European

Consumption/behaviour

- **Mostly online** – social media, newspapers and broadcasters (BBC/Sky)
- Minority watching multitude of TV news channels (e.g. RT, Al Jazeera, Sky News)
- Radio – more passively consumed (commercial music stations' headlines)
- Beyond Sport, little engagement in Polish media.

Please note, findings for minority audiences are broad indicators as only a small base size was sampled in this research



I mainly get news online or when I'm in the car as I've always got the radio on and I know with Kiss FM the news comes on about three minutes before the hour."

Black British, Female, 25-44, Bristol



Recently on BBC News they've been exploring the Israel/Palestine conflict which I find really interesting."

British Jewish, Female, 25-44, Leeds



I prefer watching the news or reading the newspapers, but I don't really use social media."

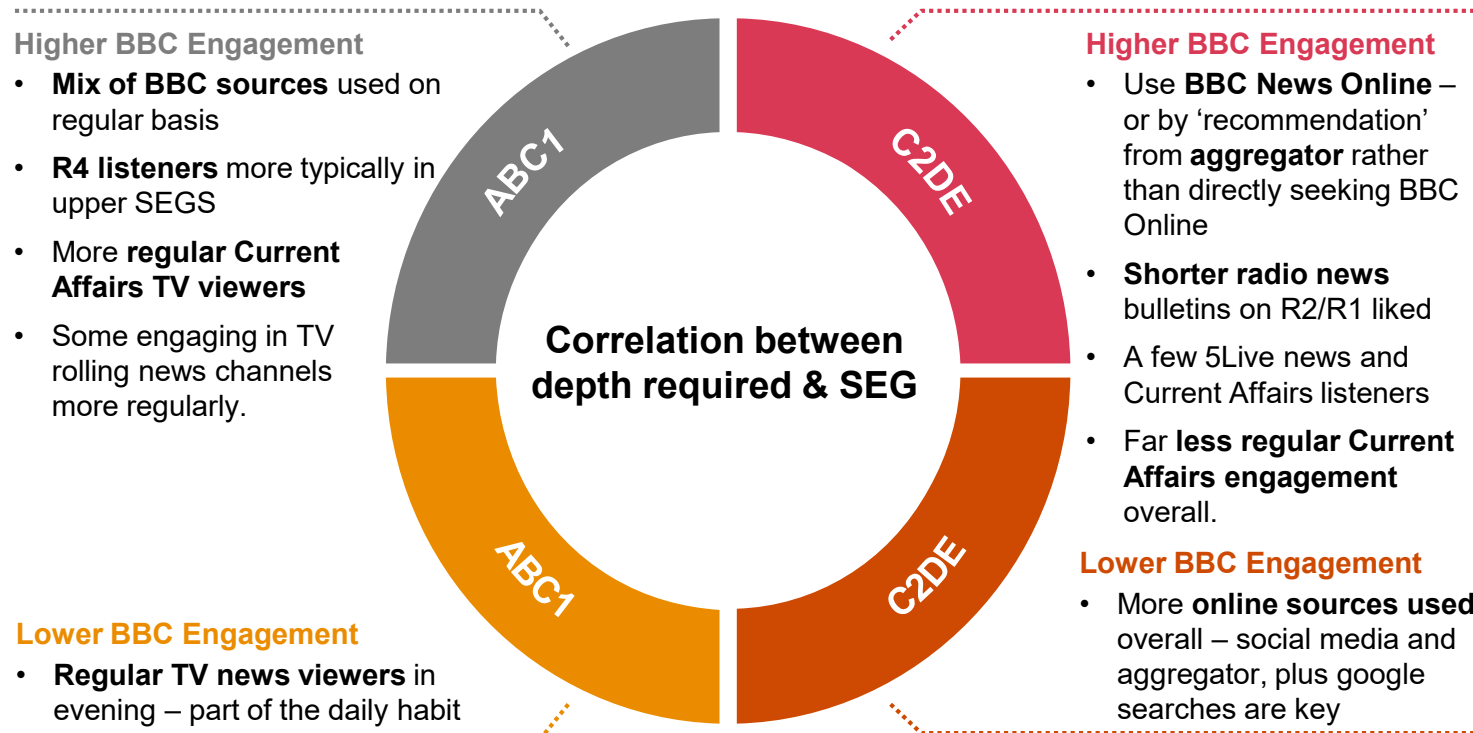
British Muslims, Males, 25-44, Birmingham



I tend use TV in the morning and after breakfast I use Sky News, The Independent and Facebook."

Eastern Europeans (Polish), Males, 25-44, Peterborough

In this research sample, there are indications of some correlation between socio-economic group (SEG) and degree of interest in detail and depth of news coverage



“Radio 4 has something for everyone..”

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Stornoway

“I tend to go to Twitter, Facebook or Samsung News.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Larne

The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) are defined as:

ABC1

- Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations (AB)
- Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations (C1)

C2DE

- Skilled manual occupations (C2)
- Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations (DE)

3

Audience needs and wants from a news provider

Audiences see mainstream UK broadcasters' role as providing an authoritative take on news, as a counter to widespread non-regulated and 'agenda led' news sources

Main UK Broadcasters

- BBC seen as a serious and formal broadcaster, but generally trusted and believed to be accurate
- A perception that BBC presenters lack personality compared to ITV and Channel 4 News.

Other UK broadcasters & media outlets

- Typically watched by those more engaged with the news.
- Those seeking different perspectives on the news.

Social Media

- Useful to get points of view from journalists/ influencers
- Helps them form their own opinion
- Twitter provides breaking news, fast
- Generally aware of risk of fake news from social media.

Newspapers (online)

- Newspaper online sites often visited for more opinion and depth of coverage on a variety of news
- Generally recognised that these sites/newspapers are skewed in their opinions.

Mentioned

BBC News, Sky News, Channel 4 News, ITV News

Vice, RT, Al Jazeera

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat

The Guardian, The Telegraph, Metro, The Times, The Sun, Mail Online, Huffington Post



I think Channel 4 and ITV are a bit fresher than the BBC. A bit more modern.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham



I always watch BBC as I believe it has the least amount of unbiased, along with Al Jazeera.”

British Muslims, Males, 25-44, Birmingham



Twitter is really up to date and you can see what's trending and popular.”

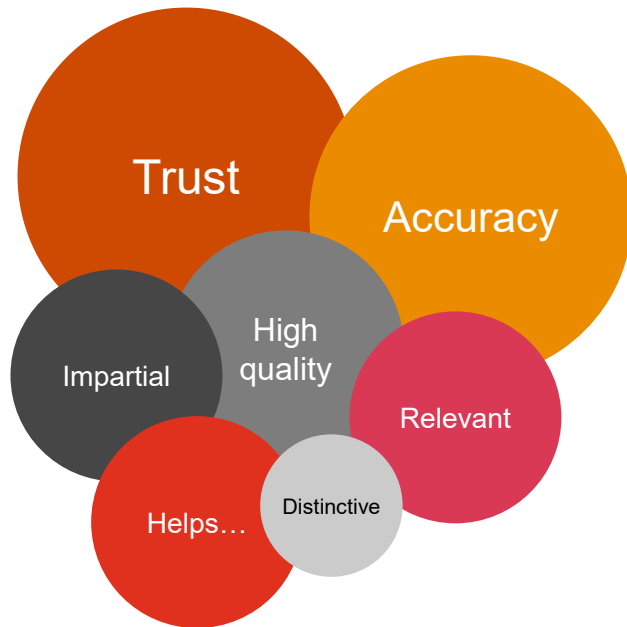
Lower BBC Engagement, 16-20, Brighton



Free newspaper from metro station – usually a few pages of decent news, plus I like doing the crossword.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Newcastle

Across the sample: ‘Trust’ and ‘Accuracy’ perceived to be the most important attributes for a news provider, with ‘Distinctive’ the least important



Key

- Trust
- Accuracy
- Helps me understand the world
- High quality
- Impartial
- Distinctive
- Relevant

Across the sample: Important attributes in a news provider

- ‘Trust’ and ‘Accuracy’ seen as the most important attributes of a news provider
- ‘High Quality’ & ‘Helps me understand’ heavily linked to their perceptions of ‘Accuracy’, ‘Trust’ and ‘Impartiality’
- ‘Relevance’ was interpreted as reliable content/style of delivery
- ‘Distinctiveness’ not a top of mind ‘need’ so often given the least importance.

No discernible differences between devolved nations



Distinctive would be last – that can be good, but it isn’t vital.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-44, ABC1, Stornoway



We all agree that it has to be accurate – definitely no fake news.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Newcastle

NB. Size of circle represents prevalence

Important attributes to minority audiences: they appeared to value impartiality and relevance more than other audiences

Black British



Aside from 'Trust', 'Relevance' was key (talk to me/my community) as well as 'Impartiality' and 'Accuracy', especially with stories relevant to their culture



When we see something that's common to us we want to try and give more support such as culture, races. The BBC needs a bit more diversity and it shouldn't always be about the UK."

Black British, 25-44, Bristol

British Jewish



Again, aside from 'Trust', 'Impartiality' stood out for both British Jewish and Polish audiences – they want news they can trust that's relevant to them/their lives/their identities



Whilst the reporting of the facts is done accurately sometimes the way it's presented by presenters, whether it be radio or TV, it does indicate certain biases that they have."

British Jewish, 25-44, Leeds

Polish



I feel like the BBC is interested only in what's happening here. You don't get much on what's happening outside of the UK on the BBC. Also [the app] it repeats the news, It's all about UK and often Brexit."

Eastern European (Polish), 25-44, Peterborough

British Muslims



'Relevance' and 'Impartiality' were key to this audience as they felt the media portrays their culture negatively and doesn't cover the issues important to them



Relevance should be first, we watch the news because we want to know what's happening today that affects us."

British Muslim, 25-44, Leeds



Important attributes by lifestage: Importance of ‘Quality’ grows through the lifestages whereas the need to ‘Help me understand’ diminishes

16-20 year olds



- ‘Relevance’ and ‘Helping to understand’ were more key for this audience – want to learn about what’s important to them
- ‘Impartial’ & ‘Quality’ had lower importance (less discerning or simply seen as a given?).



If you have news that is more understandable, so many more people would read it.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 18-20, Bristol

21-34 year olds



- ‘Quality’ became more important as they got older
- ‘Helping me understand’ featured lower down – seen as a given if ‘Trust’, ‘Accuracy’ and ‘Quality’ achieved.



High quality is important, you can’t have it [news] badly presented.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, Brighton

35-54 year olds



- ‘Impartiality’ emphasised more for this age group as they become more aware of bias reporting



It’s got to be accurate, if it’s not accurate then what’s the point.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Brighton



I watch the BBC, because it is impartial.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Liverpool

55+ year olds



- ‘Quality’ and ‘Relevance’ seen as crucial for this older audience as less inclined to tolerate low quality coverage and irrelevant stories
- ‘Relevance’ referred to ‘local’ and their world.

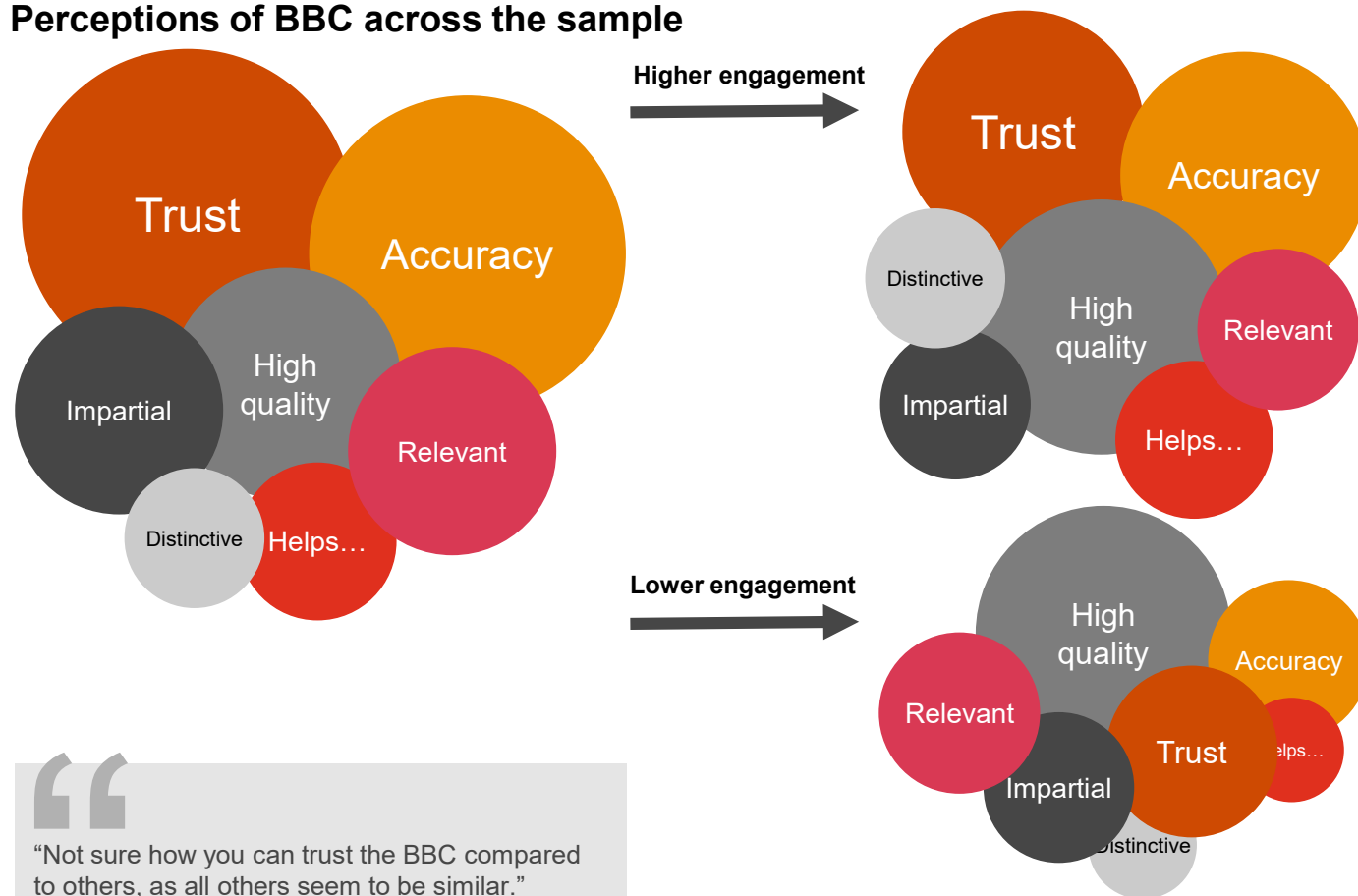


You would expect if it is accurate and relevant, then it would be high quality.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham

BBC's performance: Perceptions of how the BBC is performing against these attributes differs by engagement, but both see the BBC as High Quality

Perceptions of BBC across the sample



Higher Engagement

- Higher Engaged have greater trust in BBC News & Current Affairs, holding it in high regard due to its legacy/ history
- BBC News and Current Affairs was also felt be 'high quality' due to its professionalism/presentation, structure and reputation as a global news provider
- Accuracy was also a key attribute of the BBC – a reputable 'go to' source for breaking news
- Little difference by 'Relevance' and 'Impartiality' with some Higher Engaged referring to instance of bias.

Lower Engagement

- Lower Engaged did not fault the BBC for 'High Quality' but were more critical in terms of 'Accuracy' and 'Trust' – both linked to their concerns around 'Impartiality'.



“Not sure how you can trust the BBC compared to others, as all others seem to be similar.”

Lower BBC Engaged, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham



It provides quality and in depth topical/current news that covers a range of areas and countries.”





Higher BBC Engaged, 21-34, C2DE, Barnsley

4

Meeting audience needs: BBC News performance vs. competition

Across audiences, BBC News brand as a whole felt to be distinctive and unique, with key elements universally recognised

BBC news... key associations

			
History and legacy of brand	Accurate and reliable	Go to source to verify facts	Local correspondents who can respond to news quickly



Long standing, powerful brand, inspires trust, has gravitas across the world. Perceived as gold standard of journalism.”

Higher BBC Engaged, 35-44, ABC1, Nottingham



BBC have reporters at the scene quicker describing live scenes.”

Lower BBC Engaged, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham

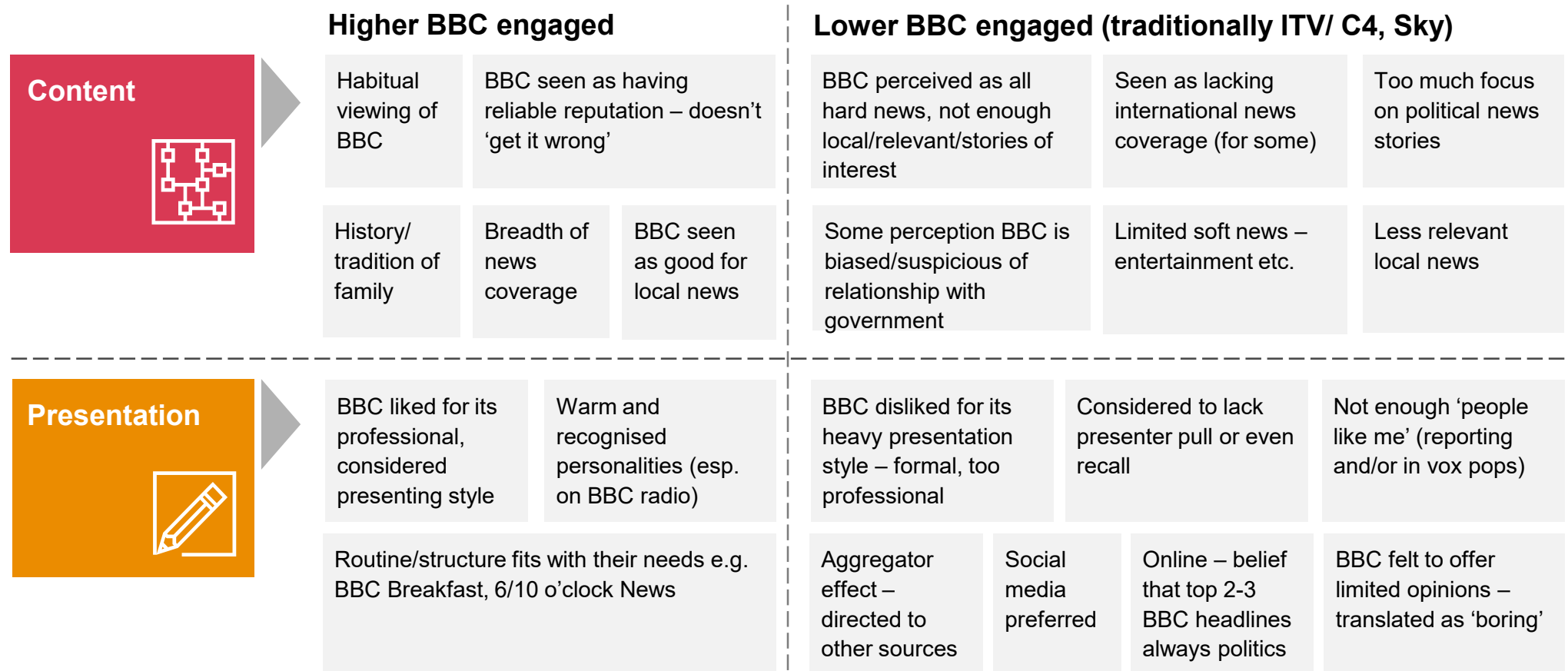


I feel the BBC is very trustworthy. I feel that as it is publicly funded they have a responsibility to provide accurate information for us.”

Lower BBC Engaged, 21-34, C2DE, Thurrock

- Limited differences in perceptions of BBC News and Current Affairs coverage between those who are higher and lower engaged; key associations remain fairly consistent
- General consensus that for a big breaking news story, BBC will be a top of mind 'go to' source for a 'reliable' take on events – no matter how often they generally engage with the BBC
- By contrast, Sky News was seen as being quicker but less reliable in reporting the facts with some concern around speculation/sensationalism.

Multiple reasons given by participants for their (lack of) engagement with the BBC – relating to ‘content’ and ‘presentation’



Nevertheless, BBC is the primary 'go to' news source for verifying news stories and for coverage on breaking news, due to its perceived accuracy and the presence of local news correspondents. This is across both TV and online news sources.

Across the lifestages, there are broadly similar positive and negative perceptions of BBC News & Current Affairs

	16-20s	21-34	35-54	55+
Higher engaged	Trusted	Simple, clear and clean presentation (online)	Trusted, independent	Balanced, factual
	Parental influence	My news filtering liked (online)	Respected, World renowned (proud)	Reputation
	Free of 'fake news'	Seen as more impartial than others	But too much politics, sometimes too much detail	But too London-focused
	But a bit dry/boring			
	Too much politics			
Lower engaged	Good for big breaking news – a reliable take	Strong for breaking news – get the facts	BBC has its place (societal view)	Professional, trusted heritage
	But it focuses on things of little interest	But a bit dry/boring	Reliable and mostly impartial	But too much politics, sometimes too much detail
	Don't feel they are talking to 'me' and my age group	Too much hard news/depressing stories	But not a 'go to' for local news, too focused on bigger	Biased (in politics)
			Too much politics	Too London/ Westminster focused

- Positive perceptions
- Negative perceptions

Perceptions of BBC News & Current Affairs by lifestage: In their words

	16-20s	21-34	35-54	55+
Higher engaged	<p>““ We feel the BBC has a more impartial view of Brexit, it gives a good balance so we as viewers can make our own opinion.”</p> <p>Higher BBC Engagement, 16-20, Liverpool</p>	<p>““ We've formed that opinion as we use the BBC as a benchmark and we compare all other sites, platforms and providers back to the BBC as a trustworthy site.”</p> <p>Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Barnsley</p>	<p>““ I've been brought up watching the news, I think it gives unbiased views when it can. I think because it's public funded as well, there's more ownership of it almost.”</p> <p>Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Dundee</p>	<p>““ I feel the BBC is consistent in its approach towards stories regarding balance of views and opportunity of expression of those views by interested parties.”</p> <p>Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Bangor</p>
Lower engaged	<p>““ Stop prioritising politics over other global issues as I feel like there are other important issues.”</p> <p>Lower BBC Engagement, 16-20, Brighton</p>	<p>““ Sometimes it [BBC News App] can be very over-saturated with [politics] and if you're not that interested in it, then it can be easy to be put off by that.”</p> <p>Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Thurrock</p>	<p>““ Trusting, I occasionally watch it but only when I see a headline/story interests me, it is a good news provider.”</p> <p>Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE Larne</p>	<p>““ Question Time's got worse. With the political situation as it is, it's all about point scoring. They're just trying to score points off each other. I got bored of it all.”</p> <p>Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Stornoway</p>

Throughout the devolved nations, BBC felt to largely focus on Westminster, with any 'local' news stories felt to be too broad

- In the nations BBC News largely seen as 'doing its job'; providing high level coverage of their region
- But all feel more national coverage would be welcome.

Northern Ireland

- Positive about BBC for breaking news – seen as reliable/trusted
- Some feeling BBC national news lacks NI focus
 - This is largely driven by extensive coverage of Westminster vs. the limited reporting on Stormont
 - However, older group felt fatigue with Stormont deadline even more than Brexit
- Not always clear in news if stories are relevant to devolved nations (e.g. education/health stories)

Scotland

- Feeling BBC is too focused on England/Westminster
- Wanted more Scottish news presenters
- Some sense of bias in coverage of Scottish Referendum and seen by some as against Scottish Independence
- STV more favourably viewed – more focused on Scottish issues and a more informal/brighter presentation style with a Scottish newsreader

Wales

- BBC's reputation strong for breaking news
- But 'local' news seen as too broad (Wales as a whole) – and lacked depth around areas within Wales e.g. demise of traditional industry, impact of technology on Welsh industry, challenges of the Welsh landscape
- Seen as focused on Welsh Assembly (particularly for those in North Wales) – not especially key to this audience
- BBC felt to deliver local news on radio to a good standard, but TV coverage is not local enough. S4C and local radio such as Mon FM felt to deliver local news well

Devolved Audiences Perceptions of BBC News & Current Affairs – in their words

Northern Ireland



I like the fact that they have local presenters such as Donna Trainor – it's consistent."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54+, ABC1, Belfast



The BBC don't go into great depth regarding topics, it's more headlines."

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, Belfast

Scotland



I think the TV news does have that Westminster bias. But I think generally over all the news media that the BBC produces, it's quite a reliable news source."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway



I think that it's kind of an old favourite. There is a lot of good stuff that comes from the BBC but they have been found to be bias certainly on certain political issues, one of them being the Scottish Independence Referendum."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Stornoway

Wales



I'd like the Welsh news to include a more regionalised slot. Because the seat of government is in Cardiff the perception in mid and North Wales is that the whole emphasis is 'down South'. This would be countered with an additional local slot."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Bangor



I don't think that BBC TV News does local news that well, I want to know about news in North Wales specifically and it's all focussed on South Wales and Cardiff in particular."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Bangor

BBC generally perceived positively amongst minority audiences, although some areas of improvement were identified

Black British

Big discussion area:
Diversity & Portrayal

- BBC is a **'safe' option**, if they want no hype or emotion... but it's a bit boring
- **Not seen as particularly diverse** – didn't represent 'them' especially well
- BBC **not noticeably better** than others in 'positive' portrayal e.g. knife crime still assumed to be a black gang issue
- **Liked BBC Online News** – succinct.



It's aimed at a certain audience... there is not a lot about certain cultures, races. I feel like they could be a bit more diverse."

Black British, Female, 18-20, Bristol

British Jewish

Big discussion area:
Impartiality

- **Very positive** about News & Current Affairs programming
- Most **trusted the BBC**, but with the exception of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and one or two on Brexit coverage
- Felt **international news** such as Venezuelan crisis received scant coverage on the BBC compared to international providers e.g. RT, Al Jazeera.



I trust them that it's the truth, but it is known that they can sometimes be biased towards Israel."

British Jewish, Female, 25-44, Leeds

British Muslim

Big discussion area:
Portrayal & Diversity

- **Issues with diversity** of presenters and inclusion of different viewpoints
- **Lacks international coverage** of the Indian subcontinent on TV but online does this well
- BBC seen as **playing it safe** to retain licence fee funding
- Too focused on **politics and 'the BBC's view'**, not a range of opinion
- Issue with **language** used to describe incidents and portray their culture.



They tend to pick on certain nationalities and individuals and they don't always portray them in the right way."

British Muslim, Female, 25-44, Birmingham

European (Polish)

Big discussion area:
World News coverage

- BBC brand **well respected**, and News key to this perception
- **Good global coverage** (offices, correspondents)
- But some feeling **not as much focused coverage of world news** as competitors (Sky News).



Sky feels more international to me. On a Saturday you get 5 minutes on each country, including Poland. BBC doesn't have a time for this. It's just spread over the news."

Eastern European (Polish), Male, 25-44, Peterborough

Overall, BBC News & Current Affairs is seen to be delivering on what is expected of them from Public Purpose 1

BBC Public Purpose 1

To provide **impartial news** and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them

- Spontaneously **accuracy** ('facts'), **trust** ('reliable') and **unbiased** ('balanced' and 'impartial') were perceived as key components of a respected news provider – and BBC's key strengths correlate
- That said, there were more **mixed views on the BBC's level of impartiality** and its delivery on 'due impartiality' depending on their political engagement and leanings

What do you want from a news provider...?	Core Attribute	Is BBC News/CA delivering?
'Facts'	Accurate	✓
'Reliable'	Trusted	✓
'Balance'	Impartial	?
'Unbiased'		



I think it's definitely doing that inform and educate bit. It's not the most entertaining, but should it be? I don't want it to lose that gravitas it has. And it's pretty balanced, really. Certainly seems to be no worse than any of the others [news broadcasters]."

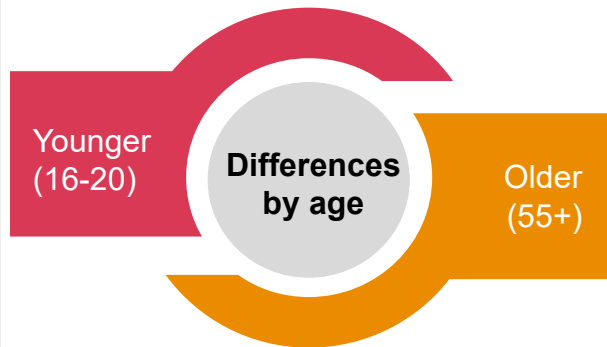
Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea

The BBC 'helps me to understand the UK and the world' – mixed perceptions based on levels of engagement

- Overall there was more of a range of perceptions and scores than when we asked participants to assess BBC News and Current Affairs on 'Trust'
- Typically, those less engaged with the BBC as a news source scored the BBC's performance lower than the higher engaged

➔ BBC's approach contributed to the lower scores: too detailed, serious, a focus on topics of less interest or relevance to them and their lives

- Less engaged in news overall, and BBC sometimes perceived as very detailed and less relevant to them
- Too much on UK news, less focus on the world.



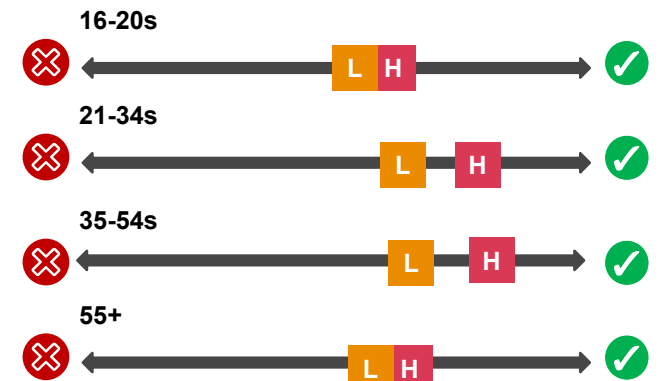
- BBC TV News dominated their judgement
- Word of Mouth/ newspapers also have a role in perceptions of BBC and its bias
- This audience cited a lack of focus on local/ regional news and a high focus on politics.



I think the BBC does an excellent job of curating the important stories from around the world and in the UK.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Nottingham

Lifestage scores

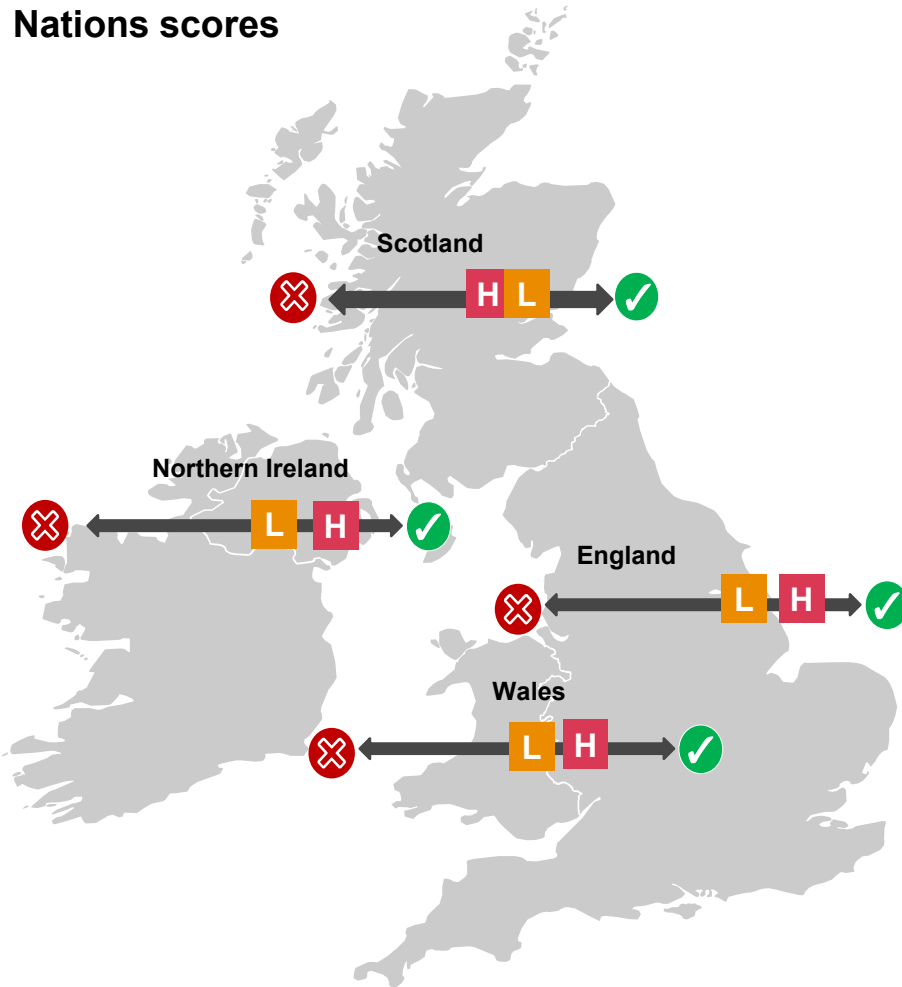


I find that the BBC tend to focus on politics and government affairs rather than global issues. I'm not sure they let me form opinions.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea

‘Help me to understand the UK and the world’ – Generally felt the BBC could be doing more to provide a more ‘local’ view in the nations

Nations scores



Scotland

Higher score among lower engaged compared to higher engaged – due to coverage of Scottish Referendum. Some BBC viewers disappointed with coverage and more critical of whether it really helped them understand the Scottish mood around the Independence vote.

England & Northern Ireland

Very similar scores and distributions – indicating BBC appeal based on habits, needs and influences. But those less engaged not convinced of BBC's influence in helping them to understand the UK and the world (e.g. local news not relevant enough).

Wales

Lowest scores overall, but still fairly strong – slightly more scepticism of BBC's local coverage in particular; too focused on Cardiff/South East Wales at the detriment to their region.



I don't think it [BBC] reflects the region well. South Wales generally. It could do better. It's too much pointed to the South East, Cardiff and London."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea

Overall, BBC's News & Current Affairs is seen as helping inform people to understand the UK and perhaps less consistently, the world

- For example, the case studies on Climate Change, the breaking news story of the Sri Lanka Bombings

- It can get people 'on the ground' quickly and with local knowledge

- For those who are interested, political coverage is a real strength



Case study example: Brexit Extension (TV clips)

- Coverage felt to be balanced, provide both sides of the debate, clearly articulated key dates...
- Ultimately seen as doing its job in 'informing' the electorate about latest developments
- Although some felt it was in too much depth.



It's probably the most comprehensive out there on what's happening in Westminster. I don't always want to know, but it does that well, I suppose."

Higher Engaged, 35-54, C2DE, Thurrock

However, there are challenges to the BBC's News & Current Affairs ability to 'inform': the level of detail, its structure and its lack of 'opinion'

Level of detail

- Those with a moderate interest in news are not interested in the detail around certain 'hard news' stories. Too much depth is not engaging for this audience and can lead them to 'switch off'
- Too much analysis, especially on topics like Brexit can stop 'helping them understand'; topic becomes too complicated
- Issue with the focus;
 - Too much politics
 - Westminster/London/SE bias
 - Too UK focused/perceived to lack focus on world news.

Structure

- Not 'short and concise' enough (particularly for TV/radio news)
- Some reference to a lack of positive representation of diverse audiences (in news stories and through 'audience views' vox pops).



It feels like there's a real formula to the BBC's news. I guess that's a good thing if you like it. But I find it too dry. A bit boring. A bit obsessed with Brexit."

Lower engaged, 21-34, C2DE, London

Lack of 'opinion'

- Some felt the requirement to be impartial could lead to a lack of opinion which lacked the entertainment offered by alternative options.



Even in that piece about climate change protests the BBC brings it back to Brexit. Yes, it's the big news story, but we're so bored of it. I don't want news to be all about that."

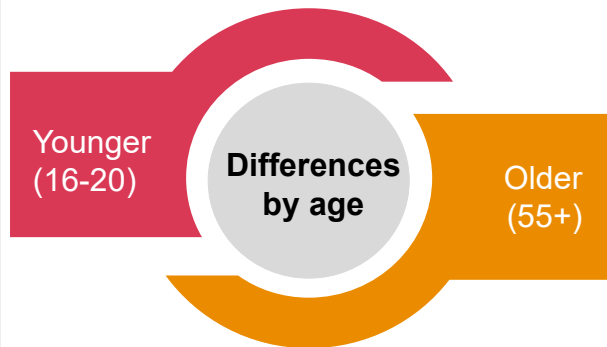
Lower engaged, 55+, ABC1, Newcastle

‘Trust’ and BBC News & Current Affairs – although high scores across ages, youngest and oldest slightly more questioning

- Overall, across life stages, there were high scores for all with regard to the level of trust they had in BBC News and Current Affairs
- However, there were slightly lower scores for the youngest and oldest audiences.

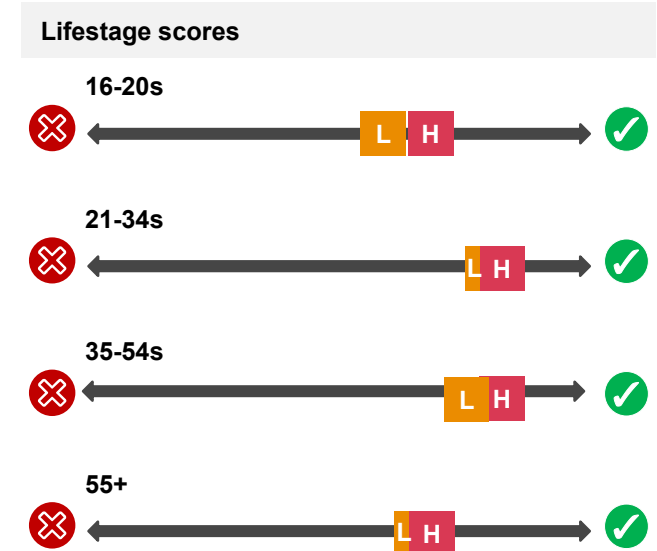
Tendency for 21-34s/35-54s to be less critical of the BBC News overall – more accepting and unquestioning of coverage

- Lowest scores reflected feeling the BBC News coverage not ‘aimed’ at them
- Didn’t cover issues relevant to them
- Some ‘anti-Corbyn’ bias referenced.



- Tended to reflect stronger perceptions of bias in TV political coverage (felt to be either too left or right wing – depending on personal politics)
- Perceptions of contextual damage to BBC overall from the Saville scandal.

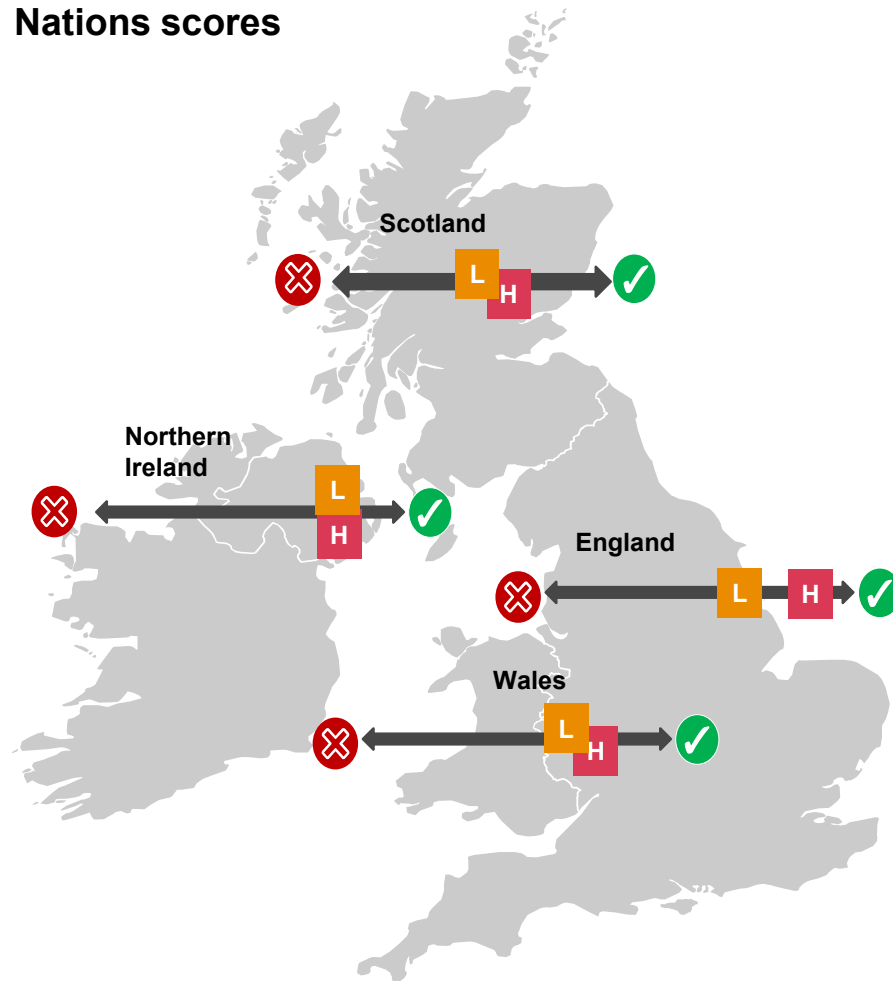
“ I lost a bit of respect for the BBC over the Saville thing. To not have dealt with it, when it sounds like they knew something. I think it’s meant the trust’s gone a bit.”
Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Newcastle



“ Have no reason to doubt them as to what they deliver and heard nothing about them delivering news that is untrue”
Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, CD2E, Swansea

‘Trust’ – limited differences in perceptions across nations. If anything, English, in this sample, appear to be more critical

Nations scores



Scotland

Trust slightly impacted by **perceptions of ‘bias’ about Scottish Referendum coverage** (too pro-union).

Lower engaged particularly critical of the BBC – more from hearsay and Word of Mouth/newspaper coverage than experience.

Northern Ireland

Little difference in perceptions of trust for BBC News and Current Affairs for the lower and higher engaged.

Lower engaged just **preferred UTV coverage** – felt more relevant to Northern Ireland.

England

Highest discrepancies in scores between high and low BBC News engagement.

Lower engaged had some lapsed BBC News viewers – felt BBC to be **too politically biased (newspaper influence?) or suspected government influence**.

Wales

Similar distribution to Scotland

Typically trusted BBC but engagement was based on habits and news needs (i.e. high level vs. detail).



“I trust them to give the facts but I'm less trusting that they are not biased toward the Government.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Larne

‘Trust’ and BBC News & Current Affairs: Overall high levels of trust, but some challenges based on perceived political bias and ‘cover ups’



High scores across higher and lower engaged – and across all ages/lifestages

- Reputation for balance and neutrality
- Long established and venerable
- Scrutinised to a greater degree than other news providers and as such, held to a higher standard.



A minority of the more politically engaged questioned the BBC’s political bias

- Treatment of Dianne Abbott on Question Time
- Coverage of Jeremy Corbyn (e.g. Newsnight ‘communist’ image)
- Suspicious of relationship with government



A few feel BBC’s reputation has been tarnished by ‘cover ups’

- Saville fall out; some need their trust restoring
- BBC gender pay dispute
- Even, recently, coverage of Danny Baker sacking (perception was the BBC didn’t really cover it).

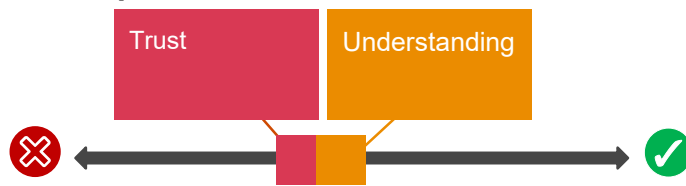


I’d say none of the news outlets are perfect, but they do a similar job. Give the facts. But the BBC’s the one you feel wouldn’t have an agenda. You’d hope it wouldn’t. It’s not got a Murdoch pumping money into it.”

Lower engaged, 21-34, C2DE, London

Minority audiences: Certain audiences slightly more critical in terms of 'trust' compared to 'helping me understand'

Black British and British Muslims more muted in their view of BBC News & Current Affairs performance



- ✓ Comprehensive coverage of politics
- ✗ But perceived as being biased when talking about how minorities/other countries are portrayed in the media
- ✗ Plus BBC focuses too much on the negatives when reporting on 3rd world countries.



Because they can sometimes seem misleading on news in third world countries and communities with minorities.”

Black British, 25-44, Bristol

British Jewish/Polish Groups were more positive




- ✓ Seen as a well established, long standing institution
- ✓ Well researched, up to date and easily accessible news that covers a broad range of topics
- ✓ BBC News perceived to be accurate and impartial.



Well established channel with lots of news on different subjects.”

Eastern European (Polish), Male 25-44, Peterborough

 very small sample sizes

Providing 'due impartiality' in news and current affairs coverage was recognised as a challenge for the BBC perceived



Impartiality is subjectively defined and experienced making it impossible for coverage to satisfy everyone at any given moment



Held up to greater scrutiny than other news providers – by general public, politicians and others in the media.



Views on impartiality can be driven by what they've heard elsewhere – particularly among less engaged who may consume news stories *about* the BBC from other news stories.



Amount of choice available – given there is so much available, it can lead people to question the information they receive far more readily.



'Impartiality' can equate to boring, middle of the road content – there were questions around whether the BBC tries too hard to be impartial which can take the 'entertaining' element out of coverage.



Question whether the BBC do enough to defend themselves against accusations of not being impartial – leaving the opposing view unchallenged can lead some to think the BBC is at fault.

Spontaneously BBC were often cited as providing impartial coverage and this was driven by a number of factors

- BBC frequently criticised for being both 'too left wing' and 'too right wing'
- Also criticised for reporting more positive stories about the Israelis and about the Palestinians
- With both sides feeling the other is portrayed in a more positive light, suggests increased sensitivity around political news



- Especially online
- This was emphasised by the Brexit case study.

- Expected of the BBC but praised
- C4/ITV in the case studies demonstrated how objective the BBC are.



I think often the left and the right in the political arena complain the BBC is biased towards the other one. That to me, says they're doing something right."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Brighton



Objective reporting and giving global news – they keep offering value for the licence fee."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Nottingham

- Some felt the BBC were trying to provide balance and were less agenda driven than other providers.

However, criticism came from across the political divide, typically from the most politically engaged and focusing on controversial topics

Drivers of perceived lack of impartiality

Political coverage

- × **Political coverage was felt to be the most important to get the right balance**
 - For example, coverage of Brexit, Israel vs. Palestine and then more broadly, left wing (particularly Corbyn) vs. right wing bias
 - This was the most heavily scrutinised with complaints from across the political divide
- × **Some are suspicious of the BBC's relationship with government** and was felt to be less critical than other providers because it was reliant on the Government for funding
- × **Some felt the BBC gives undue prominence to extreme political views** at the expense of those in the middle
 - For example, when selecting general public vox pops to show, and on current affairs programming (e.g. Question Time guests and audience members more generally).

Framing of news story

- × **Some criticism of the BBC for covering both sides of a 'story' even if the arguments don't have equal weight** e.g. climate change
- × The BBC has a **mixed reputation for challenging interviews** – this is dependent on the presenter and it was felt that some are better than others at this. Radio was perceived to have more challenging presenters compared to TV (largely driven by Radio 4 presenters)
- × **Framing of coverage was challenged** by some e.g. a view that the BBC fail to provide full contextual understanding around issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian situation
- × BBC was felt to **present themselves as impartial, but sometimes there's a hidden agenda** – e.g. with the climate change case study, the interviewer was felt to be against protest but did not overtly express this.

Impartiality – in their words



One negative in terms of its politics, it's less impartial and probably leaning a little towards the right."

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Barnsley



I feel they are impartial (as much as they can be) – they still educate with documentaries etc. and within news programmes. Regionally they're very good and haven't dumbed it down too much. I trust them more than others on TV, radio and online."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Belfast



I think that it's kind of an old favourite. There is a lot of good stuff that comes from the BBC but they have been found to be bias certainly on certain political issues, one of them being the Scottish Independence Referendum and other occasions as well and I think that if they're honest to their own values on impartiality, they have to work a bit harder to regain people's trust and confidence."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Stornoway



BBC is a long standing, powerful brand, inspires trust, has gravitas across the world. Perceived as gold standard of journalism. Impartial."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Nottingham



I would say it definitely provides the most up to date and important news. Definitely not impartial. Not entertaining."

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea

Distinctiveness and Quality – not easily articulated concepts, but evidence of BBC News & Current Affairs delivering

Distinctiveness evident in the consistency of its top of mind attributes

Serious, Professional, Trusted, Reliable, Balanced

- There was **consistent language used across all age groups**, levels of engagement and interest in news – showing how the BBC has a very distinct image
- **Long established**, and therefore has well developed expectations of the BBC's News brand (and the BBC Masterbrand)
- News brand and Masterbrand associations were fairly indistinguishable
- Yet across the sessions, 'distinctiveness' was **not considered an important attribute** of news, per se
- **BBC's 'distinct' image can be as much of a turn-off as an advantage**, especially for those more moderately interested in serious or 'hard' news.

'High quality' achieved through its long established reputation for being accurate, trusted and impartial

Accurate, Professional, Structured, Reputable

- 'High quality' was seen as a product of the **BBC's consistent delivery on its News & Current Affairs output** over many years
- Perceptions of 'high quality' were derived from the following;
 - **'Professionalism'** – presentation; dress code (TV), tone of presenters/reporters
 - **'Structure'** – providing a clear narrative around each story (context, background, range of views, use of experts)
 - **'Reputation'** – ability to deliver and 'not get it wrong' over decades
- In contrast, 'red top' newspapers **not** seen to be high quality – felt to be more of a guilty pleasure
 - Opinionated, soft news, primarily for entertainment
- The lower engaged audiences believed 'high quality' was a core attribute of BBC's News & Current Affairs coverage, which indicates that **'high quality' did not necessarily translate to wanting to engage in the content.**

Distinctiveness and High Quality – in their words



The BBC are very professional, they seem as though they have got a lot of background in journalism. You've got proper journalists, they're not just presenters."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea



With having grown up in the 60's I have seen the massive changes in the BBC and how the organisation has grown to take its responsibility of not just a high quality, balanced and trustworthy source of news, but also an educator."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Bangor



I feel that the BBC and other main news providers both are capable of and do provide high quality current affairs programmes. Dispatches [C4] being a case in point, that appears to have equally rigorous journalistic standards and the remit and freedom to look deeply into specific issues."

British Jewish, Male, 25-44, Leeds



Distinctive is a nice element to have but it's more about being recognisable – it can be good but it's not vital."

Lower BBC Engaged, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway



I wasn't really sure what distinctive meant at first, but I think it's a combination of things like high quality, professional and accurate."

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Thurrock

Bringing theory to life through case studies: BBC's structure and narrative is seen as providing better understanding of the topics than competitors

	Breaking News	Brexit	Ongoing news (climate change, education, health)
Appropriate contextual understanding	✓	✓	✓
Rounded perspective of the topic	✓	✓	✓
Expertise on the ground	✓	✓	✓
Appropriate level of detail	✓	?	?

BBC is often a 'go to' for breaking news because of its reliable, non-speculative perspective.

There was some question over whether coverage is too detailed – this can lose some viewers.

BBC has gravitas and clarity in these types of stories and they are less opinionated. But sometimes it is not relevant or there is still too much depth on stories of little interest.

Breaking News: BBC News is a 'go to' source for many; being the 'reliable and trusted' view on big stories

Ref: Participants shown coverage of the fire at Notre Dame and Sri Lanka bombings

- BBC strengths are with breaking news: professionalism, clear structured story with credible journalists in situ so quickly
 - A very polished report/online story within 30 minutes
 - Local correspondent on site quickly (e.g. Notre Dame)
- Social Media sources and Sky News are often the 'first' to break news – but it is seen as very speculative and sensationalist, while the BBC is still collecting the facts
 - For example: incorrect & irrelevant context provided by Sky News re Sri Lanka bombing and the history of the Tamil Tigers
 - For example: Notre Dame reporting was mentioned as 'ponderous' and 'speculative' from competitor news provider
- Evidence of flicking between Sky News (for initial reporting, emotion, drama) and BBC News for 'facts' (this was especially evident among the over 35s)
- BBC News alerts were also praised for raising awareness of breaking news.

Appropriate contextual understanding



Rounded perspective of the topic



Expertise on the ground



Appropriate level of detail



Criticisms of BBC's coverage

- Slow to report any detail (compared to other news providers) which gives others their USPs
- BBC News could be quicker with helpline information.

Breaking News: in their words

Ref: Participants shown coverage of the fire at Notre Dame and Sri Lanka bombings



You can trust it to cover breaking news as it happens. It has to be for the public.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Dundee



The BBC should continue being impartial and educational and at the forefront of high level, breaking news.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, London



Breaking news – it’s live, it’s more information, it’s about how it’s happened and what it looks like and the BBC is really good at this.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Liverpool



With Sky, it was obvious it’s breaking news – there was a bright banner and they did have empathy. BBC had a correspondent therefore they were able to provide more information. But the BBC were monotone.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea



The BBC brings relevant breaking news from around the world and UK, with reporters on location. It’s reliable and easily accessible.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Barnsley



If it was a breaking story I would choose BBC as a source. They are accountable due to being publicly funded.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Barnsley

Brexit/Politics – BBC coverage is heavy going and too dominant for most... but still seen as more reliable than others

Ref: Participants shown coverage of news on the day that Article 50 was extended to 31st October 2019

- There is a clear structure providing both sides of debate (both on TV and online) and key information upfront
- Criticism: it's heavy going, very detailed and a dominant element of the news (TV/online)
 - This is off putting for many, particularly for youngest ('not talking to me') and oldest (perceived to be 'too left/right')
 - All other news stories are seen as marginalised (compared to other news providers)
 - This is ultimately a key factor driving lower engagement with the BBC
 - Northern Irish audiences wanted more about the consequences of the backstop. There is plenty of coverage of the fact there is an issue but not enough on the consequences
- In contrast, C4 and Sky News coverage is seen as more opinionated (which is polarising) and as providing less clarity in coverage structure
 - Some felt the narrative is jumpy, confrontational and hard to follow
 - Whereas for some (younger, ethnic minorities, more left-wing), there is a feeling that these providers are better at representing them
- Online coverage was liked for its structure – with summaries, links to detail and videos for multi-media, there was a sense that readers are given the option for headlines or detail.

Appropriate contextual understanding



Rounded perspective of the topic



Expertise on the ground



Appropriate level of detail



Criticisms of BBC's coverage

- There is a repetitive feel to politics coverage and political Current Affairs
- Laura Kuenssberg was quite a polarising personality
- Some feel the use of 'extreme' views can result in a see-saw experience, with the 'middle' having no voice.

Brexit/Politics: in their words

Ref: Participants shown coverage of news on the day that Article 50 was extended to 31st October 2019



The BBC covered all angles of the Brexit news.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Belfast



The BBC need less 'noise' in lengthy, complex issues like Brexit. Less totally polarised opinions – more of a mix and moderacy.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea



We feel the BBC has a more impartial view of Brexit. For example for Channel 4 we were shown views from different people with blogs from politicians, the majority of which disagreed and tried to sway our opinion of Theresa May by portraying her in a bad light. Whereas, the BBC sort of gave the best of both ends and told us a bit of positive, showed us a bit of positive people in regards to Theresa May and showed a bit of negative. It gave a good balance so we as viewers can make our own opinion.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 16-18, Birmingham



It was much easier to get straight to the facts on Brexit rather than a lot of talk.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Barnsley



I think it largely does achieve its aim of getting news and topics across and then it goes to dilute them with endless debates with maybe the wrong people. World news is less now because of this Brexit thing.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Belfast

Climate Change: BBC brings balance and gravitas, but some question the focus of coverage on the ‘consequences’ rather than ‘reasons’ for protest

Ref: Participants shown coverage of Extinction Rebellion protests in London in April 2019

- Climate Change is universally recognised as a hugely important issue (some from a personal perspective, others from a ‘citizens’ standpoint)
- Taking the example of the climate change protests, BBC radio coverage was largely seen as drawing on its key strengths:
 - There was a clear structure, substantiated with facts/numbers and experts
 - The use of Attenborough added gravitas/weight to the BBC’s coverage
- But it also highlighted some issues with the interviewing style (on radio)
 - Some felt the presenting was suppressing a desire to express a view... so was it impartial?
 - They also questioned the local relevance – too London focussed
 - There was irritation that all topics tend to be brought back to politics/Brexit
- Some younger audiences were critical of online coverage
 - They wanted to see more on the reasons for protests and less on the actions and consequences; it made them feel the BBC was not in tune with what matters to their age group.

Criticisms of BBC’s coverage on climate change

- Online coverage was a bit dry and lacking opinion (and young audiences more likely to view this)
- Scottish audiences questioned where the Scottish angle was... e.g. Scottish natural resources and restrictions on car use on the islands
- A few were cynical about Attenborough being ‘rolled out’ to add some gravitas. They felt this showed a lack of other credible experts.

Climate Change: in their words

Ref: Participants shown coverage of Extinction Rebellion protests in London in April 2019



David Attenborough is so well respected and it was reported in a calm balanced way and a lot more controlled than the LBC coverage. LBC was more sensationalist with a link straight to knife crime which is completely irrelevant.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 25-54, ABC1, Brighton



What's Diane Abbott's views got to do with climate change at all – especially relating to knife crime! There should be some explanation about views.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Newcastle



Generally I feel as though they cover everything I want from a story but maybe it's because I have a vested interest in climate change that I didn't feel like it captured what I felt, it was almost very anti – it was like oh there was loads of disruption and things. I feel like they could have shown both sides of the story a bit more.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 18-20, Nottingham



Serious and factual. Using David Attenborough was good as it's someone everyone trusts, but the BBC was much more negative. They keep linking everything back to politics.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea



Nick Ferrari, I find rude. He seems to ask pointed questions with the answer already inferred in his tone. BBC was more straight down the line and impartial.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Thurrock

Education/Health news: devolved nations are more critical of the stories' relevance overall

Ref: Participants shown coverage of appropriateness of SAT testing (shown in the Nations i.e. relevance was being probed) and measles vaccinations (again, exploring relevance in the Nations).

- Education and health stories are not always relevant
 - If have no children or children of a different age
 - If they are not living in the relevant Nation
- But audiences felt they had value from a 'citizen' perspective
 - Some feeling in the Nations they were used to English stories in the news – and just accepted this happened sometimes
- Not always clear if the news story is relevant or not
 - The nuance of devolved issues means that relevance could be better signposted
 - English government news could affect them as decisions in Westminster can be an indicator of trends soon to happen elsewhere
- Style of reporting is generally praised
 - This was felt to be clear, with visuals and statistics that stood out well
 - BBC News was also felt to be less emotive and sensationalist compared to the rival broadcasters' coverage.

Criticisms of BBC's coverage on education/health

- There was criticism about bringing politics into the discussion unnecessarily in the opinion of some audiences (ref: Jeremy Corbyn, Labour)
- There appeared to be a lack of other views (e.g. students, teachers) in the education case study.

Education/Health Case Studies: in their words

Ref: Participants shown coverage of appropriateness of SAT testing (shown in the Nations i.e. relevance was being probed) and measles vaccinations (again, exploring relevance in the Nations).

“

Both seemed to give mostly the same information, asking for specialist opinions, asking parents, teachers etc. BBC mentioned the tests were controversial in Scotland.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Dundee

“

The ITV coverage seemed more relevant as it spoke to children and parents directly – it was more emotive, whereas the BBC coverage was much more factual.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea

“

BBC Television news seems to cover education and health type news as if what is happening in England is also happening in Scotland, but it's not it is completely different, a different way of running the system.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway

5

Perceptions of BBC News by platform

Perceptions of BBC TV News are dominated by perceptions of the BBC brand more generally, although differences between news platforms are recognised

TV



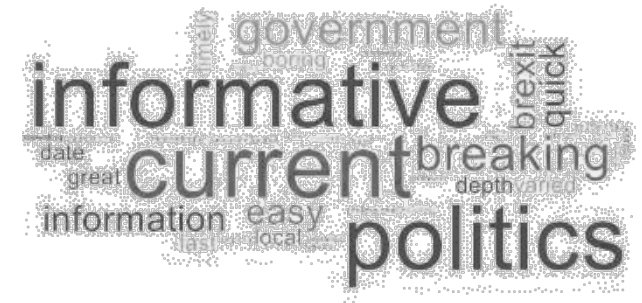
- Dominated by **formal, serious and professional associations/perceptions**
- **Structured, clear and predictable** – you know what you will get
- **Presenters are not a draw** to BBC News coverage on TV, and at breakfast time in particular
 - In contrast, ITV presenters such as Piers Morgan/Susanna Reid are key pull for some viewers.
- Overall consensus that BBC TV News coverage **better for 'hard' news**.

Radio



- Felt to be **more character led**; presenters like John Humphreys, Jeremy Vine, Nick Robinson
- Seen as having **more personality and opinion (vs. TV)**
- Recognition that it **caters for breadth of different audiences** – Radio 4 to Radio 1Xtra
- Often a **taster/ springboard for news**
- R4 appeals to older, heavier news audiences – variety & depth desired
- **Covers local issues better** than TV and online.

Online



- **Convenient** and used across sample
- **More accessible** (and appeals) to the younger audience
- **More breadth AND depth**: news output more distinct – variety of stories covered, different styles of journalism from written stories to videos and podcasts, encouraging a wider reach
- **Navigation and the ability to tailor content** particularly important to nations audiences.

BBC News & Current Affairs platforms – in their words

TV



They're very professional, they seem as though they have got a lot of background in journalism. You've got proper journalists, they're not just presenters."

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea



BBC [News on TV] just bores the life out of me. In the morning it's just so boring. The presenters are grey. And they're all about politics... Politics is just boring. Maybe it's not well explained."

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Thurrock

Radio



I think the BBC try to meet a variety of different audiences in different ways. So whether it is watching the BBC TV for your news, or whether it's the radio with its different styles of radio from 1Xtra to 5live to Radio 4."

Black British, Female, 25-44, Bristol



I think radio gives you a taster for news. If I hear something interesting on the radio then I'll go online and try to find out more."

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway

Online



I find that they make more of an effort to get the facts rather than just getting out there first with a catchy headline. I think the way they deliver the news is more effective too. It's a bit more serious and a bit more formal, particularly the BBC News website."

Black British, Male, 25-44, Bristol



BBC online is so easy to use and you can tailor it so you only see the news stories you want to see and are interested in."

Eastern European (Polish), Female, 25-44, Peterborough

6

Perceptions of BBC Current Affairs output vs. competition

Current Affairs programming – in their words

“

I watch Panorama and Dispatches sometimes but I wouldn't watch them all the time, it would depend on the topic, I'm not a regular watcher and sometimes the music turns me off.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Brighton

“

Current affairs is looking into topics in a bit more detail. 'Have I Got News For You', it's comical and they talk about current affairs and what's happened in the week, it's interesting and entertaining.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Newcastle

“

I think current affairs is more politically orientated and something that's a bit more ongoing and follows a particular topic. There's also a lot of discussion and debate.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, London

“

Current affairs programmes are usually based on one topic and it allows people to give opinions and you can say what you agree with and disagree with.. They have to try and keep the news impartial but with these ones there's more opinion.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Liverpool



BBC Current Affairs Programming seen as more opinionated, although some feel competitor programming is more gritty and impactful

BBC Current Affairs Output

Panorama

Question Time

Stacey Dooley
Unreported World

Newsnight

Victoria
Derbyshire

- ✓ BBC seen as more **opinion based** which was (usually) liked
- ✓ Content reaches some of the **higher and lower engaged** audiences
- ✓ **Panorama is familiar and liked** – covers interesting stories/relevant social impact
- ✓ Stacey Dooley and BBC Three documentaries **feel relevant** – particularly for younger audiences
- But flagship programmes such as **Panorama still felt to be a bit formal and ‘safe’**
- Too heavily focussed on **politics** coverage
- BBC felt to give too many **extreme views** and very little of the mainstream view.



I can watch Panorama sometimes if it's local, or something that interests me."

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Barnsley

Competitor Current Affairs Output

Dispatches

The Last Leg

Peston

- ✓ Tackles **more engaging/controversial** subjects
- ✓ Channel 4 Dispatches seen as **grittier** and covers topics in **more depth** (compared to Panorama)
 - Perceived as having more ‘pull factors’, risk taking, impactful approach and topics chosen
- ✓ **The Last Leg** is a standout show for Channel 4
 - Appeals to a **wide audience** due to its light-hearted take on serious topics, particularly relevant for younger audiences.



Dispatches is just more grittier than Panorama, it takes more risks and does things and covers topics that the BBC doesn't bother with."

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, London

7

Future Considerations and Challenges for BBC News and Current Affairs

In summary: five headlines

1

Expectations and experience of the BBC's News coverage shifts from predominantly based on online for younger audiences, through to TV and to a lesser extent radio for older audiences

- Online 'identity' less deeply engrained and can challenge expectations, whereas TV/radio more set and harder to challenge
- Audiences do not actively avoid BBC News; habits and perceptions ('it's not for me') play a key role in how/where they engage.

2

Overall, BBC News and Current Affairs content largely appeals more to audiences with more interest in 'serious', so-called 'hard' news

- Our research found a split between those who engage in news that is perceived as 'important' to them, society and the world as a whole, and those whose engagement is driven more by what is 'interesting' to them
- BBC news is a 'go to' for those more habitually engaged in news, more 'dismissive' of 'soft news' (e.g. entertainment news/pop culture) and looking to be informed and educated by news output

3

Strong and well-established associations with the News and Current Affairs brand across lifestages and levels of engagement with BBC News

- But this is perceived both positively (reliable, accurate, trusted) and negatively (boring, dry, safe) – and correlate to levels of engagement in both the BBC and news more generally
- So the BBC is thus better serving those more engaged in news, and especially those more interested in politics.

4

UK-wide perception that the BBC is held up to greater scrutiny than other news broadcasters because it's publicly funded and due to its historical legacy

- The BBC has a reputation for being 'balanced' and 'neutral' in its tone and coverage, but it means that it is also more noticeable if they deviate from this
- Thus examples of questionable impartiality can be drawn on (whether through experience or through perceptions based on what they hear in newspapers/online or through Word of Mouth, etc).

5

Overall, there were four key challenges that audiences felt the BBC needed to consider going forward. These were around: Relevance; Engagement with BBC News Online, Perceptions of Impartiality and Distinctiveness.

Key challenges: relevance and engagement with BBC News Online



Relevance: the issue

- **Style** – seen as serious, opinion-free, dry and ‘buttoned up’ by some; lack of personalities (especially on TV); the BBC have not changed their ‘feel’ for decades – older, middle class
- **Content** – considered to be too detailed for some; too much focus on politics; very ‘England’ focussed (too London focussed for some) and not enough world coverage; the more interesting content can often be hidden
- **Appealing to all** – it is difficult to strike the right balance, but generally the BBC was felt to lack diversity; its traditional formats were considered to be less relevant to younger audiences.



Engagement with BBC News Online: the issue

- **BBC Online** – this is generally well perceived across the research, providing breadth and depth of content as required (including tackling softer/quirkier news that grab attention)
- **BUT, the challenge to become more of a destination** – for less engaged, the BBC online content was sometimes only ‘discovered’ due to deprivation task at the outset of the project; for younger audiences in particular, their use of social media/phone aggregator apps make it difficult to cut-through
- **Potential to be more engaging** – for some the format/style has not changed for a while. The relatively bland headlines and lack of opinion means the site doesn’t draw them in. Politics/UK has the greatest focus, as with other BBC News channels.

Key challenges: perceptions of impartiality and distinctiveness



Perceptions of impartiality: the issue

- **Striking the right balance** – impartiality is highly subjective, and the BBC is likely to always be criticised for failing to show the right balance of perspectives, or providing sufficient context (can be difficult within existing news formats)
- **Perceived lack of engaging content for some** – further challenge is that for some the ‘sitting on the fence’ delivery leads to a perception of unengaging content
- **Prominence of extreme views** – perception that these dominate over the ‘middle ground’ views across news and current affairs output. This may be more engaging, but it adds to the divisiveness of our times (e.g. with general public vox pops, Question Time/guests).



Distinctiveness: the issue

- **This is not an audience priority, per se** – few people are identifying this as a news ‘need’ or priority
- **But there is an important subconscious association and it can be a reason to engage** – highly professional, long-established, well-trained journalists... they don’t really get it ‘wrong’
- **Conversely, distinctiveness is also responsible for its perceived ‘blandness’** – the serious, dry, template approach to the news can lack the engagement factor for those moderately interested in serious or so-called ‘hard’ news.

Future Challenges for BBC News and Current Affairs – in their words



Embrace technology to update the style of content. Give some lighter news for all audiences.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 21-34, ABC1, London



Consider relevant other parts of the country and think about having a younger news focus.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Larne



Have a diverse range of presenters and interviewees to get an opinion of different people. Report facts accurately. Please show more international news on TV, not just online.”

British Muslim, Female, 25-44, Birmingham



“Have a gender/age/ethnic balance as the norm. Make sure there is pay transparency and equality for both genders.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Stornoway



Start having a more relatable fun team for shows such as BBC Breakfast, make more people of all ages want to watch.”

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Belfast



I think they should consider Scotland more and provide more local news.”

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, C2DE, Dundee

8

Appendix

Appendix – Case study breakdown by location

Main sessions

Engagement with BBC	SEG	Age	Stimulus	
			Option 1	Option 2
London (Pilot)				
Higher engagement	ABC1	21-34	Brexit TV	
Lower engagement	C2DE	21-34		
Barnsley (Yorkshire)				
Higher engagement	C2DE	21-34	Climate Change Radio	Brexit Online
Lower engagement	C2DE	55+		
Nottingham				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Climate Change Online	Education Online
Higher engagement	ABC1	35-54	Breaking News TV	Climate Change Online
Lower engagement	ABC1	55+		
Newcastle				
Higher engagement	ABC1	21-34	Climate Change Radio	Breaking News TV
Lower engagement	ABC1	55+		
Thurrock (East England)				
Higher engagement	C2DE	35-54	Brexit Online	Climate Change Radio
Lower engagement	C2DE	21-34		
Brighton				
Friendship Pair		18-20	Brexit TV	Climate Change Online
Higher engagement	ABC1	21-34	Climate Change Radio	Brexit Online
Lower engagement	ABC1	35-54		
Liverpool				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Brexit TV	
Higher engagement	C2DE	21-34	Brexit Online	Breaking News TV
Lower engagement	C2DE	35-54		

Appendix – Case study breakdown by location

Nations sessions

Engagement with BBC	SEG	Age	Stimulus	
			Option 1	Option 2
Belfast (NI)				
Friendship Pair		18-20	Education TV	
Higher engagement	ABC1	35-54	Health TV	Brexit Online
Lower engagement	ABC1	21-34		
Larne (NI)				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Brexit Online	
Higher engagement	C2DE	55+	Health TV	Brexit TV
Lower engagement	C2DE	35-54		
Swansea (Wales)				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Education TV	Brexit Online
Higher engagement	ABC1	55+	Climate Change Radio	Breaking News TV
Lower engagement	C2DE	21-34		
Bangor (Wales)				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Education TV	
Higher engagement	C2DE	55+	Education TV	Breaking News Online
Lower engagement	ABC1	21-34		
Stornoway (Scotland)				
Lower engagement	C2DE	55+	Education Online	Climate Change Radio
Higher engagement	C2DE	35-54		
Dundee (Scotland)				
Friendship Pair		16-20	Climate Change Online	Brexit Online
Higher engagement	ABC1	55+	Education TV	Brexit Online
Lower engagement	ABC1	35-54		

Minority audience sessions

Engagement with BBC	SEG	Age	Stimulus	
			Option 1	Option 2
Birmingham (Minority audience)				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Brexit TV	Climate Change Online
British Muslims	Males	25-44	Brexit TV	Breaking News Online
British Muslims	Females	25-44		
Bristol (Minority audience)				
Friendship Pair		18-20	Education Online	
Black British	Males	25-44	Brexit TV	Breaking News Online
Black British	Females	25-44		
North Leeds (Minority audience)				
Friendship Pair		16-17	Education TV	Climate Change Online
British Jewish	Males	25-44	Breaking News TV	
British Jewish	Females	25-44		
Peterborough (Minority audience)				
Eastern Europeans (Polish)	Males	25-44	Breaking News Online	Brexit TV
Eastern Europeans (Polish)	Females	25-44		

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