

TELEVISION NEWS AND PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE: UNDERSTANDING THE ECONOMY

Coverage of the economy is a routine aspect of British television news for most viewers. For many it provides the principal source for information about economic issues and for evaluating economic policy and the competence of its execution. The way in which British television news reports economic issues is therefore an important factor in the formation of popular economic understanding and the development of an informed citizenry.

In this paper we present some of the findings from a Liverpool University research project exploring how economic news is reported on television and the extent to which television audiences are able to make sense of this reporting. Although this is a study of British television news, the issues raised have a wider resonance and connect with several strands of international media research. First of all, that of news analysis, with its concern for the news as political and social knowledge and, increasingly, for the communicative organisation of its images and speech as it bears on this. Leading studies in this field include Ericson *et al.* (1987) and Glasgow University Media Group (1980). Equally prominent within our perspective is the field of reception studies, with its broad interest in modes of interpretation and the use to which media items are put. In this area, to which Morley (1992) provides a valuable recent overview, Morley (1980) made an early and influential intervention which included some discussion of Budget coverage, whilst Lewis (1985) and Jensen (1990) have made further important contributions. Our study also relates to recent enquiries into the way in which media accounts contribute to the development, and at times the emergence, of "public issues" (for instance, Corner *et al.*, 1990; Deacon and Golding, 1994; Schlesinger *et al.*, 1983) and to questions about knowledge and citizenship (addressed, for instance, by Gamson, 1992 and Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992).

Our choice of economic news as the focus for this study was motivated not by a wish to enquire into economic issues themselves but out of an interest in the range of questions about

public communication which the topic raises, given the importance of the *economic* to the modern political process. Economic news discourse has a distinctive character as a result of the statistical and systemic nature of most of the events which are reported, the sourcing and regularity of those events and the directness of their relationship upwards — to questions of political management — and downwards — to the ordinary life of the nation. Economic exposition and analysis increasingly poses problems for journalists as the economy becomes a more complex and contentious area of public debate, with public perceptions of it now established as a factor of paramount importance in the formation of popular political opinion (Gavin and Sanders, 1996, p. 68-84; Newton, 1993, p. 158-176; Philo, 1993, p. 407-418; Sanders, 1991, p. 235-261). Indeed, this being the case, work on economic news is surprisingly under-developed, with few studies of any kind and no major research in Britain.

Our approach both to television reporting and to viewer interpretation is informed by a recognition of the economy as essentially a systemic notion (Emmison, 1983, p. 139-155) — for an historical account of the term as indicating a sphere of national polity. That is to say, as an entity, the economy is dispersed across a range of inter-related processes, states and indicators (including interest rates, unemployment levels, exchange rates, balance of payments, public sector borrowing and inflation). But the configuration of this dispersal is subject to change in various ways. Different factors can be included or excluded as parts of the system, the relationship assumed to be desirable between parts (the economy in balance) can vary, and the priority accorded to given parts can also alter.

Over the course of the economic restructuring undertaken by many countries in Western Europe during the 1980s, there has been a tendency for political debate about economic management to become more technical, with macro-theories and predictive models playing a more prominent role in public debate than before. This has been part of a general shift in which key factors of national economic performance have become as much a function of the international economy as they are of national policy, with governments adopting varying, and often strategic, stances towards this, thereby opening up questions of responsibility and controllability which have often been adopted as themes in economic journalism. In Britain, the move into a period of recession in 1990/1991, a designation initially resisted by the Conservative Government, had the effect of making not only the management of the economy, but also national economic direction, an area of open contention and, finally, of crisis. Nightly, the economy was foregrounded on television news — the symptoms, causes and possible cures providing the premier domestic running story. The signs, and then the strength and sustainability, of possible economic recovery has been a key news theme of the 1990s. In what follows, we base our findings on research covering the period from March 1995 to February 1996. In order to investigate questions of comprehension and evaluation by viewers, we set up a range of focus groups to which we showed selected extracts from economic news coverage collected at three notable points in the course of the year¹.

First of all, we would like to make some points about the nature of the coverage itself.

The Economy as Image and Speech

The ways in which viewers understand the economy are dependent, as we shall illustrate later, on quite fundamental questions of comprehension. Economics, it is widely thought, is difficult technically and also a subject notorious for the wide range of views which can be held about the same data. The modes of reporting the economy, then, present distinctive problems for broadcast journalism. The nature of the economy as a systemic entity, in which shifting relations between the parts provide the main focus of news, means that the news event for most coverage is abstract and cannot be visualized directly. As in diplomatic coverage, images may sometimes be available of the secondary events associated with the news focus (eg. airport arrivals, cars drawing up at government buildings, the inside of conference chambers) but a good deal of economic news uses visuals not to precise illustrative ends, but to provide broad thematic support. So, for instance, shots of busy trading rooms may be found under commentary on City reactions, shots of job centres under details of unemployment figures, shots of various industrial processes under accounts of the state of manufacturing and shots of high street counters under reporting of consumer spending.

This means that the core depictive material for many economic reports is *voice-over across diverse images* in which the speech is strongly dominant. In many of the accounts in our survey, this is interspersed with sections of *voice-over across graphics*. Here, the communicative profile changes and the visual depiction becomes primary, as the reports attempt by various devices to render abstraction and (statistically-based) complexity in terms of visual symbols. A third use of reportorial speech is the *piece-to-camera*, in which the reporter offers exposition, frequently from a location having significance for the news theme. Location reporting of the kind found elsewhere in TV journalism is less common in economic items for the reasons noted above, but thematically supportive settings are often used. These have a more direct role to play in the account, and are thus given more emphasis, when the report is cast in the narrative form of a visit — for instance, to a region, to a factory, to a shop or to a particular household.

Transitions between speech over supportive image, speech over graphics and speech to camera often produce an interwoven account rather than sequenced, discrete blocks, although the convention of closing the report with a piece-to-camera is widespread across the channels and, not surprisingly, we have found that the discursive summarising this involves weighs quite heavily in viewer response.

We have noted the different modes of reporter speech but one of the most important elements of economic reporting, as in most television news, is the *interview*. Interviews are mostly location sequences, although on big stories (Budget day would be an obvious example) there may be studio interviewing after the location report has concluded. Interview speech feeds into the report the accounts of political actors, experts, and a range of citizens variously related to economic events. In economic reporting, it is most often evaluation (rather than information

or experience) which is sought. Interviews reflect the economy as both multi-aspectual and as the object of a (potentially chronic) number of professional as well as lay interpretations.

These various uses of image and speech in the economic report almost always follow an introduction by the news anchor and may follow a main headline too if the item is high enough in the bulletin's running order. *Headlines and anchor speech*, with their special density and framing role, are a key aspect of any journalistic discourse, signalling the essence of a story and often situating it within the broader classifications and topography of the newsworthy. Along with the reportorial usages we have outlined, they are an important constituent of the dynamics of understanding.

The Reported Economy

In this section, we want to examine in more detail one of the three different dimensions of the economy as reported on British television, each of which is to be found across the range of our taped and transcribed material as well as featuring with varying degrees of directness in respondent comment. These dimensions are the economy as figures; the political economy and the sectorised economy. Our focus here is on the economy as figures. Our focus is on the economy as figures accounts of the other two dimensions can be found in our full report (see Gavin (ed) forthcoming). By using the term "reported economy" we wish to draw attention to the incontestable point that of all the various activities and circumstances that constitute the economy, only a selection receive television treatment. This is the inevitable result of pre-selection within the political sphere and the sphere of economic debate combined with further selection within the terms of broadcast journalistic practice, a field with its own institutional constraints (including those on time) as well as its commitments to specific audience groups. However, observed discrepancies between the nature of the economy and the reported economy have often been used in criticism of broadcasters by politicians and academics and they are also to be found in the accounts of our own respondents, discussed later.

We have noted earlier how the abstract, systemic, contingent nature of economic events and conditions often poses a challenge for journalistic story-telling. The reporting of significant statistical change in the context of expectations provides the core of most economic news items. New figures are significant longitudinally, against a background of recent history and prediction, and laterally, in relation to other economic indicators. The longitudinal setting may be one of high volatility in economic affairs, or one in which relative stability has been maintained. The significance of figures consequently varies with immediate context — a 0.5 % rise in retail sales figures might be dramatic in one period and unremarkable in another. The lateral setting is affected by those indicators which have become highlighted for particular attention, as a result most often of government targets or, for instance, strongly expressed concern within industry.

The broad movement during the period of our study was out of recession and towards recovery. At the beginning of our study, strong news values still surrounded the question of whether recovery had really started; at the end of our study the question of its pace and its sustainability provided the strongest news framing, with the “feelgood factor” (peoples’ optimism about their own circumstances) having become a dominant marker against which demand-side statistics were read. During such a period of uncertain transition, readings can generate news interest from confirmatory or contradictory indications almost equally, and we have found reversals of evaluation occurring within one week on the same channel.

“New figures” may not only have news value as indicators, of course. They often also have value as the grounds of *dispute*, not just of their significance but of their reliability and provenance. The disputing of significance is sometimes carried out by journalists themselves but in recent years economic broadcasting has used experts from the banking and finance sector more extensively. This has provided a way of opening up the reporting of economic shifts to variable interpretation whilst obviating the need for reporters either to initiate a strong critical framing themselves or to pass the story over to the more predictable differences of party politics — although the political colouring of comment drawn extensively from City employees has not gone without comment (Gavin, 1992, p. 596-611). However, opposition political parties are available to provide regular and news-credible challenges to more fundamental questions of statistical probity.

We turn now to look at the responses of our respondents to the material, focussing in this paper on those interpretative issues which turn on questions of statistical comprehension and assessment.

The Managed Economy: Statistics and Politics

“A question you often ask yourself when you see these figures is where do they come from?” (Garage workers).

The news reports on an economic realm which is official in at least two important ways. News items are often grounded in the release of statistics from governmental or government-related institutions, although throughout our study-period news bulletins frequently indicated the contested character of these statistics. News items also routinely report the condition of the economy in terms either of the consequences of past political action or of likely future political action. Moreover, they reflect on economic competence as a feature of the broader parliamentary contest.

In our respondent groups we found that these features of the reported economy connect with different strands of scepticism. First of all, there is a scepticism about the truth of economic conditions reported so extensively through the use of government statements. This may impugn

the integrity of the broadcasters themselves as carriers of such statements, despite their attributions and the accessing of counter-claims. Related to this, but more specific, is a scepticism about the integrity of statistical information as an indicator of economic conditions. This may derive from a belief in the fiddling of economic statistics by governments or it may be a more general scepticism about statistical representation *per se*. Then there is a strand of scepticism about the degree of actual control over the economy which government can really exert. Again, this is different from, though often related to, specific criticisms of policy and policy statements. We have noted that the value of statistics can be doubted for a variety of reasons, including specific concern about the calculations upon which particular figures are based and a more general scepticism about the employment of detailed figures in public discourse. This latter position may regard incomprehensibility as a general failing as serious as unreliability. For instance:

“But do these figures mean anything for...like? I mean, they throw these fig... But there’s so many different figures at you and, like you said before, they’re putting in percentages and that. [...] These sort of figures that get thrown at you - different figures all the time - they don’t mean anything really”. (Sixth form students).

Or even more directly, with the implied idea that not just miscomprehension but deception is at stake:

“I think figures are things that blind people, more than anything”. (Hotel workers).

Around unemployment, scepticism often became more focussed on particular limitations of statistical indicators, drawing on alternative knowledge of this problem in Britain and the Government’s record over many years:

“It suggests that for months and months, and going on years, that all that... how much it’s rising... how much it’s been going down and they’ve been claiming it’s good that it’s been going down... they’ve been doctoring the figures so much that... people on training schemes don’t count and everybody else doesn’t count towards the figures and then they’re seasonally adjusted and after everything else...” (Sixth form students).

Or, similarly:

“Well, I’d like to know, the graphs that they’re quoting, they haven’t got 16 to 17-year-olds on... Right, because they can’t sign on the dole. They’ve got to go on YOP [Youth Opportunity Programme] schemes or whatever, whatever else. Now, how can they come up with an accurate picture of what the economy’s like if their own graphs are ridiculous?” (Garage workers).

Both of these examples display a political reading of the statistics as unduly managed in the Government’s favour in the light of specific exclusions, a dominant trend in our respondent groups. However, when we showed material critical of the Government’s record in the context of a slight rise in unemployment, a reading of bias against the government was forthcoming in one group. This item, in the context of a very small rise in national unemployment figures and a fall in retail sales, featured a report by Peter Jay, the BBC’s chief economic correspondent, on location in Bristol. Jay was shown standing at the docks in front of the classic early steamship S.S.

Great Britain, once a model of efficiency and power, later an abandoned hulk and now a tourist attraction. The metaphoric implications were given full weight, illegitimately so in the view of this speaker:

“Well they only gave one side as well, didn’t they? I mean, I think the unemployment’s been falling for the last...ooh, several months at least. It’s gone up by 200 and I think they’ve really overemphasised the fact the economy is perhaps worse than it is. By using the S.S. Great Britain and, you know, saying... I mean, I thought that was really over the top to use that. I mean, had it been going up and up and up for the last 12 months, I’d say, yes, fair enough. But they only put one side of the story. They didn’t speak to any government ministers or even speak to a firm who might have taken on three or four workers.” (Library Workers).

Other respondents were better able, if sometimes only partially, to relate to statistical information as both comprehensible and of use, but the apparent volatility of the economy itself — evident in some of the quotations already given — sometimes comes through as a reason for doubt about the validity of the indicators. Here, the reference is to the positive and negative implications carried by news items on successive days:

“Again, I can’t see how two things could come out like that 24 hours apart. It doesn’t gel to me.” (Rotary club members).

We can also note here how, compounding the problem of rapidly shifting indicators and statistical obscurity, there is for some respondents the problem of the starkly contradictory political interpretations which the news rhetoric employs on a routine basis:

“To be honest, I find it very difficult to decide how it is going because you’ve got one set of politicians saying we’re doing marvellously well and everything’s fine and on the other hand they’re saying no, it’s not, it’s the worst position we’ve been in for nine, ten years. So you really don’t know.” (Library Workers).

This general uncertainty is returned by one respondent to the question of the figures and their high level of dependence upon party political perspective:

“Are they a Labour figure or are they a Conservative figure, if you like? [...] I’m sure if the Conservatives had come up with a figure, Labour’d come up with another figure and totally contradict it.” (Garage workers).

The possibility that statistics are part of a news concern with *description* which displaces *explanation* is also raised. Thus, for example, the garage worker’s comments below refer to the value of the pound sterling against other currencies. The value of the pound is one of the indicators used in discussing the health of the economy, but it is not the focus of this report. So this respondent’s questions — “why is the pound at an all time low?” and “whose fault is it?” — could be seen as tangential to the point of the story, were it not for the fact that he perceives the omission of information to fit in with an underlying logic (whether of the Government or of the broadcasters is not altogether clear). “they always seem to be preparing you for tales of gloom and doom”:

“To be honest, I start asking myself questions, you know, about the pound and... why is the pound at an all-time low? And they’re showing you all these people with computer screens in front of them and I go: well is it their fault that fell then? Who’s fault is it? But they always seem to be preparing you for tales of gloom and doom all the time. Do you know what I mean? Oh well, inflation is at such-and-such a percent but the pound is at an all-time low and... You know, the pound is the basic thing that sets everything in perspective, isn’t it? And yet they never really go in to why the pound’s at an all-time low, and why it can’t compete in Europe, and why we’re well below Italy and Spain, you know, in the European group.” (Garage workers).

The Economy as Public Knowledge: Comprehension and « Gist »

On the question of their general ability to comprehend the news material, our respondents’ own assessments suggested varying degrees of success, with a marked variation between and within groups and in relation to different types of text. Few people, for example, expressed difficulty with the “typical families” extract referred to above. Of all of our groups, the Rotary club members expressed the least difficulty overall. This may perhaps be explained by the fact that they were experienced, professional people, having some interest in the subject matter, who were able, consequently, to bring more *prior knowledge* (Hoiijer, 1993) to bear than most.

Broadly speaking, responses to general questions of comprehensibility ranged from those which professed little difficulty with the material, except in relation to the more arcane terms or concepts touched upon, to those which, initially at least, claimed almost total incomprehension:

Q: “What kind of issues do you think this piece was trying to raise?”

A: “I haven’t got a clue.” (Sixth form students).

“I got very little information from that at all.” (Arts workers).

“No idea at all. Sorry.” (Garage workers).

“I just feel terrible because, like, that just washed over me, and I tried my hardest to concentrate then.” (Geography postgraduates).

These were among the most extreme comments, amounting almost to a rejection of comprehension (and in two cases, an apologetic one).

In general, however, our respondents did their best to engage with what they acknowledged at times was difficult material for them and claimed, if not total comprehension, then some at least:

Q: “Can anyone remember any of the details of the arguments in that?”

A: “Can’t say that I can, no, the *details* of it [our italics]. (Garage workers).

Q: “Did you find it clear apart from the graphs? [...]”

A: "I knew what it was talking about, yeah, but..." (Sixth form students).

"I can go along with the *gist* of it [our italics] but obviously I couldn't go along with the finer details of it." (Garage workers).

A variety of explanations were put forward for poor comprehension, including mode of address, specialised terminology, lack of contextualising information, over-reliance on comment perceived as speculative rather than fact-based, speed or lack of clarity in verbal delivery, mismatches between verbal and visual cues, and either too many or too few graphics.

Furthermore, even most of those who initially claimed almost total incomprehension were able, when questioned further, to recall some information from the screened material and to piece together a general sense of its meaning. So it would appear that in most cases our respondents, like the Garage worker quoted above, were able at least to pick up what might be termed *the gist* of the news reports even where the finer details remained elusive. These *gist readings*, if we may so term them, appeared to be available despite a failure to engage fully either with the terms in which the story or its significance were expressed, or with the propositional structure and coherence of a story, or despite difficulties of engagement arising from particular elements within a story.

However, the idea of *gist readings* must be treated with caution. It depends upon the explanations of our respondents and arises out of their own conception of and explanations for comprehension. It is in the nature of *gist* to render comprehension difficulties less problematic for respondents; to have got the gist is to have understood (or to feel that one has understood) a story *despite* difficulties in comprehending it. Hence there is a sense in which it may be used, consciously or unconsciously, in self-appeasement. The significance and attraction for our respondents of *gist* may arise in part from a desire to resolve the cognitive dissonance involved in partial comprehension, where the alternative is to admit a failure to comprehend. Respondents may be keen to impose some sort of closure on the screened material even where they do not feel this is satisfactorily provided by or can be adequately comprehended from such material. Hence, *gist readings* partially remove the need for confessions of failure or apologetic rejections of comprehension.

In a few cases, however, respondents' difficulties in comprehension did not resolve themselves in this way and instead an outright rejection of the terms in which economic news is presented was proposed instead, as in the following response to a sequence reporting figures for economic growth:

"I think sometimes as well when it's reported like that it puts a lot of people off. I'm not saying, like, a lot of people are stupid but a lot of people are put off watching the news because either they won't understand it or they lose interest because it's not in their language." (Hotel workers)

Our findings show that many of our respondents found considerable difficulty in making sense fully of the extracts which they were shown and the likelihood is that the circumstances in which they were asked to watch them (including the foreknowledge that they would be asked

questions about them) would encourage closer concentration than would be normal in a domestic environment. Nevertheless, most of our respondents were able to make a partial general sense (to get the *gist*) even of that material which they found most difficult. Where a *gist* reading is developed early, it is likely to determine (either through selective attention, selective meaning or both) subsequent understandings (Lewis, 1983, p. 179-197) — on the incremental character of interpretation. Although it carries us beyond the bounds of this specific study, we might note here that research on news and public knowledge may benefit from more attention being paid to the schemas and practices of *gist* and the moves, some of them documented earlier, by which viewers *figure out* what essentially is at issue in a news story. As an established way of coping with extensive, diverse or difficult information and of being content with quite high levels of communicative slippage, *gist* might indicate some problems and even dangers for emerging forms of mediated citizenship.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to identify some of the features of economic news which define it as a problematic, as well as a crucial, realm of public service television output. It has also looked at the dynamics of economic news interpretation and at the salient questions of comprehension which are raised here.

All the factors to emerge from our work have to be seen in the broader setting of the changing terms of public knowledge brought about by television, and now by information technology, and of the broader and long-standing debate about the knowledge requirements of democracy. What do citizens really need to know in order to be regarded as participants within a representative system? What range and depth of coverage of public events and public administration is the minimum necessary for political health? Here, it is useful to be wary of the radical idealism issuing from parts of the Academy, which can project wholly unrealistic expectations about sustained popular engagement with public issues. We have to remind ourselves how, within the routines of daily life, the reporting of economic affairs can, like much political reporting, seem so remote as not to be worth the effort of attention let alone engagement. This may be part of the play-off between democracy and increasing social complexity and will not easily be resolved.

Television has in many countries brought about a wholly beneficial extension of the number of people who are regularly informed about the main events in national and international spheres. Given its low literacy requirements, electronic availability and sheer reach, it has become the principal agency of *mediated citizenship*. Whatever the debates about dilution and superficiality, it has also seen some of the most successful efforts to improve the general accessibility of knowledge, whether of public affairs or of the more specialist areas of the sciences and humanities.

However, the terms of that mediation are changing in many countries, introducing a higher level of commodification and market logics into television, fragmenting national publics and at the same time carrying higher risks for any journalism which cannot quickly appeal to its target audience. The need for resources of public knowledge which are both serious and popular has always been a precondition of democratic development but it has never been stronger. This requires an approach which is aware enough of its audiences not to make the resigned semi-understandings of *gist* the standard option for many. It also requires a distancing from the populist condescension of the newer styles of fast and bright reporting which, in fact, increasingly constitute a kind of *pre-gisting*, compounding the problems of public communication we have noted, whilst perhaps appearing to avoid them or even solve them. As always, a serious popular journalism is much easier to describe than to practice. Nor is it solely either a cognitive or a journalistic matter since, as some of our quotations indicate, the kind of affective investment people are prepared to make in public affairs regulates the terms of their engagement with news. Media research is well beyond its terms of competence here, of course, but continuing inquiry into the interplay between television exposition and viewers' understandings will at least allow us to plot some of the tensions, gaps and, hopefully, fresh initiatives as mass-mediated public knowledge enters its second century.

NOTES

* The Group's members are John Corner, Neil T. Gavin, Peter Goddard and Kay Richardson. This article is a condensed version of a chapter from a forthcoming study of economic news reception, N. T. Gavin (ed) *The Economy, Media and Public Knowledge*, Leicester University Press.

1. Methodology: The two principal British weekday television news programmes, BBC's Nine O'Clock News and ITN's News At Ten, were video-taped throughout the research period as a base-line archive of television news coverage. For our principal audit periods (18th September-30th November 1995; 15th January-26th January 1996), from which all of the material used in our audience study phase was taken, we supplemented these news programmes with ITN's Channel Four News. For Budget Day itself (28th November) we collected live and news coverage from all BBC, ITN and Sky News bulletins.

From this material, three screening tapes, each containing three recent stories, were prepared and shown to focus groups; the first about six weeks before the November 1995 budget, the second immediately after the budget, the third at the end of January 1996. In selecting material for the first and third screening tapes, we sought stories which were drawn from more than one news organisation, embodied a variety of presentational forms and covered the reporting of a range of economic and associated political variables. For our second screening tape, material was drawn exclusively from Budget Day news coverage, differentiated by channel and presentational form.

We aimed to recruit groups to reflect as wide a range as possible of occupational, social and economic circumstances as well as offering a balance of age and gender. Although full sociological representativeness was not sought in the range of respondents consulted, we tried to guard against obtaining a misleading picture by being too narrowly selective. We recruited four *core* groups from which we gathered responses to each of our three

screening tapes within a week or two of their original transmission. These were groups of garage workers, Rotary club members from an affluent suburb, public library workers and sixth form students. To broaden our range of respondents and to control for the possibility of these groups becoming sensitised by repeated exposure to economic news, we interviewed further groups on a once-only basis, showing our second set of screenings also to groups of unskilled cleaners and geography postgraduates, and our third set to Church of England workers, hospital nursing staff, Liverpool and Everton football supporters, Townswomen's Guild members, hotel reception staff, arts sector workers, fire-fighters and first-year veterinary science undergraduates. Twenty-two group sessions were conducted in total. The average group size was four members. In all, fifty-eight group members were involved.

Following each screening, group members were asked a set of questions from a prepared inventory about their responses to the material and the issues it raised for them. Such a method ensured intra- and inter-group comparability, while allowing the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and probe more fully where appropriate. In addition, each group member completed a short questionnaire, giving background details including age, political orientation and media use and exposure.

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