

# THE WORLD IN FOCUS

HOW UK AUDIENCES CONNECT WITH THE WIDER WORLD  
AND THE INTERNATIONAL CONTENT OF NEWS IN 2009

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If you understand the people anywhere it will help break down barriers as a lot of prejudice comes from ignorance. For me it was the child factor that got me because I've got children and I was devastated. It made an impact. I'm really glad that I understood because later I donated towards the same item in the same way it's the same shot and that of consistency or lack of what isn't news, and that the whole news industry. We don't preach to the audience. I would love to do the problems in the Congo and all that kind of stuff but I have to realise that probably it's not all that important to a mum at that time of day getting her kids ready for school. They tend to concentrate on the squalor or the natural beauty. There is nothing in between is there? I think we all have an interest in understanding what happens in these countries but so often you get bogged down with the news and the doom and gloom that you forget there is another side to these places and it's these other sorts of programmes that can really show the other side to them. Whether it's the Sky newsroom or the ITN newsroom or the BBC newsroom, broadly speaking it's the same kind of people making the decisions about what is news. Sometimes you have to be brave and scream out loud and say this is so important that this deserves x amount of time. If somebody sort of slips on a banana skin in New York it's a story, if 200 people drown in Bangladesh it's not. Journalists still tend to see things in terms of domestic and foreign, and they cover the stories as if they're hermetically sealed from one another. It's as if one never affected the other. It's not that easy to watch stuff like that on the TV. It's difficult viewing.

# CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>2</b>
How can television engage audiences with the developing world?	
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>10</b>
A narrow agenda? A review of international news in the UK	



In collaboration with One World Media

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# FOREWORD

Despite the substantial growth in internet use, television remains the main source of information about the wider world for most people in the UK. But there is a growing concern that TV is not doing as much as it could to connect UK audiences with the rest of the world.

In our interconnected world, international events increasingly impact on the lives of UK citizens. The credit crunch, climate change, migration, infectious diseases and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are just some of the global issues that affect us all. The broadcast media has a vital role to play in informing and engaging audiences with these events and processes. But how effectively is it doing so?

This third report by the Reflecting the Real World research group examines this by asking both *how audiences make sense of international content* and *how the wider world is portrayed by broadcast and online news*.

Chapter 1 presents the results of a unique piece of audience research into how audiences respond to television content about developing countries. It finds that while television has a huge potential to inform, engage and inspire audiences, for a number of reasons it is simply not realising that potential.

Chapter 2 presents the results of a two week quantitative analysis of international news in the UK and finds that while there is much to celebrate about the quantity and quality of international news available to UK audiences, there are several areas for concern.

There is evidence in both chapters that although the world is becoming 'smaller',

broadcasting in the UK is contributing to a more insular world view. The international news agenda of the main news bulletins is relatively narrow. They have a strong tendency to cover the same topics, countries and stories and many bulletins are rejecting all but the biggest international news stories.

For almost all audiences the term 'developing world' prompts deeply ingrained responses dominated by images of malnourished children reinforced by news and 'charity TV.' As a result, most viewers regard all programming labelled as being about developing countries as 'worthy'. So, if audiences are to acquire an understanding of the more complex realities of life in developing countries and the role which development plays, there is a significant hurdle to overcome before they will choose to watch a programme labelled as being specifically about the developing world.

However, the research does highlight the fact that some programmes do succeed in breaking through these barriers and reaching mainstream audiences with international content. But more attention needs to be paid to how they are scheduled, marketed and promoted, and it's vital that broadcasters continue to explore the potential for all genres – including drama and factual entertainment – to make connections that enable audiences to relate to the wider world.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents the results of a unique piece of audience research which looks at how audiences respond to television content about developing countries. To investigate this complex issue, the market research company TWRResearch developed a methodology designed to give audiences the opportunity to reflect on their reactions for themselves.

Participants commented on how television coverage of developing countries was 'all picturesque safari or doom and gloom'. The dominance of news and 'charity appeal' TV reinforces a particular stereotype of developing countries dominated by disaster and extreme poverty in which little appears to change. This has led viewers to see all programming about developing countries as 'worthy' or 'difficult viewing'. By the end of the project, having been exposed to programming which didn't fit these stereotypes, participants expressed a strong desire to see more content about people's everyday lives in the wider world.

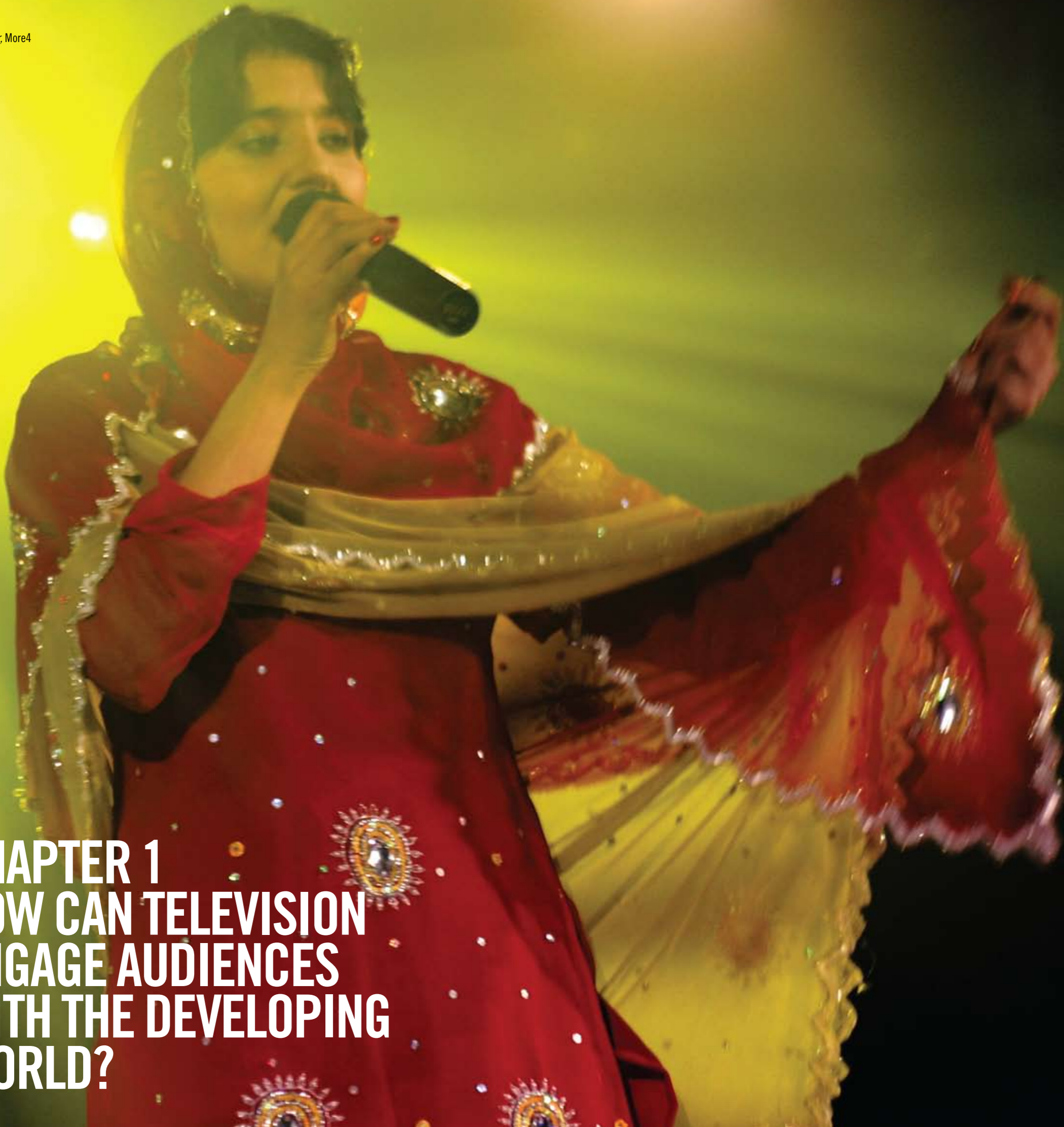
Presenter-led programmes like *Amazon with Bruce Parry* (BBC2) or *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan* (Sky1) were found to be both informative and popular. Reality formats set in developing countries, like *The World's Strictest Parents* (BBC3), were also able to provide an entertaining way of understanding everyday life in developing countries.

While traditional current affairs strands were highly valued, there was a tendency to respect them but avoid watching them. Some documentaries like *Rageh in Iran* (BBC4) did break through these barriers – it had wide appeal because it showed daily life in Iran and challenged the prevailing stereotypes.

Participants reflected on how feature films and literary fiction set in developing countries had the ability to change their perceptions and enhance understanding but television drama had failed to realise this potential.

This research found that, while television content about developing countries can engage and enthuse all audiences, this can only be achieved if a broad range of relevant connections to the lives of those in the audience is made in all genres of programming.

# CHAPTER 1 HOW CAN TELEVISION ENGAGE AUDIENCES WITH THE DEVELOPING WORLD?





## INTRODUCTION

Informing the public about the wider world is central to the remit of both the main UK public service broadcasters. One of the six purposes of the BBC is 'to bring the world to the UK' and one of the goals of Channel 4 is to 'challenge people to see the world differently'.

If broadcasters are to be effective in achieving these goals, it is important to develop a deeper understanding of how audiences respond to and engage with international content on television, across a range of genres. Which programmes inspire viewers? Which ones wash over them and fail to leave their mark?

Engagement with media content about developing countries is particularly important as recent research into public attitudes to development shows that audiences feel disconnected from, and uninformed about, poorer countries. Only 22% of the UK public say they are 'very concerned' about levels of poverty in poor countries (DFID, 2008a).

So, rather than focussing on the quantity or type of content available about developing countries, or even how many people watch such programmes, the aim of the research presented in this chapter is to explore the more complex question of *how people respond to content about the developing world*. In doing so this research seeks to address some other challenging questions:

- Can programming about the wider world be engaging, enjoyable and entertaining?
- Is it possible to demonstrate that there is a wider audience interest in 'the developing world' and therefore an opportunity for broadcasters to gain greater audiences by providing more coverage?
- Can marketing and promotion drive audiences to content that they then 'discover' and value?

In order to answer these questions, the market research company TWResearch was asked to develop a methodology which gave audiences the opportunity to reflect on these questions for themselves. Instead of a series of one-off focus groups, participants in Norwich, London and Glasgow worked with TWResearch over a 3 month period, starting with an initial meeting, then a blog and finally an extended focus group session. Television was found to have significant potential to inform, engage and inspire, but, the research found that, for a number of reasons, TV is simply not realising this potential. The most striking and recurring themes emerging from this unique piece of research are discussed below.

## THE FINDINGS

### What images do audiences have of developing countries?

A previous report by VSO, *Live Aid Legacy*, found that '80% of the UK public strongly associate the developing world with doom-laden images of famine, disaster and western aid' (2001, p3). The findings from participants in the TWResearch focus groups suggest that little has changed since then. The term 'developing world' prompted deeply ingrained responses from participants, responses which were overwhelmingly dominated by clichéd images of malnourished children, flies, disease, dying babies, primitive villages, mud huts, etc. One participant described the developing world as 'malnutrition and pot-bellied young children desperate for help with flies on their faces' (Norwich).

The nations of Africa were consistently the first countries to be associated with the developing world and these were mostly understood to be resolutely and immovably 'third world'. As with the VSO study, there was an overwhelming tendency for the participants to see themselves as the 'powerful, benevolent givers' with an apparent sense of superiority over the 'helpless victims' who lived in developing countries (2001). Whilst many of the participants were uncomfortable with their adherence to these popular perceptions, they saw little alternative to this viewpoint at the start of the project.

The results of this study reaffirmed the conclusions of previous studies that the media, and television news in particular, is the principal driver of these stereotypical images. As was found in the most recent DFID survey, *Public Attitudes to Development*, television is the main source of information about poverty in developing countries for 80% of people (2008a).

### The dominance of news and charity appeals

When discussing different types of coverage of developing countries it was initially a challenge to push participants to think beyond 'charity appeal' television and news and current affairs formats. For most audiences, 'the developing world' has been mentally ghettoized as a subject, only relevant to particular television genres. Many of the participants were unable to accept that programmes such as *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (BBC1) or *The World's Strictest Parents* (BBC3) could be considered to be 'about' developing countries or that you could learn anything about the developing world from them. As one participant commented, '*No. 1 Ladies* seemed like *The Archers*, unreal. But I don't know how real it is because I've only been exposed to that [negative] stuff. After so many years, this is what I believe Africa is' (Glasgow).

The nature of news and 'charity appeal' TV means that, for the most part, coverage of developing countries is issue focused and based on one-off events, such as disasters. The results of this study indicate that if this high impact, ephemeral portrayal is the

*The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, BBC1



dominant form of coverage of the developing world, then such coverage only serves to reinforce the view of developing countries as places that are dominated by extremes in which little appears to change. 'I think they give the impression that there's always a drought or a famine, there's always death and disease' (Norwich).

The more developing countries are covered in terms of issues, rather than stories about the people who inhabit them, the more audiences are inclined to associate these countries, and coverage of them, with a sense of moral and emotional pressure. This popular perception is so deeply ingrained that it also prevents viewers from engaging with even positive or off-agenda content available within news reports or 'charity appeal' TV. As one participant said, 'I just hear what I want to hear' (Glasgow). Another said 'there are all these terrible things happening to people in the world but it washes over you' (Norwich).

A further consequence is that viewers carry these stereotypes with them when they have the opportunity to watch other programmes about developing countries. 'Personally I try and avoid those sorts of programme. They're really irritating, it's like 'oh come on, more kids with flies'' (Norwich).

The dominance of news and charity appeal TV has encouraged audiences to associate all programming about developing countries as 'worthy' or 'tough TV'. 'It's not that easy to watch stuff like that on the TV. It's difficult viewing' (Glasgow).

### 'All picturesque safaris or doom and gloom'

By the end of the project, most of the participants were able to offer a critical reflection on what they had watched, and one of their most common conclusions was that television coverage of developing countries was 'all picturesque safaris or doom and gloom' (London), 'they tend to concentrate on the squalor or the natural beauty. There is nothing in between is there?' (London)

Participants in all focus groups expressed a strong desire to see more coverage of stories which lay in between 'squalor and safari', stories which they described as 'real life', 'normal' and 'everyday lives'. 'I think we all have an interest in understanding what happens in these countries but so often you get bogged down with the news and the doom and gloom that you forget there is another side to these places and it's these other sorts of programmes

that can really show the other side to them, whether through a light-hearted drama or documentary, but something that we can relate to that isn't necessarily all about the war-torn' (Norwich).

Content which did present issues in terms of people's lives was found to foster a more empathetic relationship with those living in developing countries and provided a challenge to negative stereotypes. 'Reading and watching for this project has made me start to think about people as people with the same kinds of feelings as I have. I have a stereotyped idea of Muslims that I know is wrong... I realised there is a real complexity to Muslims. They are all so very different' (Glasgow).

### Reality TV or 'real' TV?

For some participants, reality TV formats set in developing countries offered an entertaining way of understanding 'everyday life', and also of making connections with their own lives. Recognisable and familiar formats provided 'comfortable' viewing for a mass audience not looking for 'worthy' or issue based content. 'For me, something verging on reality TV is what I enjoy. I am not saying that I like *Big Brother*, however I prefer TV I feel I can relate to. Programmes which show the differences in how people live, for example, *The World's Strictest Parents*' (Glasgow).

The same participants found other entertainment formats could use a developing world setting to 'take them to places' which they might not otherwise go to. As one participant commented: '*Top Gear* is a programme about cars but they went up and down Vietnam. That way I'm getting the main programme but I'm getting the bit on the side as well. If they were coming at you with the information it would probably over power you and you'd turn off' (London). There was evidence to suggest that some audiences of factual entertainment shows did pick up impressions of what life was like in developing countries which could, over time, challenge stereotypes.

However, for audiences looking for more demanding content, these programmes could be too formulaic. These participants expressed a preference for 'real experiences' rather than reality TV. As one commented, 'there are hundreds of reality TV programmes but not half as many 'real' reality programmes about people living in poorer countries' (Norwich).





### How can documentaries break through?

Traditional current affairs strands were highly valued by participants and often drew positive comments. 'We shy away from the reality type programmes and prefer a good documentary like *Panorama* and *Dispatches*. We want it to be real people in real situations rather than contrived people or extreme situations' (Norwich).

One of the documentaries commented on was *Red Oil* (More 4) which had a distinctive style. 'It was quite different in its approach, making it easier watching but you are still getting some information at the end' (Glasgow).

However, there was evidence of a tendency for most participants to respect but avoid such programming. This was especially true of less engaged audiences. 'I work long hours and sometimes just want to get home and zombie out whereas some of the documentaries required too much concentration' (London).

Another said 'sure I want to learn and have an understanding of the world but I'm not sitting there to be educated or learning to pass an exam so I've got to be entertained as well' (Glasgow).

One programme that repeatedly managed to break through these barriers and was popular with the focus groups was *Rageh Inside Iran* (BBC4). The initial appeal of the programme was the way it presented itself as going beyond the dominant

imagery of Iran evident in much of the news media. It was the small details about the way people lived which maintained audience interest and which then led them on a journey, discovering deeper issues along the way. 'It was nice to see how they actually go about their daily life, just the normality, the ladies with sunglasses, just really normal' (London).

Participants also liked Rageh Omaar as a presenter. They felt that, as a Muslim and former BBC war correspondent, he could be trusted. However, many confessed that they had only watched this programme because the research process had prompted them to do so. The title or the electronic programme guide (EPG) would have put them off as they would have assumed it was 'worthy' programming. The way programmes are marketed, or promoted, can make a crucial difference to who watches.

### The continuing appeal of travel

It was clear from the focus groups that there is no magic formula, no single type of programme which appeals to everyone. But one of the challenges for broadcasters is to find formats which do have a mass appeal, and can both entertain and inform. In this study a small number of formats emerged which offered high levels of engagement and subject matter beyond 'squalor or safari'.



The most popular of these were travel documentaries like *Tribe* (BBC2), *Long Way Down* (BBC2) and *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan* (Sky1). They offered a different view of countries and often produced greater empathy and deeper cultural understanding. 'It's better when you see a presenter actually go in and live within the surroundings even if it is just for a few weeks, rather than a documentary where they are just showing you the facts. It's difficult to get emotion until you see someone live with a family' (Glasgow).

Presenters in these programmes were described as the audience representative who would establish a rapport with the people they encountered. Some, by simply accessing 'normal life': 'the person who has cracked normality in all these is Michael Palin by travelling third class and meeting the people' (London). Others, by being in more extreme situations: '*Amazon with Bruce Parry*. Absolutely love it. He is prepared to get stuck in. He is prepared to live in that tribe and you get to meet the people and see the way they live, you see their daily routines, and he gets stuck in with them. It is something I would love to do' (London).

### Drama: television's missed opportunity?

Participants reflected on how feature films and literary fiction set in developing countries did have the ability to change their perceptions and enhance understanding. The same examples came up repeatedly including *Blood Diamond*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Last King of Scotland*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. For many, these left a lasting impression, sometimes even years after they had seen the film or read the book. 'I read the book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* which really made me engage with Afghanistan. After that, every time I heard about Afghanistan on the TV, I listened and looked. I suddenly started to think about these people as people. Before it was way over my head and I wasn't really interested' (Glasgow).

By contrast, television dramas have failed to achieve the same kind of impact. Current dramas set in developing countries, such as *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (BBC1) and *Wild at Heart* (ITV1), seldom emerged as a credible source of insight into developing countries. These were interpreted as 'soft' feel-good Sunday dramas where the 'exotic' location might add colour to the story but not in such a way as to challenge stereotypes. One typical comment on *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* was 'it's not heavy going and I don't get the impression it is something that is going to make me think too much' (Norwich).

While TV drama, as a genre, was remarkably popular amongst participants, they also concluded that there has been a distinct lack of ambition when searching out ideas for dramas set in developing countries.

Another reason why television drama has failed to match the impact of feature films is that feature films benefit from substantial marketing budgets and word of mouth. These films are also marketed on the basis of telling a good story, rather than labelled as developing world coverage. As one participant noted '*The Kite Runner* was based in Afghanistan and it really made me think about what the country went through with regards to the Soviet invasion and then the Taliban coming about. It just made me think more and I would never normally watch that kind of film. I heard it was a great film and a great book so that made me watch it' (Glasgow).

Some participants pointed out that the way audiences watch TV is often very different from the cinema experience. 'Because a film is longer and you get more into it, you enjoy it more, it shows you a lot more. TV programmes are too short, and you plan to see films, with programmes you just normally flick through the channels' (Norwich). This is clearly a challenge for TV drama executives and again raises the issue of marketing and promotion.

### Territories of interest

One of the recurring themes of this research has been the myriad of connections that audiences have to developing countries and the tendency for television to underestimate this. The UK has an increasingly ethnically diverse demographic, people also travel for work, leisure and gap periods, consume music, food, clothes and media from around the world and have interests and hobbies which connect them to a range of different places. This increasingly wide range of 'territories of interest' plays a key role in engaging audiences in programming about developing countries and this was evident in the comments of almost all of those who participated in the focus groups, whether in Glasgow, Norwich or London.

*'I'd probably watch that because I used to work in the Dominican Republic.'* (Glasgow).

*'For me it was the child factor that got me because I've got children and I was devastated. It made an impact. I'm really glad that I understood because later I donated towards the Gaza appeal'* (London).







'I watched the Doctors and Nurses one because a couple of my friends are Marines' (London).

'For me it was flipping through Metro one day and there was a big anti-cocaine article showing the knock on affects for Colombia of buying a bag here' (Glasgow).

'Programmes like Blood, Sweat, and T-shirts, the documentary where they went into the sweatshops in India. So you have the impact of the developing world affecting India and what is being made, and tracking back to our high streets and the millions being made in designer clothes or even at Primark and Matalan. Those sorts of TV shows that track the link back' (Norwich).

Audiences have multiple, personal connections with different parts of the world and they want to see this blurring of the international and domestic reflected in their television content.

This finding has implications for how audience behaviour is understood. Previous studies of the relationship between audiences, the media and the developing world have attempted to create audience categories such as 'actively engaged' and 'passively disengaged' (Darnton, 2007) or 'active enthusiasts' and 'disapproving rejecters' (DFID, 2008b). But the results of this study show that the reality of audience engagement is more complex. What determines a person's viewing choice is not simply their level of engagement with developing countries, rather it is a function of dynamic and unpredictable factors such as what formats they enjoy, where they've been on holiday, what time of day they watch TV, who controls the television remote, etc.

One thing seems very clear: developing country programming is not a particular genre of television programming. All genres, including drama and entertainment, should be seen as having the capacity to reflect the reality of the wider world and the interconnected lives we all lead. If government, broadcasters, producers or NGOs want audiences to have greater engagement with people who

live in the developing world then instead of attempting to tailor programming for specific audiences, the focus should instead be on encouraging broadcasters and producers to ensure that all programming offers as many potential connections as possible.

### Scheduling, promotion and trailing

One of the most striking findings revealed by this study is how unaware viewers are of the range of international television content that is already available. 'The thing you are going to look at is the main channels, not BBC3 and BBC4. The thing this project did for me was make me more aware of these types of channels. There were channels I didn't know I had when I was finding stuff for the project' (Glasgow).

Although audiences have the capacity to be less parochial in their viewing, finding international content is tough in a multi channel context where habit draws most audiences towards familiar formats and channels. This difficulty in finding new content is compounded by the migration of international programming away from terrestrial and onto digital channels (Screening the World, 2008). Output on digital channels is more likely to be watched by audiences who intentionally search for programming that already interests them.

Most participants felt that promotion can play a crucial role in guiding audiences towards content. 'It definitely can. A lot of the BBC documentaries aren't advertised enough. A lot of the clips you showed were BBC4 and BBC3 and they are really interesting stuff but you just wouldn't know they were on unless you buy a Radio Times, and no one buys the Radio Times in Scotland' (Glasgow).

But there are also lessons in the research for how such programmes can be marketed in order to reach the widest possible audience. Programming perceived to be 'about' developing countries was a turn off for much of the audience because it was felt to be 'worthy' and 'difficult viewing'. Content which referred to developing countries was much more appealing if the potential connections to audiences were highlighted, rather than aspects which appealed to stereotyped ideas of what 'the developing world' is.



Hence, the trail for *Rageh in Iran* (BBC4) was relatively successful because it highlighted the ordinary aspects of day to day life in Iran, with women wearing designer sunglasses and having cosmetic surgery, rather than focusing on the geo-politics of the country.

### CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that quality programming about developing countries has the potential to inspire, entertain and inform. Such programming can challenge stereotypes and misconceptions, and provide a window on a range of cultures, people, issues and landscapes. Three specific impacts of programming about the developing world were identified in this project.

Firstly, the continued dominance of news and 'charity appeal' TV means that the most frequent response to content about developing countries is a sense of despair and frustration at 'how people live that way', 'how have we allowed this?', 'why can't their government do more?'. A dominance of this type of programming also reinforces deeply ingrained, negative stereotypes for most audiences, and creates a barrier for engagement with other forms of international content.

Secondly, content about developing countries has a significant capacity to engage audiences either by providing new knowledge about places and cultures which they previously knew little about or by challenging stereotypes. 'If you understand the people anywhere it will help break down barriers as a lot of prejudice comes from ignorance' (Glasgow).

Thirdly, a range of forms of content about the developing world prompted participants to make comparisons and connections with their own lives and to promote a real sense of empathy. This was true, for example, of *The World's Strictest Parents* (BBC3). 'They are just grateful for an education. It's bizarre because you have to push our kids to go to school but all they want over there is an education. That's what I found quite difficult' (London).

This research demonstrates that, while television content about developing countries has the potential to engage all audiences, this can only be achieved if a broad range of relevant connections to the lives of those in the audience is made in all genres of programming.

A key challenge for broadcasters is how to remove the artificial boundaries that have arisen between domestic and international programming. These boundaries prevent television from reflecting the fact that the day to day lives of UK audiences have a range of international connections.

There are lessons from the film industry which has found that films set in developing countries – like *Slumdog Millionaire* – can be hugely popular with UK audiences. Broadcasters could follow this example – and this research suggests audiences would welcome more mainstream drama and entertainment featuring developing countries.

Audiences also say they are tired of the negative images that dominate TV coverage of the developing world. There is an imperative and an opportunity for producers to approach stories set in these countries in a more innovative and creative way – and for broadcasters to support and encourage this.

Promoting content as being about the developing world, as if it were a genre in itself, is a significant cause of audiences turning away. But this research shows that, with the right marketing, promotion and scheduling, there is a wide potential audience for authentic and innovative programmes, based on how real people live their lives in developing countries.

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research project was undertaken by TWRResearch between December 2008 and March 2009. It was designed to identify participants' existing opinions about television, developing countries and the relationship between the two, but also to encourage participants to review media output of developing countries and to reflect on their own attitudes and behavior in this context.

There were three stages to the project, during which an initial sample of 108 participants was filtered down to 48, three months later. Meetings took place in three locations: Glasgow, Norwich and London.

1. Initial 'hot house' discussion sessions with focus groups of four participants, designed to gain a baseline understanding of existing opinions and media habits. It also enabled participants to be briefed about the research process and aided in the selection for the next phase of the project.
2. Two month online blog / diary in which participants were asked to monitor all the media and non-media sources they encountered on a daily basis that had some connection to the developing world (whether or not they chose to watch them). In the second month participants were prompted to view certain programmes.
3. Workshop phase of six two hour sessions reflecting on the participants' experiences of the diary phase. These workshops were designed to give participants the opportunity to reflect on the research process and the wider themes of the project.

The qualitative sample was a demographically representative spread of UK residents. The age range was 18-65 years with age bands clustered in lifestage groups. The sample ensured a range of ethnicities, length of residence in UK, TV viewing habits and connections with developing countries.



## CHAPTER 2 A NARROW AGENDA? A REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS IN THE UK

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents the results of a quantitative study of the international content of television, radio and online news in the UK and a commentary on the findings based on interviews with news executives from all the broadcasters covered. Four key findings can be identified:

Firstly, the main UK news bulletins have a strong tendency to cover the same, relatively narrow, international agenda in terms of topics, countries and original stories. They also adopt a similar treatment and use of pictures to report the biggest international stories. In the two weeks of this study, 53% of all international coverage on the main UK news bulletins concerned just three countries (USA, Australia and Israel).

Secondly, despite the dominance of stories about the UK recession during the two weeks of this study, broadcasters largely maintained their levels of international coverage (at an average of 32%). BBC1's *Ten O'clock News* had the highest percentage of international news (48%), international lead stories (38%) and coverage of developing countries (47%).

Thirdly, the USA dominates the international agenda of news broadcasters. In this sample period, it received 34% of all international coverage. By contrast, developments in Iraq, Sri Lanka, Latin America and the Caribbean received relatively little coverage as did a number of 'good news' stories about parts of the world which are usually only reported during a crisis (Somalia, Darfur and southern Sudan).

Finally, news coverage of developing countries has increased and is no longer dominated by 'coups and earthquakes'. However, news stories about these countries are still treated differently as they are more likely to include the voices of those outside the country and significantly more likely to be covered as one-off features, compared to developed countries which are given more continuous coverage.





Australian bush fires, ITV 6.30pm News, 9.2.09



Morgan Tsvangirai sworn in as Zimbabwe Prime Minister, ITV 10pm News, 11.2.09



Israeli elections, BBC Six O' clock News, 10.2.09

## INTERVIEWEES

1. Adrian Wells, Foreign Editor, Sky News
2. Alistair Burnett, Editor, *The World Tonight*
3. Charlie Beckett, Director, POLIS and former Programme Editor, *Channel 4 News*
4. Chris Shaw, Head of News and Current Affairs, Five
5. Jon Williams, World Editor, BBC News
6. Martin Fewell, Deputy Editor, *Channel 4 News*
7. Martin Frizell, Editor, GMTV
8. Mohamed Ali, CEO, Islam Channel
9. Paddy Coulter, Director, Oxford Global Media
10. Sam Barratt, Head of Media, Oxfam
11. Suzanne Bush, Programme Editor, Al-Jazeera English
12. Tim Singleton, Acting Head of Newsgathering, ITV News

## INTRODUCTION

Now more than ever before, events happening outside the UK have direct consequences for the lives of UK citizens. The credit crunch, climate change, migration and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are just some of the global issues with local impacts and these issues cannot be fully understood without sufficient, accurate reporting of events and processes taking place internationally.

News continues to be the most important source of information about the wider world for most UK citizens and recent research has revealed the value audiences place on the international dimension of news bulletins. An Ofcom report, *New News, Future News* (2007), found that the most common reason people watch the news is 'to find out what is going on in the world' (70%) and a comparison with the results of similar studies shows that the importance placed

on this aspect of news is increasing. Furthermore, 40% of news audiences say they consume the news because they are specifically interested in worldwide politics and current events and 25% said they would like to see more news about these topics (Ofcom, 2007a: p56). Recent YouGov research for Channel 4 showed that 91% of those surveyed rate international news on television as either 'important' or 'very important' (Phil Harding, 2008).

While audiences place great value on international news coverage, examining the nature of international news available to audiences is not as simple as it once was. A new news ecology is emerging in which increasingly fragmented audiences can and do access their news from multiple online and offline sources which they consume at times and places of their own choosing. The results of Ofcom's second PSB review showed that 49% of people use news on terrestrial television channels as their main media source for finding out about the world (2008: p30). Other main sources include: news on digital television channels (19%), newspapers (11%), the internet (6%) and radio (6%).

In order to examine the nature of international news available to audiences, this study investigates the diversity of countries and topics covered by a range of UK news bulletins and their different approaches to international news over a two week period February 9-22, 2009 (see Figure 1). Rather than focussing solely on the evening terrestrial television bulletins, as previous studies have done, this study also includes breakfast bulletins, religious and ethnic minority television news bulletins, news bulletins for children, radio bulletins and online sources. The purpose of this two week study is not to produce definitive findings about the volume and nature of international news, rather, it is to act as a stimulus for debate

### International news

<b>February 9</b> Australian Bush Fires	<b>February 10</b> Israeli general election	<b>February 11</b> Swearing in of new cabinet in Zimbabwe	<b>February 12</b> US congress approval of economic stimulus package	<b>February 19</b> NATO summit about Afghanistan
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### Domestic news

<b>February 10</b> Questioning of former bank bosses by the Treasury Select Committee	<b>February 13</b> Thirteen year old boy allegedly becomes a dad	<b>February 14</b> Jade Goody given months to live	<b>February 15</b> Row over HBOS and Lloyds bonuses and expected losses	<b>February 18</b> Helicopter crash off coast of Scotland
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Figure 1: Timeline of major international and domestic stories during the sample period (February 9 -22, 2009)

about the variety and general characteristics of international news in the UK today and how decisions are made regarding international coverage. To this end, the comments of a range of news editors and commentators are also included in this report to qualify, account for and elaborate on the findings of the quantitative study.

## A NARROW INTERNATIONAL NEWS AGENDA?

One of the conclusions reached in the Ofcom report, *New News, Future News* was that 'there are far more similarities than differences in agendas on mainstream television news... Programmes on different channels often vary more in style than in substance... [and] all the broadcasters offer a similar range of news stories delivered through a similar variety of methods' (2007a: p4). The quantitative findings of this study suggest that this is also true for international news in terms of the topics, countries and original stories covered. The results in Figure 2 show that while 61 different countries were covered over the two week period, over

half (53%) of all international coverage on the main UK bulletins featured just three countries (USA, Australia and Israel). The results in Figure 3 show that 75% of international news on these bulletins covered just five topics (politics, economics, violence, disasters, law and order). Among the topics receiving almost no coverage were: environment (2%), science (2%), serious human interest (0.4%), health (0.2%), education (0.2%), international development (0.1%), religion (0.1%) and weather (0.1%). Figure 5 shows that, of the main UK bulletins, only Sky News (10pm newshour) had more than five unique international stories (ones not covered by any other bulletin) during the fortnight.

Adrian Wells, Foreign Editor of Sky News, accepts that there are similarities in the treatment of international stories: 'you not only see the same item in the same place in the running order, sometimes it's the same shot, back to back and that tells you there's an incredible amount of consistency or lack of imagination, about what is news and what isn't news, and that there's quite a powerful homogeneity

Asia	Africa	Middle East	Europe	North America	Latin America and Caribbean	Oceania
Afghanistan (38)	Zimbabwe (33)	Israel (56)	Holland (17)	USA (260)	Venezuela (19)	Australia (93)
Pakistan (19)	Egypt (9)	Palestinian Territories (4)	Russia (17)	Canada (5)	Ecuador (6)	New Zealand (1)
China (17)	South Africa (9)	Lebanon (3)	France (15)		Argentina (5)	
Iraq (17)	DRC (3)	UAE (1)	Italy (10)		Mexico (5)	
Iran (14)	Nigeria (3)		Germany (6)		Brazil (2)	
Japan (13)	Sudan (3)		Ireland (6)		Chile (1)	
Cambodia (10)	Somalia (2)		Spain (4)		Colombia (1)	
India (6)	Kenya (2)		Switzerland (3)		Cuba (1)	
Maldives (4)	Liberia (1)		Slovakia (3)		Guadeloupe (1)	
Sri Lanka (4)	Sierra Leone (1)		Kosovo (3)		Guatemala (1)	
Georgia (2)			Austria (2)			
Kyrgyzstan (2)			Bosnia (1)			
Thailand (2)			Croatia (1)			
Indonesia (1)			Greece (1)			
North Korea (1)			Lithuania (1)			
Philippines (1)			Romania (1)			
Vietnam (1)						
<b>17 countries</b>	<b>10 countries</b>	<b>4 countries</b>	<b>16 countries</b>	<b>2 countries</b>	<b>10 countries</b>	<b>2 countries</b>
<b>152 items</b>	<b>66 items</b>	<b>64 items</b>	<b>92 items</b>	<b>265 items</b>	<b>42 items</b>	<b>94 items</b>

Figure 2: Countries covered by news bulletins during the sample period (excluding AJE and ethnic minority bulletins) Numbers in brackets denote the total number of news items each country received



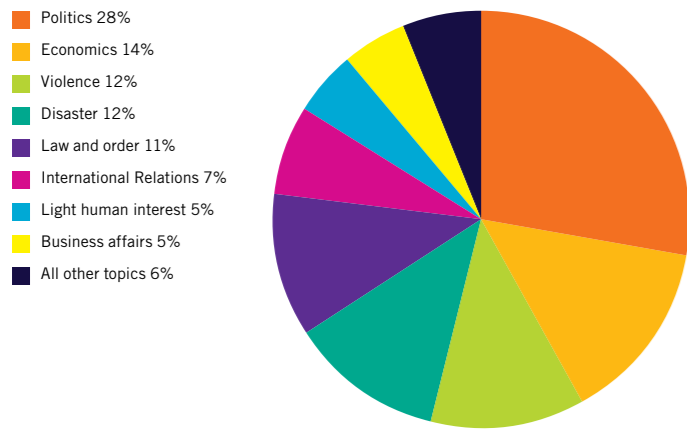


Figure 3: Topics covered by international news, as a percentage of time allocated

in the whole news industry'. This homogeneity was particularly evident in the coverage of the Australian bush fires. As Chris Shaw, Head of News and Current Affairs at Five, says, 'I don't find it surprising that we, in common with every other channel, became a bit obsessive about the Australian bush fires.... we have very similar Anglo-Saxon approaches to news coverage, there were dramatic pictures and in that sense we all gravitate towards the same kind of stories and I think there's always a danger in television news that the main providers and broadcasters gravitate towards a similar agenda'.

What was striking about the coverage of the Australian bush fires was the use of the same agency pictures and vox pops (apart from Sky News which used footage from its partners in Australia). As was argued in *New News, Future News*, 'the growth of a few dominant international video news agencies, supplying content to outlets all over the world, is a further illustration of this tendency towards ubiquity' (2007a: p3). Martin Fewell, Deputy Editor of *Channel 4 News*, explains that, 'agencies often gather the best pictures of stories so inevitably one wants to use the best pictures so of course that can produce similar pieces on similar channels'.

Most of the editors accept that the main UK news bulletins do, to some extent, follow a relatively 'narrow' international agenda but they offer a number of explanations for this. Time constraints were identified as a key factor. As Jon Williams, World Editor, BBC News, argues, 'when you only have 25 minutes to put a programme together, inevitably, they are going to cover the main stories, and at any one time, the likelihood is that there will be trends'.

While Adrian Wells acknowledges the problem of having 'a finite amount of time' he also suggests another reason. 'Whether it's the Sky newsroom or the ITN newsroom or the BBC newsroom, broadly

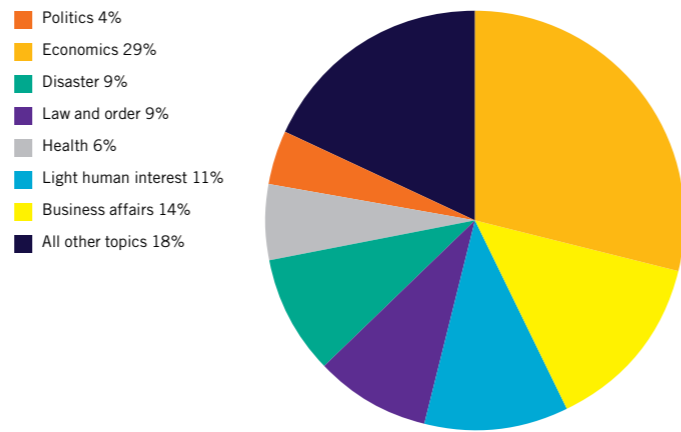


Figure 4: Topics covered by domestic news, as a percentage of time allocated

speaking it's the same kind of people making the decisions about what is news. You could make a number of observations about cultural background, the education background, the race and ethnicity background and representation in those organisations and the fact, frankly, that whether you're speaking to me or to someone at the BBC or ITN, we've probably all worked for each of those organisations... As white men in our 40s, which most of us are... you come up against that cultural barrier or those inherited news values that people have had for 10 or 15 years and its quite difficult sometimes to challenge them'. Paddy Coulter of Oxford Global Media takes this point further by arguing that 'it's an extraordinary metropolitan attitude that a lot of the top executives have and it's actually quite a narrow one'.

Charlie Beckett, from POLIS, the LSE-based think tank, believes 'this tendency among mainstream broadcast news to gather around the same set of stories and tell them in similar ways... is partly driven by a competitive editorial newsroom culture where people are frightened if seen to be missing a picture or a particular story. But there is a danger that you end up doing the same stories again and again without looking for other, more diverse stories which, in themselves, on a particular day, may not be the most important story in the world but overall, in terms of your overall coverage of the world, need to be part of the broadcast diet'.

Another reason given by some editors for this relatively narrow agenda is the perception of audience interest. 'We give the audience what they like, we don't preach to the audience... I would love to do the problems in the Congo and all that kind of stuff but I have to realise that probably it's not all that important to a mum at that time of day getting her kids ready for school... I think by and large, for the



Australian bush fires, Sky News, 10.2.09



Sri Lanka suicide bomb, BBC4 World News Today, 9.2.09

majority of our audience, it probably has less of a resonance than what is outside their front door' (Martin Frizell, Editor, GMTV). Charlie Beckett takes issue with this: 'I don't think international news has to be about preaching. You can tell the story of the Congo, for example, by the story of West Ham's left back, who is from the Congo and who had to leave as a child and is now playing Premiership football partly because of the conflict in his own country... That is not a preaching story, that's a fantastic human interest story'.

The broadcasters say one way they attempt to tackle this problem is by making a wider range of content available elsewhere, either online or on other bulletins. But Sam Barratt, Head of Media at Oxfam, finds this a worrying trend: 'with television it's in the hands of those people controlling the 25 minutes that make that 'stumble upon' choice for you and I think the danger is that things that they feel do not have either dramatic newness or agenda setting qualities will get shuffled off to More 4 or the BBC news channel'.

All of the editors are keen to point out that they regularly cover off-agenda international items and find ways of making these relevant to audiences. Tim Singleton, acting head of newsgathering at ITV News, says 'sometimes you have to be brave and scream out loud and say this is so important that this deserves x amount of time, that for example, would illustrate our commitment to recent pieces in the Ukraine, a piece in Siberia, a piece in Japan on the economy.' There is a feeling that when they do break out of this relatively narrow international agenda, these stories are well received by audiences. 'Whenever we do things our interaction

Bulletin	No. of countries covered	No. of unique international stories
Al-Jazeera English (8pm)	47	30
CCTV News (3.30pm)	40	24
BBC4 World News Today	30	10
The World Tonight	28	9
Today (8am bulletin)	23	5
Channel 4 News	23	5
Islam Channel News	22	22
Sky News (10pm)	22	8
BBC Ten O'clock News	22	3
ITV 10pm News	18	0
More4 News	17	3
BBC Six O'clock News	17	0

Figure 5: Number of countries and unique international stories covered by each bulletin

is very high, we get a quarter of a million people signing up to campaigns and the things we do' (Martin Frizell, GMTV).

Since it would seem that audiences do respond to items outside of the narrow international agenda, this raises wider questions about how and why news editors choose what is relevant and why they don't run more off-agenda items. Sam Barratt believes there's now a reduced appetite for off-agenda foreign stories: 'There's a really powerful, toxic problem of massive cutbacks in budgets and at the same time bulletins being dominated by the economic crisis... the bar has changed for stories, the demand for original content is far higher than it's ever been'.

One of the most significant events which took place during the sample period but which fell outside this narrow agenda and received very little coverage, was the conflict in Sri Lanka. Figure 7 shows that during the two week period the number of civilian deaths passed 2,000 and two Tamil Tiger planes attacked Colombo. Amateur video footage of these events was amongst the most viewed 'news and politics' videos on YouTube in the UK during this period.

Most editors agree with Martin Fewell that 'Sri Lanka is under-reported, there's no question about that'. The most common reason given for this relative lack of coverage is the restrictions on access imposed by the Sri Lankan government. As Martin Fewell notes, while access to the recent conflict in Gaza was difficult, *Channel 4 News* and other broadcasters were able to employ local stringers and production agencies, whereas 'it would be very difficult to achieve that in Sri Lanka, given the nature of the conflict there'.

Bulletin	No. of countries covered	No. of unique international stories
ITV 6.30pm News	14	2
Five News (5pm)	13	4
NTA International (BEN 8pm)	12	14
Newsnight	11	5
Newsround	9	5
5 Live Breakfast (8am bulletin)	8	1
NDTV 9 O'clock News	7	1
BBC3 60 seconds	7	0
BBC1 90 seconds	6	1
Newsbeat (12.45pm bulletin)	5	3
GMTV (8am bulletin)	4	3
Magic FM (8am bulletin)	4	0





Banking bosses face questions from Select Committee, *ITV 10pm News*, 10.2.09



HBOS shares drop by 30%, *Newsnight*, 13.2.09



Chavez wins vote to scrap term limits in Venezuela, *Al-Jazeera English*, 15.2.09

### INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

Chris Shaw believes that 'in times when people's own economic circumstances are unclear or scary or frightening or worrisome... people maybe want to focus on things closer to home... and that probably does feed through to newsrooms'. At first glance, the suggestion that the quantity of international news has declined because of coverage of the recession in the UK appears to be supported by the results of this study. A comparison with previous studies shows that, for those bulletins for which data is available, the quantity of international news has declined by an average of 2% in recent years (see Figure 6). As Charlie Beckett says 'if your ship is going down, you don't spend that much time scanning the horizon to see if other ships are going down'.

However, most of the editors reject the suggestion that coverage of the effects of the global financial crisis in the UK has squeezed international news out of their bulletins. Martin Fewell argues that since the sample covered an 'exceptionally busy period in the context of that exceptional story' (the recession), it is remarkable that Figure 6 shows such a small decline in international news.

What has been squeezed out is other domestic coverage. In 2002, domestic news about politics took up an average of 12% of total news (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002: p94), compared to just 2% during the two week period of this study.

Suzanne Bush, programme editor at Al-Jazeera English (AJE), says that rather than pushing international coverage out, the financial crisis has 'opened up a whole new subject area'. Adrian Wells agrees, suggesting that it has 'stimulated demand for international business stories, which we've done much more of than perhaps we would have done'.

However, the results of this study do not reflect this apparent change in the nature of coverage and instead suggest that, in the period of this study at least, there was a lack of coverage of the global consequences of the financial crisis. While 43% of all domestic news concerned economics or business affairs, just 19% of all international news was related to these subjects (see Figures 3 and 4). Several international stories about the economic crisis received little or no coverage, including Germany and Spain officially falling into recession and the approval of economic stimulus packages in Germany and Australia (see Figure 7). Also, relatively few stories about the global economic crisis contained a connection between the international and domestic: only 7% of domestic stories about economics had an international dimension to them and only 10% of international stories about economics had a domestic connection. As Alistair Burnett, Editor of *The World Tonight*, notes, 'everyone goes on and on about how interdependent the world is and if nothing else this economic crash has shown that that's certainly true and yet journalists still tend to see things in terms of domestic and foreign, and they cover the stories as if they're hermetically sealed from one another... It's as if one never affected the other'.

In response to these findings, all the other editors say that they have done a range of features and specials which explore these issues, outside of the two week sample period. One example comes from ITN: 'This year we've done a special four part series from around the world on the economic crisis... which took in Russia, China, Iceland and the United States. We then followed that up with a pre-G20 series which took in Japan, Ukraine and France. Both those fell outside your study period' (Tim Singleton, ITV News).

### COVERAGE OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

While the complex and dynamic nature of different countries makes the distinction between 'developing' and 'developed' rather crude and problematic, it does at least allow for a discussion of the amount and types of news coverage afforded to countries in traditionally under-reported parts of the world.

News coverage of developing countries was found no longer to be characterised by 'coups and earthquakes' (Rosenblum, 1979). The results of previous studies have shown that coverage has been dominated by 'conflict and war' (Dover & Barnett, 2004: p27) or 'disasters and terrorism' (DFID, 2000: p3). By contrast, the results from this study suggest that the most common topics used to cover developing countries are now 'politics' and 'international relations' (40%) rather than 'violence' (22%) or 'disasters' (2%). Furthermore, coverage of developing countries made up 41% of all international news, which is more than they received in almost any other year (*The World on the Box*, 2004).

Despite an increase in coverage and a change in the topics used to cover developing countries, there is strong evidence to support the claim made in previous reports that developing countries are treated rather differently to developed countries (DFID, 2000). In this study it was found that news items about developing countries were twice as likely to include the voices of individuals outside of the country as items about developed countries. Alistair Burnett admits, 'inevitably we are slanted towards using English speaking people who tend to come from the US or from former UK colonies. There is a lot of expertise in think tanks in South Africa, Indonesia, Argentina and Brazil, which we just don't tap into'. Sam Barratt argues that who speaks about events in developing countries is a

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999	2003	2009
BBC 6pm News	22%	31%	29%	34%	22%	27%	31%	29%
BBC 9/10pm News	24%	44%	33%	39%	30%	43%	50%	48%
ITV Evening News	24%	29%	24%	26%	19%	26%	30%	25%
ITV Nightly News	30%	35%	29%	36%	26%	28%	32%	30%
Channel 4 News	-	-	40%	41%	39%	38%	39%	38%

Figure 6: Amount of international news coverage as a percentage of total news coverage, for various news bulletins since 1975 (source *The World on the Box*)



Australia's Senate passes stimulus package, *CCTV News*, 13.2.09

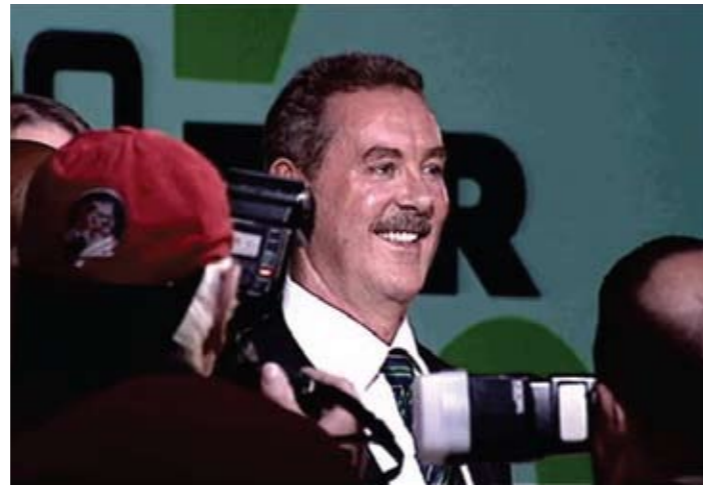
Specific events / headlines	TV and Radio bulletins which covered the issue/event
<b>Global economic crisis</b> 'New official figures confirm that Spain is in recession and now has the highest unemployment rate in the EU' (BBC News Website 12/02/09)	BBC4 World News Tonight, The World Tonight
'Germany has fallen deeper into recession, announcing its worst economic figures since 1990' (The World Tonight 13/02/09)	BBC4 World News Tonight, The World Tonight, Today
'Germany has approved a 50bn euro (\$63bn, £44bn) stimulus plan aimed at boosting Europe's largest economy' (BBC News Website 22/02/09)	BBC4 World News Tonight, Al-Jazeera English
'Australia's Senate has passed the Labour government's £19bn stimulus plan' (BBC News website 13/02/09)	CCTV news
<b>Conflict in Sri Lanka</b> 'Civilian 'slaughter' in Sri Lanka: 2,000 civilians had been killed and another 5,000 wounded in the past month' (BBC News Website 20/02/09)	Al Jazeera English, CCTV News, The World Tonight, Sky News, Channel 4 News
'Suicide plane attack in Sri Lanka hurts 39' (Sky News Website 21/02/09)	Al-Jazeera English
'Sri Lanka plans to hold displaced Tamils in 'concentration camps'' (Telegraph.co.uk 14/02/09)	None
<b>Developments in Somalia</b> New Somali Prime Minister named' (BBC News Online 13/02/09)	Al-Jazeera English, The World Tonight
<b>Developments in Iraq</b> 'New jail opens at Abu Ghraib site' (BBC News Website 21/02/09)	Islam Channel News, BBC Six o'clock News, BBC Ten o'clock News
'US soldier found guilty of Iraq murders' (BBC News Website 20/02/09)	None
'Saddam's soldiers are being recalled into the Iraqi army' (Al Jazeera English 13/02/09)	Al-Jazeera English
<b>Peace agreements in Sudan</b> 'Mass disarmament begins in Sudan' (BBC News Website 10/02/09)	Islam Channel News
'Sudan government and largest rebel group in Darfur sign an agreement which could pave the way for peace' (Islam Channel News 17/02/09)	Islam Channel News, The World Tonight, Today

Figure 7: International hard news stories which received little or no coverage





Galapagos islands under threat from tourism, BBC *Ten O'clock News*, 11.2.09



Allen Stanford charged with alleged fraud in US, *More 4 News*, 18.2.09



Abu Ghraib officially re-opened, BBC *Six O'clock News*, 21.2.09

particularly important issue because 'if you have somebody from that location describing what's happening, it actually shows that the people there are responsible for the problems themselves and are actually acting on them. Broadcasters need to be aware of how they can show how people are being active and resourceful in addressing problems within their own backyard. It can be so easily portrayed as it's the water engineer from Bristol that solves all the problems in Darfur when actually it is the 300 or 400 public health volunteers from the villages that have been made homeless that are there actually doing the hard work to make sure cholera doesn't spread'.

The results of this research also show that developing countries are more than four times more likely to be covered in off-agenda features than developed countries and almost three times less likely to be covered as part of a continuing news story. This has the effect of providing a one-off snapshot of events in developing countries which can fail to explain the context of an event and there's a danger that this leaves audiences with the impression that nothing ever changes. Tim Singleton argues that one of the main reasons for this is because developing countries are not part of the news cycle most of the time. 'We are a news broadcaster, it has to be news in developing countries'.

There are certain parts of the world which scarcely feature in the news cycle: Latin America and the Caribbean received only 6% of all international coverage (see Figure 8) and were mostly seen as a backdrop to the exploits of US or UK citizens, such as the impact of the Allan Stanford story which broke during the two week sample period. Adrian Wells agrees that this is an

example of 'us collectively not doing as much as we should be doing on an interesting place'. But Jon Williams believes that 'you report international news to a UK audience for two reasons: either the stories connect with a UK audience and they matter or the stories are so significant in their own right that they are important for a UK audience'. The reason that Latin America receives relatively less coverage, he argues, is because it doesn't 'cross this threshold as often as stories from elsewhere'.

Several editors noted that cost and the location of foreign bureaux were important factors which limited coverage. Another key element is perceptions of audience interest: 'I think the audience would get very bored if we did a weekly piece from China or Asia or Africa on the economic crisis' (Tim Singleton). Adrian Wells believes there's a wider failure of imagination. Developing countries are 'not particularly sexy... and I guess it comes back to portrayal, usually the only story you do on Bangladesh is the floods every year, which could almost be in the diary, or throwing acid in young girls' faces. These are stories that do tend to prick western consciousness and tend to be the ones that are appealing in a kind of obvious way'.

During the fortnight, there was only one news item which could be considered to be about development (excluding the ethnic minority bulletins). This was a story on AJE about the successful attempts of the new mayor of Lagos, Nigeria, to tackle corruption. Paddy Coulter believes this near-total lack of coverage of international development is an issue which broadcasters need to address. He argues that while the environment has 'arrived as a legitimate topic which gets quite well covered, development,

by which I mean all the affairs relating to international aid, trade, debt, the Millennium Development Goals, the whole relationship between the rich world and the poor world, has not'.

Figure 7 shows that during the sample period there were several 'good news' stories that received little or no coverage about places or countries which are usually only reported during a crisis. Adrian Wells accepts that much coverage of the developing world is negative: 'certainly in relation to Africa... when you're only ever seeing starving people or people with AIDS or whatever and you never do the success stories, it is a real issue'.

However, two of the bulletins in the sample define their international news by intentionally focussing on 'good news' stories. Chris Shaw says that Five 'doesn't ignore the bad news when it happens but we actively go out and seek stories that essentially show human nature in a positive light as well... we think our viewers want news that informs and keeps them feeling good and happy and maybe even makes them laugh occasionally'. GMTV takes a similar approach: 'our ethos is to let people leave their homes to go to work feeling positive' (Martin Frizell).

#### 10PM AND 6PM BULLETINS

**BBC1 *Six and Ten O'clock News*, ITV *6.30pm and 10pm News*, Sky News (*10pm*), *The World Tonight*, *Newsnight*.**

The BBC *Ten O'clock News* is the most watched news bulletin in the UK. It had the highest percentage of international news (48%), international lead stories (38%) and coverage of developing countries (47%). It was one of the few bulletins during the sample period to give significant coverage to the

impact of the financial crisis around the world and to make connections to the UK. Examples included coverage of protests in Dublin about the Irish government's handling of the financial crisis, the scale of the recession in Japan and an item on the closing of the Barratt shoe store in the UK which led into a discussion of how Europe was coping with the crisis.

While previous reports have suggested that international news was dominated by Iraq, the evidence presented in this report suggests that Iraq is now largely absent from most bulletins. The BBC *Ten* and *Six O'clock News* were two of only three bulletins to report on the re-opening of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Figure 7 highlights a number of other events in Iraq which received little or no coverage.

A comparison of the results in Figures 9 and 10 shows that, statistically at least, the quantity and nature of international news on the BBC *Six O'clock News* was remarkably similar to that of the ITV 6.30pm and 10pm News. The one key difference was in who spoke. Individuals directly involved in the news stories dominated the ITV 6.30pm (58%) and 10pm (43%) but not the BBC 6pm (27%) (see Figure 11). Tim Singleton explains that, 'we report stories from the stories themselves as opposed to people looking from outside of the stories so we would much rather have an eye witness to an expert.' *Sky News*, *GMTV*, *Five News* and *Newsround* all had similarly high levels of use of vox pops or participants.

The BBC *Ten O'clock News* and the ITV 10pm news both reported on the death of a French man in a bomb blast in Egypt but not on similar fatal bomb blasts in Algeria, Spain or Thailand or the conflict in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the BBC *Six O'clock News*

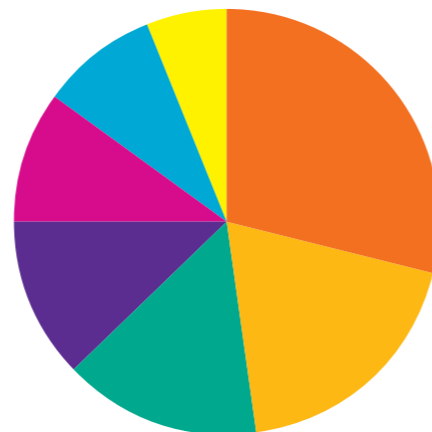
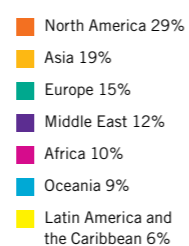


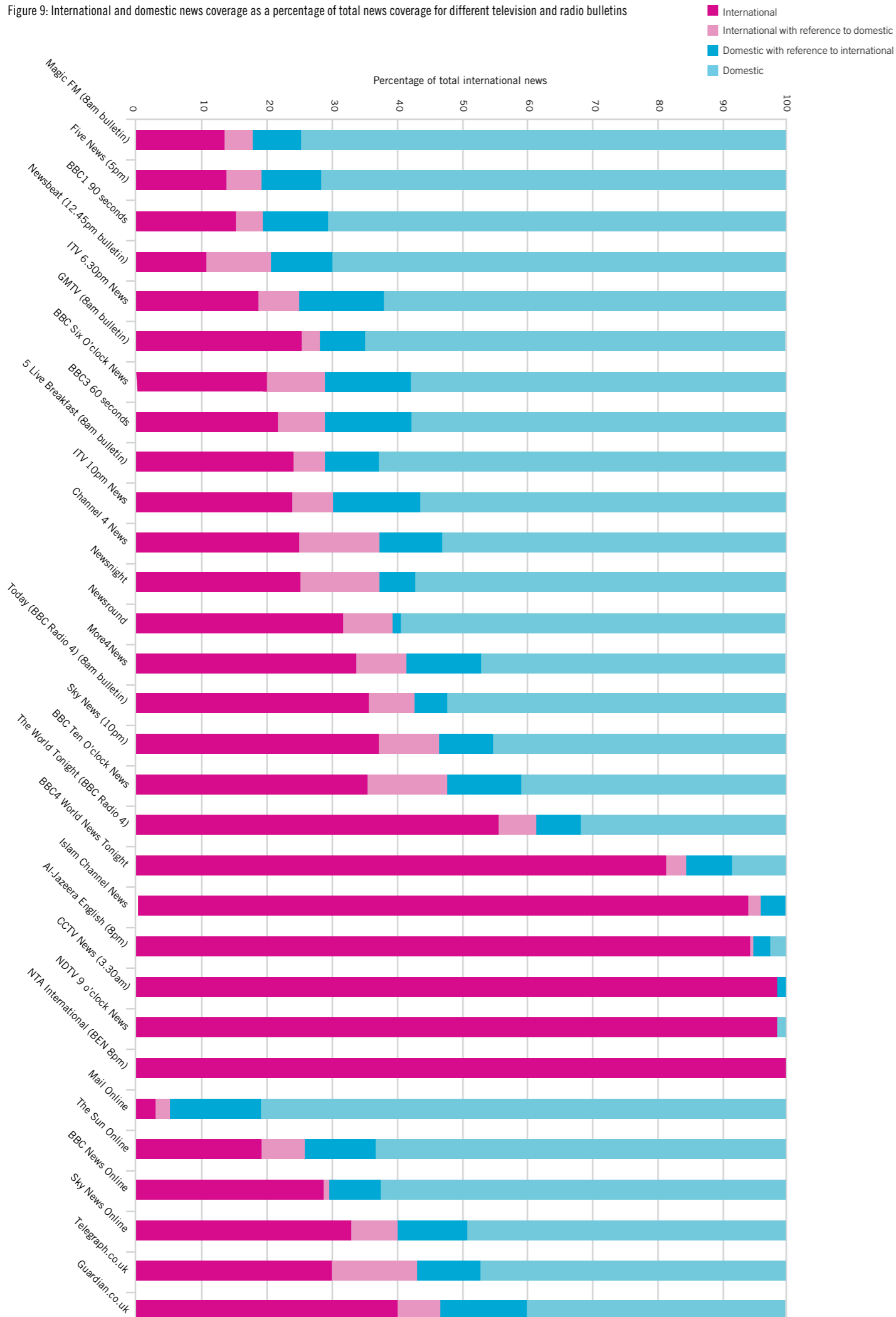
Figure 8: News coverage of different global regions, as a percentage of total coverage



Results of Afghan public opinion poll, BBC4 *World News Today*, 9.2.09



Figure 9: International and domestic news coverage as a percentage of total news coverage for different television and radio bulletins



Afghanistan President, Hamid Karzai's position is under threat, *Channel 4 News*, 14.2.09

and ITV 6.30pm both reported on the death of 11 people in Slovakia when a train hit a bus but not on a similar fatal bus crash in Iraq. Tim Singleton explains that there are a complex range of factors affecting editorial decisions but that, 'tourists being bombed in Egypt is obviously a story closer to home than an internal sectarian dispute in Algeria or Thailand'.

Sky News 10pm bulletin had the second highest percentage of international news (47%) and the greatest number of unique international stories (9) of any major UK television bulletin. It also had a high percentage of US content (39% of international coverage). Adrian Wells acknowledges that Sky is 'slightly more mid-Atlantic in our news agenda' but it was not the only channel to focus heavily on America. Overall, the USA received 34% of all international coverage, more than twice the amount of 2003 (Dover & Barnett, 2004: p24). Tim Singleton defends this: 'mid-presidency without an economic crisis, I'm sure you'd find much less American news', but the editors interviewed did accept that in general, the USA does dominate international news. 'If somebody sort of slips on a banana skin in New York it's a story, if 200 people drown in Bangladesh it's not' (Alistair Burnett).

During the fortnight, *Newsnight* had a very different international agenda to most other BBC bulletins: it had only one report from Afghanistan and one brief mention on both the Australian bush fires and the political situation in Zimbabwe. This allowed it to cover off-agenda stories not featured elsewhere on the BBC such as a report on the state of the Taliban in Karachi and one on the return of the author Chinua Achebe to his home country, Nigeria.

61% of news on *The World Tonight* was international and a distinctive feature was the way it used news events as a way of covering off-agenda, long running or under reported issues. For example it used the visit of President Obama to Canada to review how Canada was dealing with the economic crisis, revealing that it has a large enough surplus to pay for an economic stimulus package without the need for borrowing.

**7PM, 8PM AND 9PM BULLETINS**  
***Channel 4 News, More4 News, BBC4 World News Tonight, Al-Jazeera English***

*Channel 4 News* and *More 4 News* had 38% and 41% international news respectively. Martin Fewell argues that the data in Figure 6 shows that, 'despite the international economic crisis *Channel 4 News* has actually done better than anybody else to maintain its proportion of international coverage'.

*Channel 4 News* reported the swearing in of the new cabinet in Zimbabwe by using an accredited freelance Zimbabwean journalist. Martin Fewell says that one of the reasons for using this reporter was to 'get an indigenous perspective on Zimbabwe's troubles... which brings a type of authority and distinctiveness to your coverage that frankly you don't get if you send a western reporter to cover it'.

Jon Williams believes that the international content of *BBC4 World News Tonight* helps to provide the variety that is missing from the main UK domestic bulletins. The results in Figure 10 show that *BBC4 World News Tonight* consisted of very little hard news (7%) and instead provided space for diary news (35%) and longer features (18%) which other BBC bulletins cannot or do not air. Zimbabwe is an example of this as an interview with Morgan

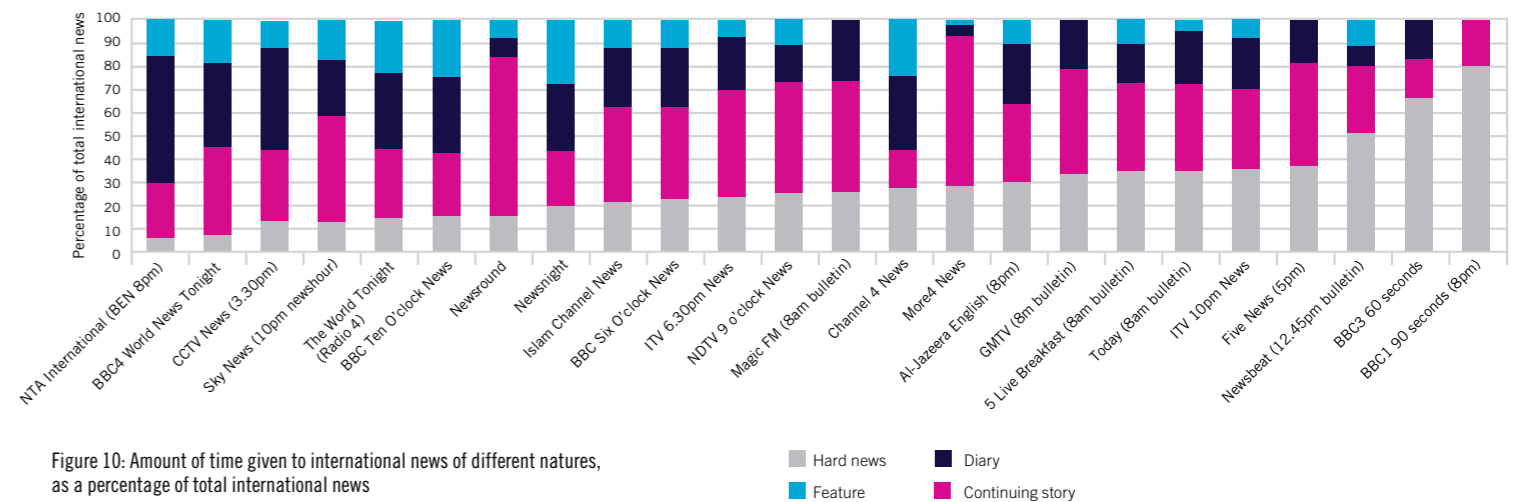


Figure 10: Amount of time given to international news of different natures, as a percentage of total international news





BBC interview with Morgan Tsvangirai, BBC4 *World News Tonight*, 13.2.09



Jade Goody given months to live, *Five News*, 21.2.09



BAFTA awards, *GMTV News*, 9.2.09

Tsvangirai, which was cut to 35 seconds for the BBC *Ten O'clock News*, ran at two and a half minutes on BBC4. BBC4 had the highest percentage of international news of any BBC bulletin (81%) and Phil Harding describes it as a 'great shame' that such an international bulletin was moved to 7pm, clashing directly with *Channel 4 News* (Harding, 2008).

Al-Jazeera English 8pm bulletin is the only other bulletin in the sample with a remit to cover the whole world. It had the largest and most wide ranging international news agenda, covering by far the most countries (47) and having 95% international coverage. There is evidence to support its claim to 'give voice to untold stories' and 'to make sure no part of the world is forgotten' (Suzanne Bush) as it covered the most unique international news stories of any bulletin (30). AJE also had one of the lowest levels of news from the USA (21%).

Although it describes itself as 'balancing the current typical information flow by reporting from the developing world back to the west', during the sample period only 51% of its coverage was of the developing world and like many other bulletins, AJE failed to give much space to Latin America and the Caribbean (5%). Although AJE has been criticised for being 'unbalanced in its concentration on the Middle East' (Painter, 2008) in this two week sample, the Middle East received only 15% of total coverage.

AJE aims to report international events with a 'different perspective' from western media. Suzanne Bush says they achieve this because 'most of our correspondents and producers are from the country or region they are reporting on. They therefore speak the language and have a deeper understanding

of their patch. It also gives us better access to people in those countries and how they view the events happening around them. Our aim is to show a range of views, and we have been able to do this by filming with groups like the Taliban and Al Shabab in Somalia. It's also about the stories we don't cover, like Madeleine McCann, Meredith Kercher and Jade Goody'.

### 5PM BULLETINS *Five News, Newsround*

Recent research into the portrayal of the wider world on children's TV, published in *Screening the World* (Scott, 2008), showed that international content is dominated by animation and programmes from North America. While 77% of parents believe children's TV is important in helping children to understand what is going on in the world, only 41% are satisfied that this is being achieved (Ofcom 2007b: p111). With international news making up 38% of its content, *Newsround* is one of the few UK children's programmes which does 'explain the world to children in the hope that this creates a greater understanding of where they fit into it' (Sinead Rocks, Editor). The two week sample period included a single subject news special on the Australian bush fires consisting of 8 different items which focussed primarily on the impact on young people. In these and other international news items, *Newsround* makes by far the greatest use of vox pops (71%).

When responding to the results in this report, Five's Chris Shaw, said that 'it's no secret that we generally pursue a largely domestic agenda'. Despite its relatively low level of international content (19%), *Five News* sees itself as having a distinct approach: 'We don't want any of our viewers to feel



Australian bush fires, *Newsround*, 9.2.09

stupid and I think sometimes news programmes can make people feel stupid, they can assume a level of knowledge or... international awareness and sophistication that not everyone has, so when we do tackle complicated international stories we try and make them as clear and as straight forward as possible' (Chris Shaw). *Five News* also looks for lighter stories. It was the first bulletin to focus on the plight of a koala which survived the Australian bush fires and the only television bulletin to cover a dog carnival in Rio and the actress Salma Hayek breastfeeding a child in Sierra Leone.

### BREAKFAST BULLETINS (8AM) *(GMTV, Today, Magic FM and 5 Live Breakfast 8 am bulletins)*

GMTV and Independent Radio News (IRN) achieve two of the largest audiences of any UK news bulletin and as such, represent important sources of news for the UK public, and ones which are often overlooked by commentators. The 8am news on Magic FM (which acquires its news feed from IRN and reaches 26 million commercial radio listeners) had the lowest percentage of international news of any television or radio bulletin (18%) and covered just four countries: USA (43%), Australia (43%), Afghanistan (7%) and South Africa (7%) over the 2 weeks. Whilst GMTV (with an average daily reach of 5 million) had a relatively higher percentage of international news (29%), it also only covered just four places: USA (59%), Australia (29%), Antarctica (6%) and Israel (6%).

Based on the results of the two weeks, all of the 8am breakfast bulletins (excluding *Today*) can be characterised as having almost no regular off-agenda international items and relatively few items about developing countries. These bulletins also gave proportionally more coverage to the Australian bush fires and to various events in the USA than other bulletins. This, Martin Frizell explains, is because 'while you are sleeping, more things are likely to have happened in the USA so when you wake up in the morning the freshest news that I've got is from the west side of the planet... [and] with Australia, I've got daylight hours over there too when a story breaks, I don't like to do too much in darkness'.

While *Today* (BBC Radio 4) also had a relatively high percentage of news about the USA (36%) it clearly serves a very different audience and as a result had one of the highest rates of international news (42%), of hard news (34%) and covered several of the 'rarely mentioned' stories in Figure 7.

### ETHNIC MINORITY AND RELIGIOUS BULLETINS *CCTV News, Islam Channel News, NDTV 9 o'clock News, NTA International News on BEN (8pm)*

*New News, Future News* noted that although, 'in general, news outlets of all kinds often tell the same stories, from the same perspective, using much the same material... multiple alternative viewpoints are available 'out there', even though many are hard to find' (Ofcom, 2007a: p3). Amongst the most

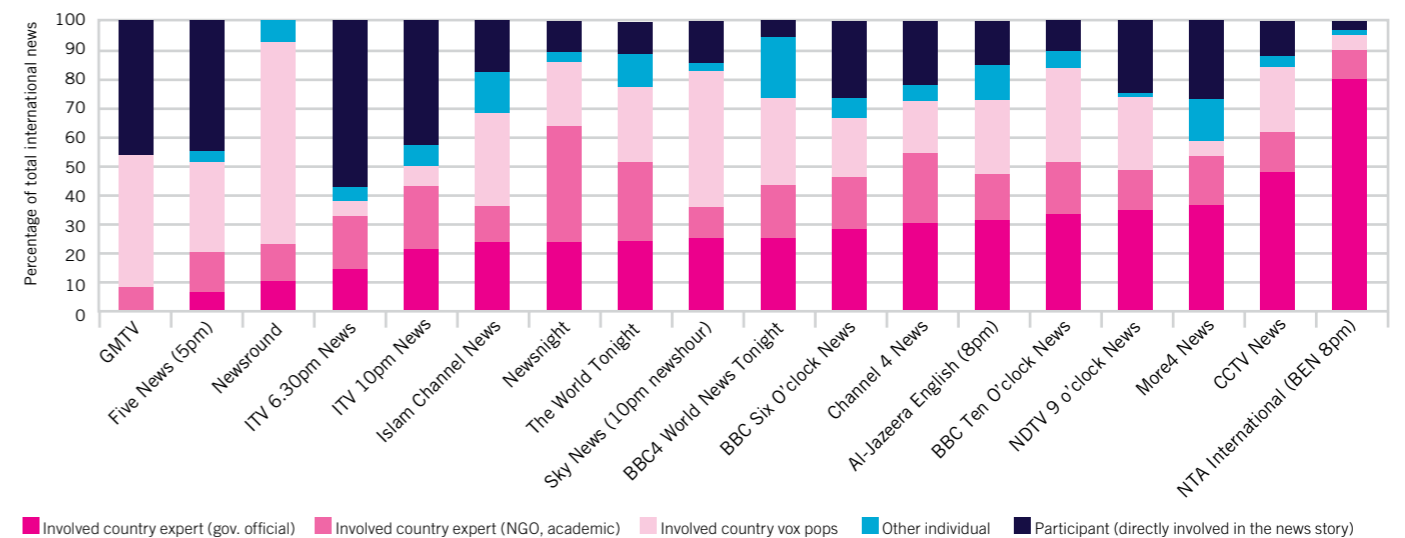


Figure 11: Amount of time various individuals get to speak in news items, as a percentage of total number of voices





Indian actor's house attacked, NDTV 9 o'clock news, 13.2.09

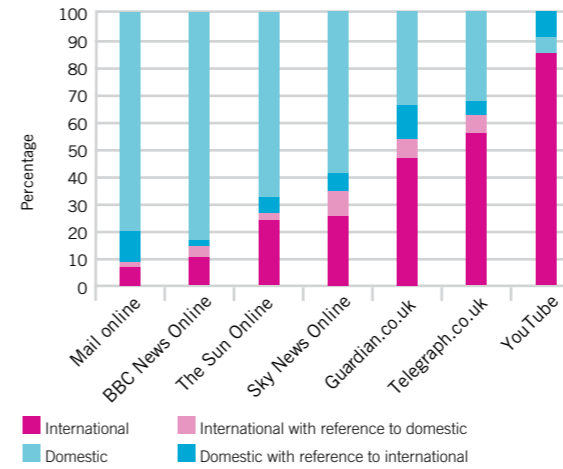


Figure 12: Percentage of international and domestic news in the 'top 5 most viewed' stories for various news websites

important of these 'alternative viewpoints' are news outlets that cater for religious and ethnic minorities in the UK.

Ethnic minorities now account for around 8% of the UK population and this figure is set to increase. Despite this, very little research has been conducted into the media consumption habits of ethnic minorities or the nature of ethnic minority media. BARB figures currently under-represent ethnic minorities and only three ethnic minority digital channels are members of BARB. Data that does exist reveals the importance of religious and ethnic media to a range of ethnic and religious groups. Approximately half of the consumption of both TV (53%) and radio (44%) by ethnic minorities can be attributed to ethnic media (Starfish, 2006). There is a growing concern amongst public service broadcasters that they are losing viewers amongst religious and ethnic minorities and that these may never return.

Mohamed Ali, the CEO of Islam Channel, makes a distinction between the ethnic and religious channels. He argues that 'with ethnic channels, they are more concerned with 'back home' news'. Indeed, much of the news on the ethnic minority channels did relate to the countries they are produced in: 81% of the NTAI news concerned Nigeria; 76% on NDTV covered India and 51% on CCTV news related to China. However, this does not necessarily mean that they do not have a strong international agenda as well. Between them, the four religious and ethnic minority bulletins covered almost as many different countries and as many unique stories as all of the 25 other bulletins combined (excluding AJE).

Mohamed Ali says that *Islam Channel News* provides news for 'people who have lost faith in the mainstream, who are looking for an alternative' and that they deliberately choose not to follow the agendas of the other bulletins. 'If you remember, suddenly, we had that big hype about hunger in Niger, in Africa, everybody started talking about it, it became international news, everywhere on the news you saw it, and then suddenly there is no single word spoken about hunger in Niger. It does not mean the hunger went away.' *Islam Channel News* has continued to report from Niger.

#### OTHER BBC BULLETINS

##### **BBC1 90 seconds, BBC3 60 seconds, Radio 1 Newsbeat (12.45 bulletin)**

*Newsbeat* is the flagship news programme on BBC Radio 1 and provides news specifically targeted at a young audience, reaching around 9 million people a week. In this study, 21% of its content was found to be international. What distinguished *Newsbeat* was its focus on off-agenda items – for example an item about the youth detention system in the UK compared it to Finland which currently has just five young people in custody. *Newsbeat* tended to focus on celebrity stories and stories about the USA (60%), as did BBC3's 60 seconds.

The BBC1 90 seconds at 8pm was initially billed as a shorter version of the BBC *Six O'clock News* and 'according to internal BBC research, has been effective at reaching viewers who do not normally watch its main news programmes' (Harding, 2008: p24). It consisted of just 19% international news compared with 29% for the *Six O'clock News*.



Job losses at Mini factory, BBC1 90 Seconds, 16.2.09

#### ONLINE NEWS

##### **Guardian.co.uk, Telegraph.co.uk, BBC News Online, Sky News Online, The Sun Online, Mail Online, YouTube**

*New News, Future News* noted that 'the internet is the fastest growing platform for news and other information' (Ofcom, 2007a: 36). Charlie Beckett believes 'increasingly if you really want to know in any great depth or variety about world news then inevitably the place is online'. The results of this study show that the international content on the front pages of the websites of broadcasters (BBC and Sky) and newspapers (*Guardian, Telegraph, Mail, Sun*) is remarkably similar to offline bulletins. Online sources had the same average percentage of international news (32%) as television and radio bulletins and covered the same top five international stories.

However, front page online news consisted of far more hard news and 'continuing story' news (80%). Online news also had a lower percentage of international news about developing countries (26%), fewer political and economic stories and more disaster and human interest stories. The USA received an even higher proportion of coverage (39%).

In order to gain some measure of audience interest, the 'top 5 most viewed' news items for each website was recorded each day (see Figure 12). On average, 33% of the 'top 5 most viewed' stories were international (not including *YouTube*). This corresponds almost exactly with the international content on the front pages of online sources (32%) and on television and radio (32%). The percentage of 'most viewed' stories about the USA (39%) and about the different regions of the world

was also almost exactly equal to the percentage of coverage that each received online and on television and radio.

While the overall percentages may be the same, a comparison between Figures 9 and 12 shows significant differences in the quantity and popularity of international for different online sites. *The Sun Online, Mail Online, Guardian.co.uk* and particularly *Telegraph.co.uk* all provide less international news online than the popularity of international stories suggests their readers want (as indicated by the percentage of most viewed international stories) while the *BBC News Online* and *Sky News Online* appear to provide more. Some of the findings relating to individual online news sites also suggest a strong public appetite for stories covering international aspects of the financial crisis. For example, the most popular item on *Telegraph.co.uk* during the fortnight (it remained in the 'top 5 most viewed' for four consecutive days) was a financial commentary, buried far away from the front page, on how a failure to 'save' East European economies would lead to worldwide economic meltdown.

It has been suggested that the number of hits a news story receives is beginning to set the news agenda. According to Andrew Currah in *What's Happening to Our News*, 'the digital clickstream is reshaping the content strategies of news publishers' (2009: p47). Jon Williams, though, rejects this, arguing that 'what it provides us with is real time running commentary on what one section of the audience is interested in, but it is only one piece of the jigsaw'.

##### **Japanese finance minister resigns but denies he was drunk at G7 conference**

Three days after slurring his way through a press conference, Japanese Finance Minister Shoichi Nakagawa on Tuesday announced his resignation, while continuing to deny that he was drunk.

By Julian Ryall in Tokyo  
Published: 10:55AM GMT 17 Feb 2009



Japanese minister resigns but denies he was drunk at G7 conference, *Telegraph.co.uk*, 17.2.09

##### **Sky Probe: Scandal Of Waste Sent To Africa**

12:45pm UK, Wednesday February 18, 2009  
Catherine Jacob, Environment Correspondent  
A Sky News investigation has revealed potentially dangerous electronic waste from the UK is being shipped over to Africa.



Scandal of waste sent to Africa, *Sky News Online*, 18.2.09





France bans young children from using mobiles, *Newsround*, 16.2.09



Michelle Obama on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, *Sky News*, 12.2.09



*NTA International News* on BEN, 15.2.09

## CONCLUSION

Tim Singleton from ITV News argues that 'what we should actually do is celebrate the diversity of the world of broadcast news'. While the results of this investigation show that there is much to celebrate about the quantity and quality of international news available to audiences in the UK, they also highlight several areas of concern.

Most bulletins continue to report a fairly narrow range of international stories, dominated by stories about the USA. Ethnic minority and religious channels, which offer a very different view of the world to their audiences, continue to pass under the radar of BARB. Children in the UK have only one broadcast source of international news, and the quantity of international news on commercial radio stations is particularly low.

Although broadcasters as a whole continue to maintain high levels of international coverage, there are stark differences between bulletins. Most UK citizens have a range of connections to other parts of the world, yet some editors still feel that many of the stories happening in faraway places are just not relevant to their audiences.

## METHODOLOGY

The content of 19 digital and terrestrial TV bulletins, 5 radio bulletins and 6 online sources were recorded over a period of 2 weeks, from Monday February 9 to Sunday February 22, 2009. This two week period was chosen as it avoided any major diary events and extreme seasonal fluctuations in the news cycle.

Only straight news items were included in this study. Headlines, teasers, musical introductions, end titles, summaries, advertisements, newspaper reviews, sports and weather coverage were not included. All news items were coded by length, topic, principal country (or international institution), story type, position, treatment and 'who speaks'. In order to record the nature of any international content all stories were coded as either domestic, domestic with reference to international, international with reference to domestic or international.

The treatment of international news stories was coded as: interview/discussion, two-ways, VT packages or newscaster reports. The nature of international stories was coded as hard news (an unscheduled event taking place within the last 24 hours), diary event (a scheduled event taking place within the last 24 hours), continuing story (a current twist in an ongoing process) or a feature (an ongoing process with no current angle). The 17 topics used to code items were: politics, economics, business affairs, law and order, disputes, violence, human interest (light), human interest (serious), health, environment, science, disasters, education, sport, religion, weather and international relations.

All websites were accessed at 12.00 GMT. To sample the news given greatest prominence and that is most likely to be consumed by the greatest audience, only prominently placed articles with teasers on the front page were included. For websites where fewer than five stories met these criteria, all items on the front page were included.

Unless otherwise stated, the statistics presented do not include the bulletins from religious and ethnic minority channels. In order to identify news stories not covered by the bulletins in the sample, the output of the BBC World Service and Reuters was also monitored.

A full account of the methodology, including more detailed descriptions of the various categories, is available on the International Broadcasting Trust and Commonwealth Broadcasting Association websites ([www.ibt.org.uk](http://www.ibt.org.uk), [www.cba.org.uk/CBA-DFID](http://www.cba.org.uk/CBA-DFID)).

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## REFLECTING THE REAL WORLD?

The first report in this series was published in June 2006. It included interviews with broadcasters and research exploring how audiences responded to different genres of programming about the developing world.

Copies can be downloaded at [www.ibt.org.uk](http://www.ibt.org.uk) or [www.cba.org.uk](http://www.cba.org.uk)



## REFLECTING THE REAL WORLD 2

The second in this series of research reports, this looked at how UK television and new media portrayed developing countries. Based on a series of interviews with broadcasters, new media specialists and commentators, the report also included audience research examining the viewing habits of young people. Published in September 2007.

Copies can be downloaded at [www.ibt.org.uk](http://www.ibt.org.uk) or [www.cba.org.uk](http://www.cba.org.uk)





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