

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Loughborough University		
Unit of Assessment: UOA34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Improving the Accuracy and Impartiality of the BBC's Coverage of Rural Issues in the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1/1/2006 to 31/12/2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
David Deacon	Professor of Communication and Media Analysis	4/1/1990 to present
John Downey	Professor of Comparative Media Analysis	1/1/2000 to present
James Stanyer	Professor of Communication and Media Analysis	1/9/2005 to present
Dominic Wring	Professor of Political Communication	29/9/1997 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 7/10/13 to 31/7/2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>While the BBC has a duty to provide duly accurate and impartial news for all communities, including rural communities, its coverage has been regularly attacked for being inaccurate on rural issues and exhibiting a London/metropolitan bias. Against this background, the BBC Trust commissioned the Centre for Researchers in Communication and Culture (CRCC) to conduct a large-scale analysis of news output. Based on this, the Trust made a series of recommendations, and the BBC Executive implemented the following changes to improve the BBC's accuracy and impartiality: 1) appointed new staff, including a senior figure tasked with championing rural affairs; 2) enhanced the use of existing expertise and implemented better internal information sharing processes; 3) diversified the sources used in rural news; and 4) provided new opportunities for journalists to develop experience and knowledge of rural issues and policy.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Deacon, Downey, Stanyer and Wring, together with other members of the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (CRCC), have, since 1992, developed world-leading expertise and experience in conceptually and methodologically innovative, empirically extensive content analyses of impartiality, accuracy and partisanship in broadcast and print journalism, both nationally and internationally. Content analysis is a well-established and widely used research method in communication and media studies. The CRCC has pioneered the development of large-scale media content analysis of political events and contentious political and social issues.</p> <p>The CRCC has developed and fine-tuned a variety of measures to indicate impartiality, accuracy and partisanship, and improved procedures for the human coding and analysis of large samples of broadcast and press reporting [R1]. These measures and practices have shaped regular analyses of news coverage of general elections, and national and regional referenda [R2, R3], and the impartiality reviews of the BBC's reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Spring, for the BBC Board of Governors and BBC Trust [R4]. The impact demonstrated in the report on BBC's news and current affairs coverage of rural matters in the UK [R5, R6] is a consequence of this expertise and experience and contributed to improving the impartiality and accuracy of BBC output.</p> <p>For R5, CRCC researchers examined a total of 1500 hours of the BBC's output, equating to 106 days of coverage of rural issues on selected days from September 2012 to December 2013. The study analysed selected news, current affairs and factual programming on radio and television across all BBC channels, as well as BBC online news, local, indigenous minority language news programmes, and a range of non-BBC news output. In total, nearly 1700 relevant items were identified and coded across 48 outlets.</p>		

Our research made the following key findings:

- The attention paid to rural matters varied across BBC outlets. There was a strong contrast in the performance of specialist programmes and local news compared to national news networks. The latter lacked an understanding of the often-complex nature of rural controversies, presenting matters as an overly simplistic binary conflict [R5, R6].
- On network news output, there was a limited diversity of rural voices present, with coverage on the UK-wide BBC network dominated by 'a small number of charities and NGOs' [R5, R6] and there was a 'disproportionate amount of time given to the views of celebrities' [R5, R6].
- The use of visuals on national network news was often rudimentary using a stock set of images. For example, in terms of Bovine TB, visuals focused on healthy badgers rather than sick cows [R5, R6].
- The unique challenges and perspectives of rural people, communities and businesses were overlooked by the main network news channels, and the national news networks often ignored the policy differences of the devolved nations [R5].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1: Deacon, D. (2007). Yesterday's Papers and Today's Technology: Digital Newspaper Archives and 'Push Button' Content Analysis. *European Journal of Communication*, 22(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323107073743>

R2: Deacon, D., Wring, D. & Golding, P. (2006). Same Campaign, Differing Agendas: Analysing News Media Coverage of the 2005 General Election. *British Politics* 1, 222–256 <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200020>

R3: Deacon, D., & Smith, D. (2020). The politics of containment: Immigration coverage in UK General Election news coverage (1992–2015). *Journalism*, 21(2), 151–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917715944>

R4: Downey, J., Stanyer, J., Deacon, D., & Wring, D. (2012). *Impartiality and Accuracy Review of the BBC's Coverage of Events Known as the Arab Spring: A Content Analysis*. London: BBC Trust.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/impartiality/arab_spring.html

R5: Stanyer, J., Deacon, D., Downey, J., & Wring, D. (2014). *Rural Areas in the UK Impartiality Review: A Content Analysis for the BBC Trust*. London: BBC Trust.

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/rural_impartiality/content_analysis.pdf

R6: Stanyer, J. (2020) Biased or Balanced? Assessing BBC news and current affairs performance in covering the Badger Cull in England. *Journal of Rural Studies*. 81, 59-67. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.11.011>

This impact case study is underpinned by a body of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in 2002 (L33330300168) and the BBC Trust in 2011 (£75,597 GBP) and again 2013 (£78,852 GBP). The reports **R4** and **R5** underwent rigorous internal and external review. **R4** underpinned a case study for Loughborough's REF 2014 submission. In written letters of support [**S5**], leading experts in the field of communication research consider **R5** internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance, and rigour, and at least of 2-star quality. Emeritus Professor Jay Blumler (Leeds) observes that the originality of the research was 'internationally unprecedented', it was 'impeccably rigorous' and in significance terms, it was crucial to Heather Hancock meeting the Trust's remit satisfactorily. Professor Stephen Cushion (Cardiff) says, 'the report is internationally excellent, setting a new benchmark for academics studying rural affairs news output.' Professor Jesper Stromback (Gothenburg) notes of the report: 'its originality, significance and rigour would be recognised internationally.'

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

According to most recent Ofcom data the BBC remains 'the most-used news provider across all platforms' in the UK, with '73% of UK adults' saying, 'they use any BBC source for news'

(Ofcom, 2020). In 2018-19 alone, the BBC produced 22,643 hours of news and current affairs output (Ofcom, 2019), spending £315m TV news and current affairs programming. The reach of the BBC is even greater for rural areas, where 96% of adults rely on BBC outputs (Ofcom, 2019). The BBC is required by Royal Charter to deliver duly accurate and impartial news and current affairs, including on rural matters. To ensure this obligation was being fulfilled the BBC Trust, as the BBC's governing body at the time, commissioned the CRCC to conduct an analysis of BBC coverage. The findings of this research [R5] were central to the recommendations of the Trust's Impartiality Review of June 2014 [S1]. The recommendations were then implemented by the BBC Executive (the committee with responsibility 'for delivering the BBC's services in accordance with the strategy agreed by the Board, and for all aspects of operational management' (BBC.com)). The changes that occurred in response to our research were highlighted in a 2015 follow-up report [S2]. Further, interviews with senior BBC journalists in 2019 confirmed the continuity of this impact [S3, S4].

Together, these reports [S1, S2, S6] and interviews [S3, S4] demonstrate the reach and significance of our impact. Heather Hancock, the author of the 2014 review, noted that she drew 'heavily' on our findings when making her proposals [S1, p.7]. The BBC Trust noted, in their end of charter report, that these reviews 'proved fundamental in maintaining and improving standards in BBC content' [S6, p.22]. Based on our research, the accuracy and impartiality of BBC's rural reporting was improved in the following ways.

Impact 1: Improved promotion of rural issues across the BBC network via the appointment of a Rural Affairs Champion and other posts

Based on our research showing the varied visibility of rural issues across the BBC, the Trust identified the need for 'a senior figure to take an editorial oversight role, championing rural affairs across network output, devolved, regional and local programmes' [S1, pp.11-12]. The BBC Executive appointed the BBC Environment, Food, Rural Affairs & Natural History Executive Editor, Dimitri Houtart, as Rural Affairs Champion in 2015, a role he continues to hold in 2020 [S2, p.7; S3]. The Rural Affairs Champion noted that this was 'a significant intervention that led to a series of changes designed to improve the reporting of rural matters which are still in place' [S3]. The Champion had success in working both across the network in providing briefing notes on rural stories, and with 'individual news programme teams to encourage the coverage of rural affairs and the inclusion of rural views' [S2, p. 2; S3]. For example, since 2014, the editors and network news teams have been briefed on a range of topics, including for example, 'milk prices, organic production, the badger cull, and problems with the Rural Payment Agency' [S2, p.7]. The outcome, the Executive noted, has been that these subjects have been 'covered by our flagship programmes' [S2, p.7]. These briefings have continued [S3]. For example, during UK General Election campaigns, the Champion has circulated briefing notes on important rural matters. In the 2015 campaign:

'This led to issues such as rural broadband, solar farms and wind turbines, and access to services and transport featuring on the One and Six O'clock news, and Radio 4's Today' [S2, p.9].

The Executive extended the remit of two BBC journalists, and BBC Northern Ireland made two journalistic appointments to improve rural affairs coverage [S2, p. 8]. The responsibilities of Claire Marshall and Tom Heap, in the Science and Environment news team, were expanded to include rural affairs, a remit they still hold [S2]. The Executive noted that the Science and Environment team had success in gaining coverage of a broader variety of rural issues on the main network news outlets [S2, p.9; S4]. For example, in 2015, a range rural issues were covered that might have been missed, according to the Executive, these included the following:

- **Changes in legislation and regulation affecting rural communities**
Pesticides: Commercial farmers' efforts to safeguard wildlife and improve yields (One O'clock News; Six O'clock News; 1800 News 24); EU pesticide legislation (Today; Radio bulletins; BBC Breakfast; One O'clock News; BBC Online); Pesticide ban

affecting crops (Six O'clock News; 1800 News 24); Closure of animal health testing laboratories (on Today; Six O'clock News; PM; 1800); Milk prices (Six O'clock News; Ten O'clock News 1800); End of milk quotas (One O'clock News; Six O'clock News; Ten O'clock News);

- **Concerns affecting those living in rural areas**

Rural Crime Figures (BBC Breakfast; One O'clock News; Six O'clock News; PM; 1800 News 24); Planning changes threaten affordable rural housing (Six O'clock News; Ten O'clock News; World at One); Concerns of rural voters (Six O'clock News). Rural manifestoes (Today);

- **Environmental and wildlife conservation developments relevant to rural communities**

Farmland bird decline (One O'clock News; Six O'clock News; Ten O'clock News 1800); Beaver colony can stay in the wild (Six O'clock News; 1800); Putting a value on nature reserves and parks (Six O'clock News); Tree disease (Six O'clock News; Ten O'clock News; PM; 1800);

- **Technological advances and more efficient and sustainable farming**

New design of pylons (One O'clock News; Six O'clock News); 'Cutting edge farming technology' (on Breakfast News and Today; Radio 4).

Impact 2: Improved use of existing BBC expertise on rural affairs from the regions and specialist programmes

Based on our findings showing the limited in-depth understanding of rural issues, the Trust recommend the main network news outlets better use expertise currently based in the regions and specialist programmes [S1, pp.11-12]. In response, the BBC Executive extended the briefs of three regional correspondents so that they would have a special responsibility to provide rural affairs stories to network news [S2, p.6]. The three correspondents were: 'West Midlands - David Gregory Kumar (Rural Affairs Correspondent, Birmingham); East - Richard Daniel (Correspondent, Look East / Radio Suffolk); East Yorkshire & Lincolnshire - Paul Murphy (Environment and Rural Affairs Correspondent, BBC Hull)' [S2, p.6]. In 2020, these correspondents remain in these roles and are widely used [S3]. They have had success in getting a range of stories on rural matters on network news bulletins and have raised awareness of rural matters on BBC network news [S2, p.2., S4].

Links were also established and developed between BBC network news and specialist programmes such as *Countryfile* and *Farming Today* [S2, p.7, S3]. The Executive determined that an Environment and Rural Affairs Correspondent would be based in Bristol to improve links between network news output and *Farming Today* [S2, p.7]. The Executive report notes that *Farming Today* team have provided packages for network radio news on a range of rural issues. Links were also developed between *Countryfile* and BBC News so that *Countryfile* reporters could contribute to network news programmes [S2, p.7]. These links have enabled reporters from these programmes to regularly 'contribute reports on rural issues to TV bulletins and offer expertise on radio news programmes' and provide 'explanation and clarification of stories' [S2, pp.7-8, S3].

Impact 3: Increased diversity of rural voices in the news

Based on our research finding highlighting the limited diversity of rural voices in coverage, the Trust emphasized the need to improve contacts for journalists. In response there was 'a concerted effort to revitalise the BBC's rural contacts list across a wide range of expertise' [S1, pp.11-12]. In 2015, the BBC Executive noted that the rural affairs Champion and Carol Rubra (Health, Science and Environment Assignment Editor, BBC News) at the Rural Affairs Unit 'compiled a pan-BBC rural affairs contacts list and a news contacts list of planning teams' [S2, p.7]. They also noted regular meetings between the *Countryfile* team and the Rural Affairs Champion to ensure 'that radio and television share contacts and information' [S2, p.7]. The Executive note that network news programmes 'regularly call the *Farming Today* team for explanation or clarification of stories, to help source contributors, or for experts' comments' [S2,

p.8]. An interview with our research team in 2019 confirmed that network news was still making use of the contacts of the Rural Affairs Unit in Bristol **[S3]**. The Unit's *'expertise is regularly called upon, and they supply packages for network radio and television news on a range of rural issues and provide all important clarification and explanation of a range of rural matters'* **[S3]**.

Impact 4: Provided new opportunities for journalists to exchange ideas and experiences and to develop knowledge of rural issues

Finally, to overcome a lack of in-depth understanding on rural issues and devolved policy matters identified in our research, the Trust recommended instigating opportunities for journalists and programme makers to discuss rural issues and policy *'with a wider mix of institutional and local voices'* **[S1, pp.11-12]**. The change implemented by the BBC Executive involved a thrice yearly Rural Affairs Committee meeting for BBC and non-BBC stakeholders. After this, there is a further follow-up meeting *'so that BBC staff from News, the regions, radio and television, have a chance to discuss stories and collaborate face-to-face'* **[S2, p.8, S3]**. The report, and interviewees, acknowledge that these meetings provide a *'very valuable'* opportunity for editorial staff *'scattered across the UK to meet and discuss this area of output.'* **[S2, p.5, S3]**. A BBC journalist who attends these meetings noted they are a *'great opportunity to discuss developments and key issues for staff across the UK'* **[S4]**. In addition, there have been one-off special events such as a Rural Affairs Awayday and the College of Journalism's *'expert day'* designed to bring together experts and BBC journalists **[S2, p.17]**. These special events provide additional *'opportunities to discuss stories and collaborate face-to-face'* **[S2, p.17]**.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1: BBC Trust (2014) BBC Trust Impartiality Review: BBC Coverage of Rural Areas in the UK. London: BBC Trust. (**S1** is the public report overseen by Heather Hancock and commissioned by the BBC Trust, which makes a series of recommendations to improve the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC output.)

S2: BBC Trust (2015) BBC's Coverage of Rural Areas in the UK: The BBC Trust's Conclusions on the Executive's Follow-up Report. (**S2** is the BBC Executive's response to the BBC Trust report documenting the changes made in response to the recommendations in **S1**.)

S3: Letter from [REDACTED], BBC [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] Executive Editor and [REDACTED], including interview notes for 12 December, 2019.

S4: Letter from [REDACTED], BBC [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] Correspondent, Birmingham, including interview notes for 19 December, 2019.

S5: Letters testifying to the quality of the underpinning research.

S6: BBC Trust (2017) BBC Trust: End of Charter Report. London: BBC Trust. (**S6** is the final report from the BBC Trust testifying to the importance of the reviews in improving BBC impartiality and accuracy.)