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REFLECTING THE FOUR NATIONS?

An analysis of reporting devolution on UK network news media

Stephen Cushion, Justin Lewis, and Chris Groves

This article examines how the new political world of UK devolved politics is reported in UK-wide broadcast media. Drawing on a large-scale content analysis of 4687 news items, our study indicates that while devolution is not ignored, there remains an overwhelming focus upon England and Westminster politics. News about devolved politics or issues occupies a tiny part of everyday news coverage. When it is featured, coverage is often unhelpful in communicating the nature of devolved government across the UK. We found, in particular, a blurring of the distinction between England and the UK, a lapse that might misinform viewers and listeners that policy initiatives in England apply to Britain or the UK as a whole. There remains, we argue, an untapped potential for UK news media to explain domestic news items in the context of different polices followed by the various devolved administrations.

KEYWORDS citizenship; content analysis; devolution; media; nationhood; public knowledge; UK news; broadcasting

Introduction

In September 1997, the United Kingdom's (UK) political map was redrawn with citizens in Scotland and Wales voting to establish their own political institutions. Northern Ireland quickly followed suit; the 1998 Belfast Agreement completed a constitutional realignment of the four nations¹ which, according to some seasoned political observers, had been bubbling under the surface of UK politics for some time (Nairn, 1977). Major areas of UK policy making—most notably in health and education—were devolved from Westminster to different degrees in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Since then, even though they began with Labour-controlled administrations in common,² Governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and London have pursued quite distinct policies in health and education. In 2003—four years into the devolution settlement—Welsh Assembly leader Rhodri Morgan boldly claimed that “clear red water” divided the policies of the Assembly and Westminster—a speech intended to emphasise the direction of more left-leaning, progressive politics in Wales on the eve of an election.

For UK-wide news media, devolution made coverage of UK politics and public affairs a more difficult and cumbersome task. So, for example, some of the most public debates about education policy in recent years—about top-up fees for higher education, league tables of school performance, faith schools and the nature of the curriculum—have followed different paths in all four nations. As a consequence, a focus on Westminster politics—with a remit largely restricted to English education—would provide only a partial and possibly misleading narrative of education policy across the UK.

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Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each have their own news media outlets, of course, but it would be difficult to argue that a realignment of UK media has matched the major constitutional settlement of devolution. Certainly, attempts to reallocate resources beyond London have been made. UK news features correspondents from across the four nations, and institutions such as the BBC have sought to reorganise their news gathering in response to devolution. Meanwhile some UK national newspapers have re-branded themselves, like the creation of a *Welsh Daily Mirror* edition—albeit a relatively short-lived experiment criticised for lacking “Welsh” substance (Thomas, 2003). However, the trend towards cost-cutting in news operations has inevitably meant a drift towards the centralisation of news, with fewer reporters outside London (Franklin, 2006).

The health of Scottish news remains a matter of debate. According to McNair (2006, p. 38), Scotland has a “public sphere of exceptional richness” because—throughout the eighteenth century—it developed a healthy liberal journalism that continues today. This success has been linked to the articulation of a strong sense of national identity located in Scottish newspapers (Smith, 1994) and subtly addressing readers as “Scottish” rather than “British” (Rosie et al., 2006; cf. Connell, 2003). Meanwhile, broadcast media in Scotland are available in the form of BBC Scotland (in terms of TV, radio, online), Scottish TV, Grampian TV and Borders TV, alongside a number of popular and well-resourced commercial radio stations. Hutchinson (2008, pp. 66–7), however, notes a broad decline of Scottish-based newspapers since the 1970s and an increase in London-produced papers that provide Scottish editions such as *The Scottish Sun*, the *Scottish News of the World* and *The Sunday Times Scotland*.

So while McNair (2006, p. 38) suggests a “substantial news and current affairs output” is available for Scottish viewers, the growing popularity of London-produced papers in Scotland concerns some (Hutchinson, 2008). Debate continues as to whether Scotland is well served with Westminster retaining control of TV and radio policy-making powers (Bell and McNair, 2007).

Welsh media are more fragmented, and few argue that they provide a strong counterpoint to English-based UK media. Historically speaking, media in Wales are often regarded as being more local than national in focus. Wales’s geography (the Welsh mountains make journeys across the country long and slow), language (around a fifth of the country speak Welsh) and the close proximity to English cities such as Bristol and Liverpool all make it difficult to sustain a shared sense of national identity (Jones, 1993). Whilst the most popular daily newspapers in Wales—the *Daily Post* and the *Western Mail*—often claim to represent “the nation”, their content serves north and south readers, respectively (Cushion, 2001). Even during devolved elections, both newspapers tended to address their readership constituencies as opposed to Wales as a whole (Thomas et al., 2003).

The lack of Welsh media clearly has an impact on Welsh national identity: indeed for historian John Davies the development of BBC Wales was a key moment in its sense of nationhood (Davies, 1994). All-Wales news and all-Wales weather meant a nation could, in his view, be more clearly imagined by audiences. BBC Wales (in terms of TV, radio and online) provides a substantial volume of news about the Assembly in Wales and is the most important Welsh source of information regarding devolution (Thomas et al., 2004). HTV—the commercial news provider—provides less Assembly news and has considerably fewer viewers (Thomas et al., 2003). Likewise, the 14 independent commercial radio stations are quite light on news—and, when it is available, celebrity gossip tends to

overshadow news about devolution (Thomas, 2006). During the 2003 Assembly elections, for example, Real Radio FM devoted just one minute of airtime to the campaign (Thomas et al., 2003). Overall, there is no doubt that people in Wales remain highly dependent on UK news media for news about politics and government (see Table 1).

Northern Ireland has, according to McLaughlin (2006, p. 60), “a range and choice of local media out of proportion to its population”. This is largely a result of fragmentation between nationalist and unionist communities. Seventy-three weekly newspapers, for example, serve nationalist and unionist readers whilst five daily newspapers produced in Northern Ireland compete with familiar English titles including *The Sun*, *Times* and *Mirror*. Like Scotland and Wales, BBC Northern Ireland—across TV, radio and online sources—provides a substantial amount of news and current affairs. But unlike the other nations, its commercial rival—Ulster TV—enjoys marginally greater audience share over the BBC and matches its coverage of devolution (McLaughlin, 2006). Indeed, a recent study of the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly campaign found more coverage on the nightly Ulster TV bulletin than on BBC Northern Ireland (Wilson and Fawcett, 2004).

To sum up, there are news outlets in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that, to a greater or lesser extent, might be expected to cover politics in the devolved institutions. But devolution has not diminished the use of UK-wide news media across the four nations. In Wales, for example, an estimated 85 per cent of newspapers bought in Wales are produced in London (Thomas et al., 2004). Likewise, in Scotland, half of all newspapers bought are English-produced, even though many are re-branded as “Scottish” (Rosie et al., 2006). Similarly, whilst newspapers such as the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter* sell reasonably well in Northern Ireland (175,000 in total per day), English newspapers enjoy high circulations. *The Sun* and the *Mirror*, for example, sell 135,000 copies a day, whilst the *News of the World* sells 88,500 (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 61).

Most striking perhaps is the consumption of UK-wide television news across the four nations. Despite the availability of news via new media formats, studies over the last decade continue to show that television remains the main source of information for

TABLE 1
BBC 1 news audiences by nation for weekday network news programmes

	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
<i>One O'Clock News</i>					
Average audience	2.8 million	2.3 million	280,000	140,000	75,000
Audience as % of population	4.9	4.8	6.0	5.1	4.7
<i>Six O'Clock News</i>					
Average audience	4.4 million	3.7 million	350,000	250,000	75,000
Audience as % of population	7.7	7.8	7.3	9.0	4.7
<i>Ten O'Clock News</i>					
Average audience	4.9 million	4.1 million	370,000	250,000	125,000
Audience as % of population	8.6	8.7	7.7	9.0	7.7

Source: BARB (12 months from October 2007 to September 2008).

roughly two-thirds of the UK population (Ofcom, 2007). As a proportion of population, audiences throughout the UK remain fairly similar. Indeed, Scotland has the highest audience (proportionately) for the bulletin at 1 pm, while audiences in Wales are more likely to tune into all three bulletins than audiences in England (see Table 1). In short, UK television bulletins remain a key source of information for people across the four nations.

Despite the importance of UK-wide news provision, previous studies of the coverage of devolved politics tend to focus on news media specific to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, evaluating their performance during key moments such as the referendums that established the devolution settlement (Williams, 2000) or at election times (Cushion, 2001; Thomas et al., 2003, 2004; Wilson and Fawcett, 2004). We would like to broaden the analysis by exploring post-devolution coverage on UK-wide broadcast news, asking:

- How has the devolution of political power affected coverage in UK news bulletins?
- What do viewers and listeners of UK network news learn about the new world of devolved politics—or more specifically, about politics in their own country?
- To what extent is news coverage still tied to traditional models of politics and nationhood centred on Westminster?

The Construction of the Four Nations: Broadcast News Coverage of Post-devolution Politics

The relationship between UK media and audiences since and before devolution contributes to ongoing debates about the ideological role the media play in constructing and reconstructing a “nation”. While citizens within nations share a physical space in everyday life, they are unlikely to know or meet most of the population. The term “Imagined Communities”, coined by Anderson (1983), captures how nations remain bound by an imagined sense of shared cultural, political and economic investment, with the media playing a key role in creating or perpetuating the nature of national identity. This “imagining” is not, of course, ideologically innocent, caught as it is in various discourses about patriotism and the particularities of nationhood. So, for example, scholars have examined how the media coverage of sport often invokes an idea of what it “means” to be “English” that might be highly contested, but that audiences are assumed to share (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003). Our interest here is less in the specific characteristics of the national imagination than in the tension between “Englishness” and more complex, inclusive ideas about “Britishness” or UK citizenship. So, for example, Jason Tuck, in an analysis of the media coverage of the world cup-winning English rugby team, acknowledges that the dominance of England makes “‘British’ identity ... a complex and somewhat confusing construct. Anglocentric views of the United Kingdom tend to inflate the English identity to British proportions” (Tuck, 2003, p. 196). For the largely English-based UK media, a focus on English teams as *the* national representatives have become routine. Notions of “Englishness”, in other words, have often tended to play a hegemonic role in the construction of a British national identity.

If the cultural slippage between England and Britain or the UK has long been a source of frustration in Wales and Scotland, desires for a Welsh or Scottish version of “Britishness” come up against concerns about the break-up of the union. This was notably revealed by the reaction to plans for a “Scottish Six” bulletin in 1998, the idea being to

replace a UK bulletin that was seen as England-centric with one that was Scottish-centric. According to then BBC Director General, John Birt, a Scottish Six would deliver the “end of a single common experience of UK news” and “would encourage separatist tendencies” (Birt, 2002, p. 284 cited in Schlesinger, 2008, p. 38). While Birt’s position remains the prevailing view, it is only tenable if the “single common experience of UK news” is genuinely inclusive. The study we draw upon to examine this question was commissioned by the BBC Trust³ as part of a review of the accuracy and impartiality in BBC output. Their decision to commission research on this topic reflects a broader concern that, despite Birt’s contention, UK-wide media may not be capturing the flavour and complexities of the new era of devolved government.

Our research involved a number of quantitative and qualitative analyses of broadcast news media. While the BBC Trust’s concern was clearly with BBC programming (anything else being beyond their jurisdiction)—and thus our BBC sample is fairly comprehensive—we also looked at some of the main broadcast news providers. Our focus in this article—as opposed to the review for the BBC Trust—is on broadcast news *in general* (indeed, we found that the differences between broadcasters on these issues were minimal). We begin with a content analysis based on a four-week sample of news coverage gathered during an eight-week period in October and November 2007.⁴ This was based on the main news programmes on BBC 1 (bulletins at 1 pm, 6 pm and 10 pm during the week and the main evening bulletins on Saturday and Sunday evening), BBC News 24 (5–6 pm weekdays, 6–7 pm weekends), BBC 2’s *Newsnight*, *Channel 4 News*, ITV’s 6.30 pm news and Sky News (5–6 pm weekdays and 6–7 pm weekends). We also looked at the main news programmes on Radio 4 (the *Today* programme (7–9 am), *The World at One*, *PM* and *Six O’Clock News*) and BBC online.

We then feature two case studies, in order to take a closer look at the coverage of news items that were, in terms of devolution coverage, either typical or notable, examining some of the language used to contextualise policy-making across the four nations.

The Broad Pattern of News Coverage Across the Four Nations

The main content analysis consisted of 4687 news items⁵: Table 2 shows the distribution of the sample amongst TV, BBC radio and BBC online sources.

Previous studies of 24-hour news channels, including BBC News 24, Sky News and ITV News, suggest that if we exclude those stories about the UK or Britain in general (and where location is irrelevant or unimportant) the great majority of domestic news items tend to be located in England rather than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Lewis

TABLE 2
Distribution of sample by media ($N = 4687$)

Media	Number	Percentage
BBC TV	1363	29.1
Non-BBC TV	1057	22.6
BBC radio	1740	37.1
BBC online	527	11.2
Total	4687	100

et al., 2005; Cushion et al., 2009; Cushion and Lewis, 2009). Our findings here suggest a similar pattern.

We looked at two measures of story location: first, when a news item was linked to a specific location (a crime story in Leeds, or a plant closure in Swansea, for example) even if it was reported from the studio, and second, at the location of reporters themselves. Table 3 measures the location of news items (rather than reporters), excluding non-domestic news items (31 per cent of news items) and items that apply to Britain or the UK generally (25 per cent of news items). It suggests that for every one item located in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined, there are 12 located in England (including those from Westminster and Downing Street). If we exclude news items from Westminster/Downing Street (on the basis that these stories *may* refer to the UK as a whole), the ratio is still around eight to one.

In terms of the broad trend of England-centric reporting, there are no major differences between news outlets (Table 4), with some outlets putting a greater emphasis on Westminster, which may be about England or the UK (BBC radio and BBC online) as opposed to a more straightforward emphasis on England (television news in general).

If we look at our other measure of geographical location, we find a similar pattern. Over half the stories in our overall sample were reported by reporters/presenters in the studio, but a significant number involved reporters on location, whose whereabouts is recorded in Table 5. Once again, England dominates. We found three times as many news items from reporters in London, SW1 (Westminster or outside No. 10 Downing Street) than the total number of news items on *any* subject reported from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. Even if we exclude Westminster, reporters were more than eight times more likely to report from England than from the three other nations combined. On television news the ratio is 11 to one.

There are, of course, no precise benchmarks for establishing what might be a fair or plausible geographical spread of news stories. At the very least we can say that broadcasters—and television news in particular—would need to considerably increase its coverage of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to reflect the population of the UK. This is not to say that population should determine the volume of coverage, simply that *England is given significantly more coverage than might be explained by the distribution of the UK-wide audience or population*. To put it bluntly, accusations that UK network news is England-centric would appear to be confirmed.

TABLE 3

Number of news items located in one of the four nations ($N = 1964$ from 4687 items in total)

Location	Number	Percentage
England	1181	60.1
Westminster/Downing Street	630	32.1
Northern Ireland	43	2.2
Scotland	80	4.1
Wales	30	1.5
Total	1964	100

TABLE 4

Percentage (and number) of story locations by media ($N = 1964$ from 4687 items in total)

Media	Story location					Total news items by medium
	England	Westminster	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales	
BBC TV	68.9 (415)	23.3 (140)	2.5 (15)	3.3 (20)	2.0 (12)	100 (602)
Non-BBC TV	63.5 (266)	30.5 (128)	2.1 (9)	2.9 (12)	1 (4)	100 (419)
BBC radio	54.9 (355)	37.1 (240)	1.4 (9)	4.8 (31)	1.9 (12)	100 (647)
BBC online	49 (145)	41.2 (122)	3.4 (10)	5.7 (17)	0.7 (2)	100 (296)
Total	60.1 (1181)	32.1 (630)	2.2 (43)	4.1 (80)	1.5 (30)	100 (1964)

Devolved to the Margins of UK Political Life

It is not surprising, in this context, that less than 1 per cent of news items were about devolved politics, compared to over 15 per cent of news items that had a focus on Westminster politics. These findings demonstrate the extent to which, despite the devolution of key areas like health and education, the new era of devolved politics has failed to dislodge Westminster as the centre of political news.

The few news items in our study that did involve devolved politics tended to concern Scotland, with just a handful of news items about Northern Ireland and only *one* item related to Wales. The single Welsh story could be seen as symptomatic of the peripheral nature of the way devolved government is portrayed, since it was not about the “big issues” of health or education, but the potential banning of electric dog collars. Without belittling the importance of animal welfare, this was not widely seen as the biggest issue in Wales during this period. Indeed, only *one* news item of the 4687 in our sample focused on health or education in its devolved context in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

This point is brought into sharper focus if we look at how health and education stories were covered. When we looked at the 1334 news items specifically located in one of the four nations⁶ (excluding those with a general UK focus, Westminster-based news items or international news items), we found 161 news items about health or education. But nearly all of them—160—were located in England. In this sense, health and education would appear to remain big issues in England (14 per cent of news items based in England concerning health or education), but to have almost disappeared elsewhere. The effect of devolution, in this sense, would seem to be to make those issues that concern the devolved administrations almost entirely peripheral to UK news coverage.

TABLE 5

Percentage (and number) of news items with a reporter on location in one of the four nations ($N = 872$ from 4687 items in total)

Media	Reporter location				
	England	Westminster	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
BBC TV	72 (303)	20.4 (86)	2.4 (10)	3.6 (15)	1.7 (7)
Non-BBC TV	68.7 (180)	26.7 (70)	1.5 (4)	2.3 (6)	0.8 (2)
Radio	62.4 (118)	22.8 (43)	3.2 (6)	9 (17)	2.6 (5)
Total	68.9 (601)	22.8 (199)	2.3 (20)	4.4 (38)	1.6 (14)

Indeed, we found a general absence of social policy news items in Scotland and Wales, where news items about crime and sport tend to dominate—especially in Wales, with over a third (37 per cent) of Scottish news items and three-quarters of Welsh news items (73 per cent) about crime or sport.⁷

The Road Less Taken: The Missed Opportunities of Covering Devolution

In order to explore how devolved politics *might have been* covered, we looked in more detail at all those news items which dealt with issues *relevant to* the new post-devolution world, regardless of whether they actually focused on or mentioned devolved politics. This includes, for example, news items that dealt with devolved aspects of the politics of health and education. We found 361 news items in this category, or just under 8 per cent of the total sample. We then coded these items under a variety of headings listed in Table 7 (a small number of these news items were coded under more than one heading, hence the total number in Table 6 adds up to more than 361).

This is, of course, considerably larger than the number of news items that actually dealt with devolution. What this suggests is that *if devolution is being sidelined, the political areas addressed by devolution are not*. The bulk of these news items covered topics—specific aspects of education or healthcare, for example—where responsibility is now devolved, but made no explicit reference to devolution. Only around one in eight of these news items made *any* specific reference to devolved powers, while a further one in 10 mentioned politicians in the devolved administrations.⁸

By far the most common example of such a story—52 per cent of the 361 news items relevant to devolution—were those that dealt with an area of devolved government but referred only to England (or, in a few cases, England and Wales). So, for example, there were a number of news items that took their lead from an Ofsted report into failing schools in England. These made no reference to the different policies being pursued in the four nations or to schools outside England. The failure to acknowledge other devolved authorities suggests that the England-centric nature of the coverage is often unspoken and assumed rather than acknowledged.

The second most common type of news item in this sample—around a quarter—were UK news items that dealt either partly or implicitly with topics where relevant policy areas have been devolved, without referring to devolution or policies (“whole UK, elements devolved”). So, for example, a story about the problem of “binge drinking” that mentioned the role of education in tackling the problem did not refer to differences in the way the four nations were tackling it. While we would not expect news items of this kind to routinely refer to devolved powers or policies, they do provide an opportunity (in these

TABLE 6
Number of news items relevant to devolution by media ($N = 361$)

Devolved power	BBC TV	Non-BBC TV	Radio	Online	Total
Devolved powers referred to	12	7	15	12	46
Devolved powers relevant but not referred to	10	9	16	12	47
Devolved political process	16	2	6	6	30
England, or England and Wales only	60	19	78	32	189
Whole UK, elements devolved	18	15	39	10	82

cases, not taken) to compare different approaches in the four nations to issues and problems.

We also identified separately a smaller number of news items—47, roughly the same number of stories that did refer to devolved policies or powers—that dealt *explicitly* with areas in which policy is devolved without making any reference to devolved government.⁹ So, for example, there were a number of news items about government targets to tackle hospital “superbugs” such as *Clostridium difficile*, most of which remained oblivious to different approaches and records of the four nations in dealing with this problem. Overall, we found that *the great majority of news items that could have referred to devolved powers or policies did not*.

During the 46 news items that *did* refer to devolved powers, we counted 83 separate references to specific powers (75 separate explicit references and eight implicit references¹⁰—see Table 7). Table 7 shows that, while they may not have been the focus of the news items, these references tended to refer to health, education, taxation or the economy (areas like regeneration) or crime/policing. The most frequent references signalled the fact that the Scottish government does not have full tax-raising powers or mentioned Scotland’s policies on tuition fees and healthcare for the elderly.

We did not include news items about “England only” in this category unless they specifically implied different policies existed in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales (rather than being news items that were simply about England). In most cases we found that news items about England made no reference of any kind to any of the other three nations.

We found a significant proportion of the 361 news items in the “relevant to devolution” sample (74 news items—or 20.5 per cent of the sample) contained information about devolution that was confusing or—implicitly or explicitly—inaccurate (Table 8). These generally involved (in 54 cases) statements or assumptions that were misleading by implication or suggestion, rather than explicitly misleading statements (four cases). So, for example, a story about new government training programmes in England was widely reported in the context of Gordon Brown’s speech about “British jobs for British workers”, and in most cases this gave the *impression* that the new training

TABLE 7

Explicit/implicit references to devolved powers by subject ($N = 83$ references across 46 news items from a total of 361 news reports)

Devolved power	Explicit	Implicit	Total
Animal welfare	1	0	1
Crime	12	1	13
Culture	3	0	3
Economic regeneration	2	0	2
Education	16	2	18
Environment	2	0	2
Equal rights	0	2	2
Health	16	0	16
Social policy	6	0	6
Tax or economy	16	3	19
Transport	1	0	1
Total	75	8	83

TABLE 8

Information in news items that was confusing or inaccurate about devolution, by media ($N = 74$ from a total of 361 news reports)

Inaccuracy/confusion	Media				Total
	BBC TV	Non-BBC TV	BBC radio	BBC online	
States explicitly that a story applies UK-wide when it does not	1	0	3	0	4
Assumes that a story applies UK-wide when it does not	12	12	23	7	54
Confuses UK with Britain/Great Britain	2	1	3	5	11
Incorrectly implies devolved powers	3	1	3	1	8
Other inaccuracy	3	0	2	1	6
Total	18	13	30	13	74

programmes were being rolled out across the UK rather than only in England (we look at this story in more detail shortly).

Table 8 also includes the small number of news items (11) that confused Britain with the UK.¹¹ A few news items (eight) also implied that a devolved government had power to do certain things when in fact it did not (all of these involved the suggestion that the SNP-led Scottish Parliament had the power to declare independence should a referendum mandate it—a power that remains legally in the hands of the Westminster government).

Finally, we looked to see how many news items in the devolution sample took the opportunity to *compare* the devolved records or policies of any of the four nations. Only 16 news items (or 4 per cent) in our sample of news items relevant to devolution did so (a tiny proportion of the news sample as whole) with 24 comparisons being made across these 16 news items.

Few of these comparisons went beyond references to the fact that there *were* different policies—again, the notable examples here were comparisons between England and Scotland on tuition fees and healthcare for the elderly. None of the news items in our sample compared the approaches taken in the four nations to tackling NHS policy (dealing with hospital infections, for example) or to many aspects of education policy, where Scotland and Wales have not followed various English initiatives around testing, league tables, city academies and other newsworthy areas.

TABLE 9

Number of news items which took the opportunity to make comparisons between devolved nations (by media) ($N = 361$)

Subject compared	Media			Total
	BBC TV	Radio	Online	
Health	1	3	2	8
Education	2	2	1	6
Crime	5	–	1	6
Tax or economy	–	2	–	3
Transport	–	–	–	1
Total	8	7	4	24

Overall, our content analysis suggests that, in terms of the sheer volume of news items, devolved government is very much on the periphery of UK news coverage. It also suggests an ideological slippage whereby England replaces Britain or the UK as the “nation”. Our case studies bring this into sharper focus.

Case Study 1: Reporting an England-only Story: Covering an Ofsted Report on Failing English Schools

On 17 October 2007 the results of an Ofsted report into English secondary schools were published. The report claimed that half of these schools were failing and that one in 10 were deemed to be “unsatisfactory”. We found nine instances of this story being covered, with a sequence of 15 different reports and/or interviews (giving us a total of 15 news items across the nine stories). None of these reports were, in a technical sense, misleading: in every case, the fact that the Ofsted report referred only to English schools was briefly mentioned at the beginning of news reports. So, for example, the BBC *Ten O’Clock News* opened with the line, “an appalling indictment of the education service, that’s the verdict of the Chief Inspector of Schools after a report found that one in 10 secondary schools in England are inadequate and almost half are offering a no-better than satisfactory education”. But, as this opening suggests, the English location of the story is matter of detail rather than emphasis: it begins, after all: “an appalling indictment of *the* education service” rather than “an appalling indictment of the education service in England”.

Despite the sometimes detailed coverage, at no point was its English location stressed. Only one of the individual reports/interviews we looked at on the BBC *Ten O’Clock News* made any further reference to England (in this case, before presenting statistics generated by the Ofsted report—statistics presented earlier at 1 pm and 6 pm without such a reminder). Overall, the language used in these news items suggested that this was primarily a story about schools rather than about *English* schools, and a less attentive viewer/listener might easily have assumed the report referred to the whole of the Britain or the UK. This is especially likely when there was a sequence of reports/interviews based on the story, without any reminders of its specificity to English schools. Coverage on BBC News 24, for instance, consisted of two news items (a package and an interview): the only reference to England being confined to the first few seconds of the package, and not repeated or mentioned at any point during the subsequent interview.

Indeed, across 15 different news items, England was mentioned only 11 times. While confusion between England and the UK or Britain on the audience’s part would therefore depend upon their missing or forgetting the initial reference to English schools, research on news audiences suggests that this is, in fact, quite likely to occur: that if information is not stressed or repeated, it tends not to be recalled unless it is already well-established in public discourse (Lewis, 2001).

Such confusion may have been increased by the use of UK politicians, such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown (on the BBC *Ten O’Clock News*) and, to a lesser extent, other Westminster politicians like Lord Adonis and Nick Gibb (used widely). While this was often appropriate, at no point was it made clear that UK ministers or “the government” were acting in a devolved context, with no responsibility outside England.

In some cases, this story was sometimes followed immediately by other news items *about schools in the UK*, without any clear explanation of the shift in focus, with the

underlying assumption that there was no difference between the two. So, for example, *The World at One* did a series of reports that drew on the Ofsted story, one of which was based on a Children's Society report on the social divide in *British* schools. The interview with the Chief Executive of the Children's Society thus moved the story from an English focus to a British focus without at any point signalling the shift.

A comparison with typical news items from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland is instructive here. In these cases, the viewer/listener is generally much more likely to be reminded of the story's location. In a two-minute BBC story on a Welsh Assembly proposal to ban electric dog collars, for example, there were six explicit mentions of Wales—four by the reporter and two by interviewees. Similarly, in a five-minute BBC interview about the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in Northern Ireland, there were five explicit references to Northern Ireland and five mentions of the Irish parties or paramilitary groups, by both the presenter and the interviewee.

In total, in stories from the other three nations audiences were reminded of the location 23 times across just three news items. This is a ratio of location identifiers to reports that is *10 times* higher than in the English schools story.

It appears from this analysis that when news items are about England, reporters do not feel the need to remind audiences of their geographical specificity, while they routinely do so when news items are about Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. And while none of these stories was technically inaccurate or misleading, the structure and style of these news items—moving seamlessly from English to UK schools, without any suggestions that this was an area of devolved responsibility—may make it difficult for people to recognise the limited remit of the original story, let alone with the differences between the four nations in education policy.

Case Study 2: Misrepresenting the Nation: "British Jobs for British Workers"

On 16 November 2007 the UK government—again, acting in a devolved context—announced a new initiative to create millions of new training places and apprenticeships in England. The story appeared on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 (across six news items totalling over 20 minutes) and on ITV's 6.30 pm news (one two-minute item). It also appeared on BBC online's UK and Politics sites, below the top three news items in the running order in the "Other Top News Items" section.¹² *Today's* opening line at the top of the 7 am bulletin framed the story with a refrain repeated throughout the coverage: "The government is creating seven and a half million training places to make good on the Prime Minister's promise to train 'British workers for British jobs'" (a pledge made by Gordon Brown in speeches at the Labour party conference and TUC conference in September 2007). However, this story was based on an initiative announced by Skills Secretary John Denham to the Commons, and only applied to trainees in England.

The newsreader then introduced a one-minute package from the social affairs correspondent who again referred to "unskilled British workers". The report went on to outline the government plans, at no point adding that the scheme would apply only to England (indeed, England is not mentioned). The report also brought up the themes of immigrants vying with the "British" for jobs and the alleged failure of the education system making the new training initiative necessary.

Today returned to the story with an interview with Jack Dromey, Deputy General Secretary of UNITE. Once again, the discussion centred on "British jobs" and "British

workers”, referencing the creation of apprentice places and the type of training to be on offer. During this item the word “Britain” (or “British”) is used 18 times, “England” (or “English”) not at all.

Today returned to the story again at 8.10 am, and for the first time, added: “today, the government is going to announce the creation of seven and a half million training places in *England*” (our emphasis). During an interview with an employment agency boss, the focus shifted back to a discussion of British workers competing with migrants. John Humphrys then conducted a 10-minute interview with John Denham which opened with the following:

Let’s try and be clear first of all, these seven and half million, er, training places in England, is the idea that you are training British people, English people in this particular case perhaps, er, to compete with immigrants for jobs?

In 20 minutes of coverage, this was, perhaps, the clearest reference to the English location of the story. Nonetheless, throughout the two interviews “England” (or “English”) was used a total of four times while “British” was used 15 times. A well-informed, highly attentive listener to the *Today* programme may have an inkling of the devolved nature of this story during the interviews at 8.10 am, but the weight of coverage would have left them with the impression that the schemes were for “British workers” in order to compete against immigrants.

On ITV, the newsreader’s introduction did not specify for whom the training places were to be provided. Rather, the government announcement was used as a way to lead into a package about Polish workers coming to the UK. The report used the words “Britain”, “UK” and “England” interchangeably throughout, without ever making it clear that the government were only making good on their “British jobs for British workers” pledge in one of the four nations.

Overall, the word “England” (or “English”) was only used five times by journalists, while “Britain” or “British” was 39 times, the “UK” eight times, and “the country” three times. While the coverage in our first case study may have created an impression in which, in the absence of a devolved context, England = Britain or the UK, the second conflates the two more explicitly.

Conclusions: The Evolution of Devolution

While politicians have been busy legislating post-devolution, UK news media have found it difficult to reflect the changing contours of political life. Audiences across the UK rely heavily on network news for their information about politics (see Table 1), so the lack of coverage or engagement with devolved policies does little to inform people—especially outside England—about who is in charge and what they are doing. Regular viewers of UK network news, our study suggests, could remain oblivious of the fact that important decisions in areas like health and education are being made in *four separate places*, while the decisions themselves, outside England, are almost entirely peripheral.

There are strong indications that behind this failure lies a long-standing cultural tendency, as Tuck puts it, “to inflate the English identity to British proportions” (Tuck, 2003, p. 196). Just as English sports teams receive UK-wide coverage as *the* “home” team, English schools and English hospitals stand in for schools and hospitals across the UK. We do not wish to rehash discussions about the colonial nature of the English imagination: suffice to

say our study indicates that, regardless of intent, English-centric assumptions about national identity are clearly deep-rooted. This makes it easy for journalists in England (which is where most of those we see are most of the time) to simply forget about the other nations and speak to and for the English majority.

For the many people living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who rely on UK network news, this inevitably leads to a democratic deficit, where the nature of their devolved governments—or the policies they pursue—is neither understood nor scrutinised. But there is also a missed opportunity for everyone here. Devolution offers journalists the chance to assess policy differences between devolved governments, or to make comparisons between the records and/or policies of any of the four nations. A “compare and contrast” approach across the four nations would not only help promote audience understanding of devolved politics, but of politics generally.

Given the diversity of political parties now in control of the devolved institutions, the divergence between the political life in the four nations is only likely to increase. This makes it critical that the UK news media keep up with the dynamic world of devolution, not least in terms of providing a more balanced coverage of devolved politics across the four nations. Of course, making sense of any “clear water” that divides Westminster and the other devolved institutions is sometimes a complicated, confusing and time-consuming task. But any scrutiny of policy can only be enhanced by looking at alternatives close to home.

While the limits of the English imagination often ignore the Celtic complexities of British or UK nationhood, perceptions of national identity have always been contested. Indeed, the very act of commissioning this research by the BBC Trust suggests an awareness of this, and since the publication of the findings the BBC has made a commitment to improving their coverage of the devolved institutions (BBC Trust, 2008). But we also need to be aware that whatever editorial or structural changes are made to the reporting and news-gathering process of devolution, there remain, for BBC news and other UK national media, ideological inconsistencies in the construction of *four* nations within *one* Union. In moments of war and high drama, from the blitz to Suez, Royal weddings to Diana’s death, national broadcasters, particularly the BBC, have brought shared UK experiences that bind rather than separate the Union. While shared experiences might be on the decline in a more global, multi-channel culture, for the BBC much of its purpose and its instinct is to reflect the nations collectively rather than individually. The BBC, in this sense, is stuck between a rock and a hard place—while the instinct might be to address commonalities in the UK, devolution forces us to consider abandoning the idea that there is one centre, one set of binding institutions. Understanding devolution requires, in this sense, more than an appreciation of administrative technicalities, but a stretching of our concept of nationhood to embrace not singularity but difference.

NOTES

1. While we refer to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as “nations” throughout the article, we are aware that this category is problematic in a number of respects. They are, rather, regions that make up the country “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland”. Nonetheless, we refer to “nation” to convey a political identity semi-independent of “British” or “Irish”. See Butler (1995) for a detailed discussion about the

difficulties BBC Northern Ireland have historically faced in constructing Northern Ireland as a “nation”.

2. Apart from a period when the National Assembly in Wales was controlled by a Labour–Liberal coalition.
3. Following the disbanding of the Board of Governors, the BBC Trust plays a key role in monitoring BBC programming and advising the BBC on the public’s behalf.
4. The specific date ranges covered by the sample are 13–19 October, 27 October to 2 November, 10–16 November and 24–30 November 2007.
5. By news item we refer to a discrete, self-contained presentation of a story—a brief presenter’s introduction followed by a report, for example. Major stories will sometimes involve two or even three news items back to back.
6. For the purposes of this analysis we have excluded the tiny number of news items in the sample that deal with more than one of the four nations.
7. This compares with 17 per cent of news items about crime and sport across the sample as a whole, and 33 per cent of English news items.
8. One example includes Scottish Labour leader, Wendy Alexander, whose involvement in the campaign contributions scandal was featured across several outlets (the latter are referred to in the table as “devolved political process”).
9. This category may overlap with items about England only.
10. An explicit reference directly specifies a devolved policy—such as the free prescription charges in Wales—while an implicit reference is more opaque: so for example, a story about changing the legal smoking age specified that this applied to England, Scotland and Wales, thereby implying that Northern Ireland had powers to develop their own policy.
11. An error of this kind would be to confuse the United Kingdom (as a political entity, across which UK-wide policies from Westminster apply) with the island of Great Britain (therefore excluding Northern Ireland by implication).
12. The BBC online news item, “Skills Drive ‘to Boost Workforce’”, 16 November 2007, can be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7097125.stm>, accessed 20 October 2008.

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Appendix A: Inter-coder reliability statistics

Coding category	Percentage accuracy
Story subject	90
Story location	92.5
Reporter location	97.5
Devolved political focus	97.5
Countries covered	92.5
Devolved powers referred to	100
Non-devolved powers referred to	97.5
Inaccuracies	97.5
Comparisons	100