

# **From Callaghan To Credit Crunch: Changing Trends in British Television News 1975-2009**

**Steven Barnett and Gordon Neil Ramsay, University of Westminster  
and Ivor Gaber, University of Bedfordshire**

## **Executive Summary**

- This study analyses changing trends in UK television news over the last 35 years. It extends the content analysis of our first study, *From Callaghan to Kosovo* (published in 2000) to 2009, thereby creating the most comprehensive longitudinal study of UK television news to date.
- For the present study, 357 evening news bulletins from 2004 and 2009 were analysed, drawn from BBC1, ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5 as well as (for the first time) the BBC and Sky's 24 hour news channels. A total of 5458 stories were individually coded into one of 31 categories, following an identical system of categorisation to that used in the first study.
- As before, these 31 story categories were then aggregated into "Broadsheet" or "Tabloid" according to carefully constructed criteria, explained in our report. Broadsheet categories were further divided into "Domestic" and "Foreign" to allow for analysis of trends in foreign coverage.
- Despite major upheavals over the last ten years in the technological and economic environment in which television news is produced, distributed and consumed, we have found no evidence of a significant shift towards a more tabloid news agenda. Even in the face of acute commercial pressure and serious audience fragmentation, every evening news bulletin, except for Channel Five, has maintained a predominantly serious agenda.
- This is particularly true of the two BBC1 bulletins which, over the full 35 year span of the study, have shown no significant change in the balance of their evening bulletins. While the two ITV bulletins have doubled the level of tabloid coverage since 1975, there has been no noticeable increase since 1999, and the balance remains two thirds broadsheet to one third tabloid. The clear differentiation between BBC and ITV which we noted in our first study has therefore been consolidated but has not widened.
- On the BBC1 6pm bulletin, tabloid coverage fell between 1999 and 2009, while over the full 35 year period there has been a slight increase of around 5%. Overall, three quarters of the bulletins in 2009 continued to be broadsheet, with a strong domestic emphasis.

- Tabloid content in ITV's early evening bulletins had risen to a peak of one third in 1999, which we suggested in our earlier study might herald a longer term strategic shift. In fact, the tabloid proportion has remained consistent during the 2000s at around one third. The bulletin's level of foreign coverage in 2009 was identical to its counterpart on the BBC.
- The BBC late evening bulletin has maintained an overwhelmingly broadsheet agenda over the full 35 years, only once (in 1985) falling below 80%. Its foreign coverage, one third of the total in 2009, is markedly higher than its earlier bulletin or its ITV competitor. There has been a small increase of 5% tabloid coverage over the last 10 years to around one fifth of the total.
- As with its earlier bulletin, tabloid content on ITV late evening news had risen to one third in 1999, but has also levelled out during the 2000s. A clear differentiation with the BBC's bulletin has been maintained, both in the level of tabloid content (around one third versus one fifth) and in the overall level of foreign coverage (one quarter on ITV versus one third on BBC).
- *Channel 4 News*, as anticipated, has maintained the most consistently broadsheet news agenda over the entire period of study both in proportion – typically 80-90% of content – and in the absolute volume of broadsheet coverage. There has been a slight but significant rise in tabloid content over the past decade, for reasons which we explain in the report, but this remains under 20% of the total.
- Only Channel 5's evening news output displayed a substantial shift in its output during the course of this study, swinging dramatically from a tabloid-driven to a broadsheet-driven agenda between 1999 and 2004, and then back again by 2009. By that point, over half its main evening bulletin was tabloid, easily the highest of all the bulletins measured.
- Our conclusions from the first study, that there was a healthy balance of serious, light and international news coverage available to viewers across the main evening bulletins, are thus reinforced by this updated study. Within a predominantly serious framework, there remains a diversity of news output from the more highbrow BBC at 10 and Channel 4 News to the slightly more populist and domestically-oriented ITV bulletins to the unashamedly populist (and youth-oriented) Channel 5 News.
- Our analysis of the flagship programmes for the two 24-hour news channels on BBC News and Sky indicates a pattern that was not dissimilar from the main early evening bulletins: a mostly broadsheet and heavily domestic agenda. There was a significantly more tabloid agenda on Sky (a difference of over 10%), explained partly by a longer sports section.

- In a more finely tuned analysis of the categories, several interesting trends were evident:
  - The last ten years saw significantly increased coverage of political affairs across all terrestrial bulletins, which is not entirely explained by the global economic crisis.
  - ‘Light’ coverage – that is, unequivocally populist stories excluding crime, sport and other potentially ambiguous subject areas – comprise a very small proportion of all bulletins except for Channel 5 where it accounts for nearly 40%.
  - The rise in tabloid content on *Channel 4 News* (albeit to levels which are still the lowest of all bulletins) is attributable to a combination of slight rises in Sport, Crime, and Light stories.
  - 24-hour news bulletins contain significantly more sport and business news than traditional bulletins on BBC and ITV, and therefore devote less time to political affairs and social policy issues.
  
- A more qualitative analysis of three specific stories across the main news bulletins found surprising similarities in overall approaches, use of television production techniques (such as live two-ways), and time devoted to different elements of each story.
  
- Overall, our data suggest that television news on the mainstream channels has proved remarkably resilient in the face of enormous economic and technological upheavals. It continues to fulfil the democratic and informational roles established by the public service framework of the 2003 Communications Act and the 2006 BBC Charter and Agreement.
  
- Television remains the most important and trusted source of national and international news for the vast majority of people in Britain, and will continue to play a central role in the informational needs of British citizens. We therefore believe it is vital that governments do not attempt to dismantle the protective frameworks that have so far sustained the relative seriousness of mainstream news agendas which make a very significant contribution to public knowledge and an informed democracy.

Full text can be found [here](#).

Authors can be contacted as follows:

Prof Steven Barnett: [s.barnett@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:s.barnett@wmin.ac.uk)  
 Prof Ivor Gaber: [ivorgaber@gmail.com](mailto:ivorgaber@gmail.com)  
 Dr Gordon Ramsay [g.ramsay@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:g.ramsay@wmin.ac.uk)