

BBC News & Current Affairs Review: PWC Research

Qualitative research to provide an in-depth understanding of audience perceptions of BBC news and current affairs content

Summary report

October 2019



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In summary

This is a summary report based on extensive qualitative research exploring audiences' views on BBC news and current affairs.

Audience workshops were conducted in 17 locations across the UK. We spoke to people from a wide range of backgrounds (age/gender/socio-economic group), including people from minority ethnic backgrounds. We also conducted depth interviews in the form of 'friendship pairs' with young people aged 16-20.



The research sought to understand news audiences':

- Current news choices, behaviours and needs
- Perceptions of BBC news and current affairs in meeting their news needs
- Views on the BBC's performance as a provider of trusted, impartial news that informs the electorate.

Key Findings

Overall, the BBC's news and current affairs content appeals more to audiences with more interest in 'serious', so-called 'hard' news

Our research found a split between those who engage in news that is perceived as 'important' to them, society and the world as a whole, and those whose engagement is driven more by what is 'interesting' to them.

The BBC's news and current affairs output better satisfies the more serious, so-called 'hard' news consumers (i.e. breaking news, important developments in politics, science, health, etc.). In this report, these 'hard' news consumers are typically:



- More habitually engaged in news (whether routinely checking throughout the day online, morning radio news or regular evening TV news)
- More selective about their news sources
- More dismissive of 'soft' news (e.g. entertainment news, popular culture)
- Looking to be informed and educated by news output; tend to spend more time consuming news

In contrast, the BBC's news output is currently less appealing to news consumers only moderately interested in so-called 'hard' news. In this report, these consumers typically:



- Prioritise news more 'relevant' to them (over and above broader societal issues)
- Seek news that is succinct and easy to digest (less detail, less depth, spending less time on news)
- Looks to be informed and entertained by news output.
- Typically have a higher interest in so-called 'soft' news stories (e.g. entertainment news, popular culture).

Irrespective of levels of engagement, across the UK the BBC is seen as a reliable and trusted source for breaking news

Across the sample, BBC news was seen as the benchmark for 'high quality' news provision, in terms of the professionalism of its presentation, tone, structure and consistency of delivery – across all platforms (TV, radio and online). In particular, it was praised for its reliability for breaking news compared to other UK news providers. Even those less engaged with BBC news said they felt it performed well – emphasising it was a trusted source - even if they typically chose other sources for their news.

News consumers less interested in hard news were still occasionally engaging with BBC news; often online when seeking a 'reliable' take on breaking news, or through following links on news feed in social media. Additionally, those who listened to BBC radio – particularly Radio 1 and Radio 2 - passively engaged with the shorter news bulletins on the hour. This was seen as sufficient, giving them the headlines they needed to keep up to date.

Overall, younger audiences were more likely to engage in the BBC's news coverage online. This was often light touch engagement across a variety of news topics. Additionally, younger audiences appeared more interested in larger global issues (e.g. climate change).

In contrast, older audiences prioritised TV and to a lesser extent radio for getting their news. For older audiences, expectations and perceptions of BBC news were relatively ingrained; it was a long-established reliable source for serious, accurate and professionally presented news coverage. Compared to younger audiences, older news consumers also prioritised local/national and UK news.

BBC news has a well established, distinctive brand image, which can be perceived both as a positive and a negative

BBC news has a distinctive brand, which was less apparent for other news providers. Across the sample, regardless of levels of engagement, BBC news was associated with accuracy and reliability.

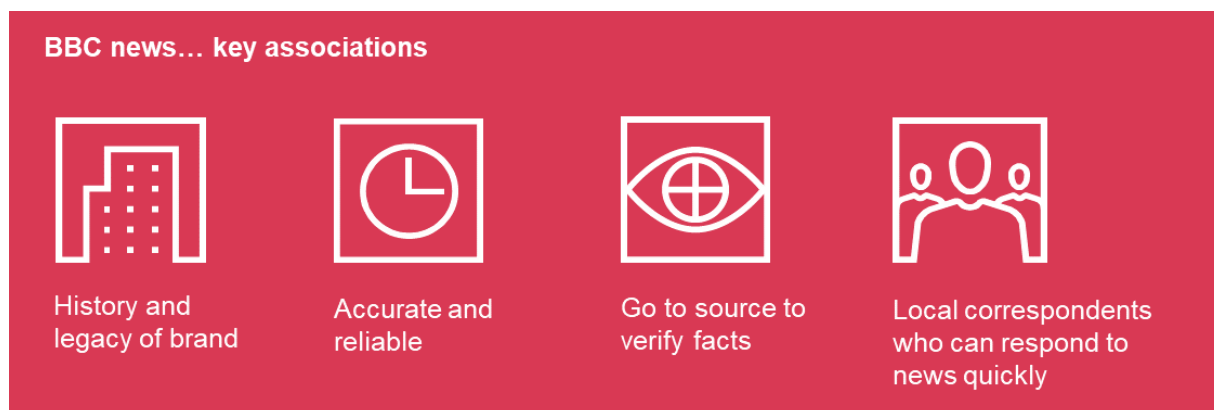


Figure 1: Key top of mind associations with BBC news across the sample

However, this distinctive brand image is perceived both as a positive (reliable, accurate, trusted) and as a negative (boring, ‘highbrow’, dry, safe, dominated by politics), and is also cited as a reason for those less engaged by BBC news to use other sources.

There is a perception that the BBC is held up to greater scrutiny than other news broadcasters because it is publicly funded and due to its historical legacy

As it is publicly funded, audiences expected BBC news to offer a service that can be trusted and relied upon. However, a low-level criticism across the research sessions was that the funded model made some suspicious of the BBC being controlled by the government.

Overall, the BBC had a reputation for being ‘balanced’ and ‘neutral’ in its tone and coverage, across the UK, but it meant it was more noticeable if it was perceived to deviate from this. Some news consumers questioned the BBC’s impartiality, based on a variety of factors including their own experience as well as the views expressed by other key influences (e.g. perceptions expressed in newspapers or social media, word of mouth or the views of family, friends and acquaintances).

Overall, audiences identified four key challenges they felt BBC news needed to consider going forward. These were: relevance, reach of BBC online, perceptions of impartiality, and distinctiveness.

Relevance

“ Make it talk to me better. I feel like BBC News is for older, middle class, suity-types. It always has been.

Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, London

Relevance was discussed in three ways:

- **Style of news:** perceived as serious, opinion-free, dry, middle-class and ‘for older’ audiences.
- **Content:** too detailed, too focused on politics, too England/London/Westminster focused, particularly with reference to TV news.
- **Representation:** felt to lack diversity in terms of presenters (a lack of ‘people like me’), coverage (i.e. who features in reports), particularly among minority ethnic groups and younger audiences in this study.

Reach of BBC Online

“ Online, the [BBC] news is good. It’s got a lot more going on, more I can relate to. It’s not all politics..

Black British, Male, 25-44, Bristol

When visited, BBC News online had high appeal across the sample. It was seen as providing breadth and depth of content, including more irreverent or so-called ‘softer’ news that appealed to those more moderately engaged by news.

However, there was a challenge in reaching this audience; the less engaged audiences did not generally visit BBC News online or use the News app. They either had not come across it, or were put off based on experience of the BBC’s TV news coverage and their overriding view that the BBC’s news coverage was ‘not for them’. Additionally, some younger audiences were not always aware of, or bothered about the source when clicking through to news content from aggregators or social media.

Perceptions of Impartiality

“ Stop giving air time to UKIP leaders and the like. They don’t represent normal people’s views.

Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham

Striking the balance between sufficient challenge whilst remaining ‘duly impartial’ was seen as something the BBC could improve on. Criticisms ranged from the perceived prominence of extreme views in political coverage on the one hand (e.g. guests on Question Time), to perceived ‘fence sitting’ on issues and lacking any opinion or defence of its position on the other.

This was particularly evident to those engaged in the BBC’s political coverage on both radio and TV; radio presenters were often seen as more fearless and challenging (e.g. Radio 4’s Today Programme) whereas TV presenters were sometimes viewed as more passive (e.g. Andrew Marr on Sunday and challenge to extreme views on Question Time were mentioned).

Distinctiveness

“ The BBC news is the one you trust. It’s got the history, the trained journalists. But it’s also, well, just really boring, particularly in the morning [ref: BBC Breakfast on BBC1].

Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Thurrock

The BBC’s news coverage was widely seen as very distinctive, but can be both a reason to engage and not to:

- Positively, it was ‘distinctive’ in how highly it was regarded; this meant highly professional, long-established, well-trained journalists; the BBC rarely get it wrong.
- But less positively, ‘distinctive’ also meant more serious, dry and lacking engagement (i.e. entertainment factor) compared to other providers, especially for those more moderately interested in serious or so-called ‘hard’ news. This ingrained image was a key subconscious barrier to engagement with BBC news.

Methodology overview

Research background

As part of Ofcom’s review into BBC news and current affairs, Ofcom commissioned qualitative research to understand what audiences wanted from news providers, and how well BBC news and current affairs delivered these requirements.

Research objectives

To explore perceptions of BBC news and current affairs output across platforms and a range of news audiences. This can be broken down into three specific objectives:

- Understanding the news landscape: news behaviours, choices, and needs (and where the BBC fits into this)
- Exploring how well the BBC’s delivery of news and current affairs is meeting audience needs
- Exploring perceptions of the BBC as a provider of trusted, impartial news that informs the electorate.

Method and Sample

Figure 2 below summarises the methodology and set-up at each session.

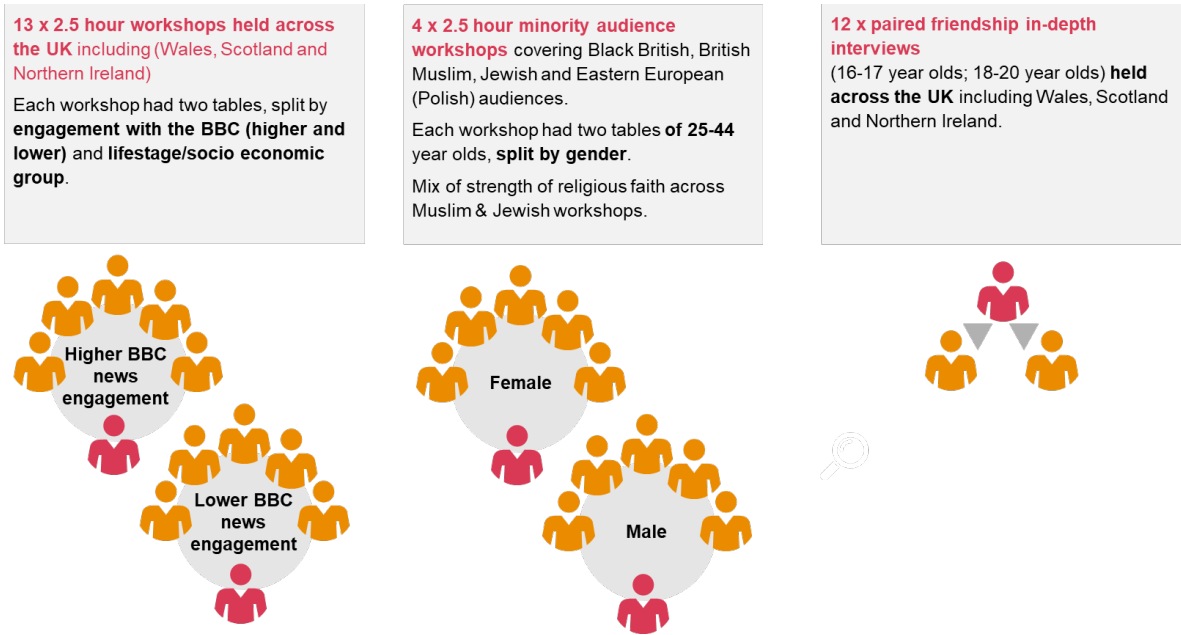
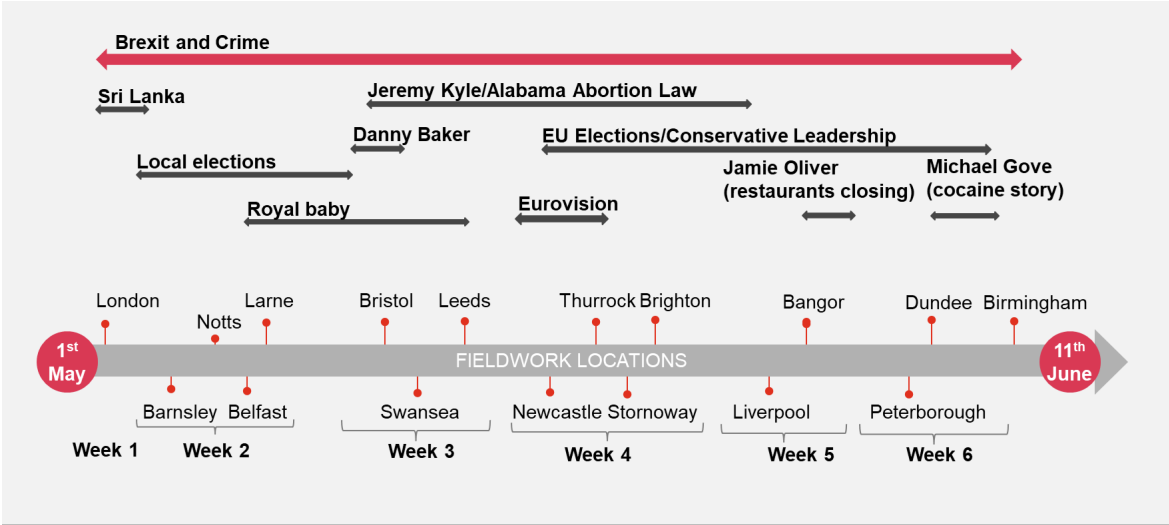


Figure 2: methodological overview of the sessions

All participants were regular news consumers (daily or most days). Rejectors of the BBC and strong advocates of the BBC were screened out, as were people with very strong opinions about Brexit (for and against) in order to avoid extreme opinions dominating discussions.

All participants completed a pre-task diary recording their news consumption (sources, occasions, stories of interest) in the week prior to the session, including two days where they were ‘deprived’ of their preferred news source and required to consume an alternative. Participants also took part in a reflective stage after the workshops to feed back on the BBC’s priorities for news coverage going forward.

Fieldwork took place between 1st May and 13th June 2019, across the UK. Figure 3, below, highlights some of the key stories in the news over this period. In particular, politics (Brexit/local and EU elections and the Conservative Leadership race) and youth/gang crime dominated the news throughout this period.



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Figure 3: Summary of high-profile news stories during the fieldwork period

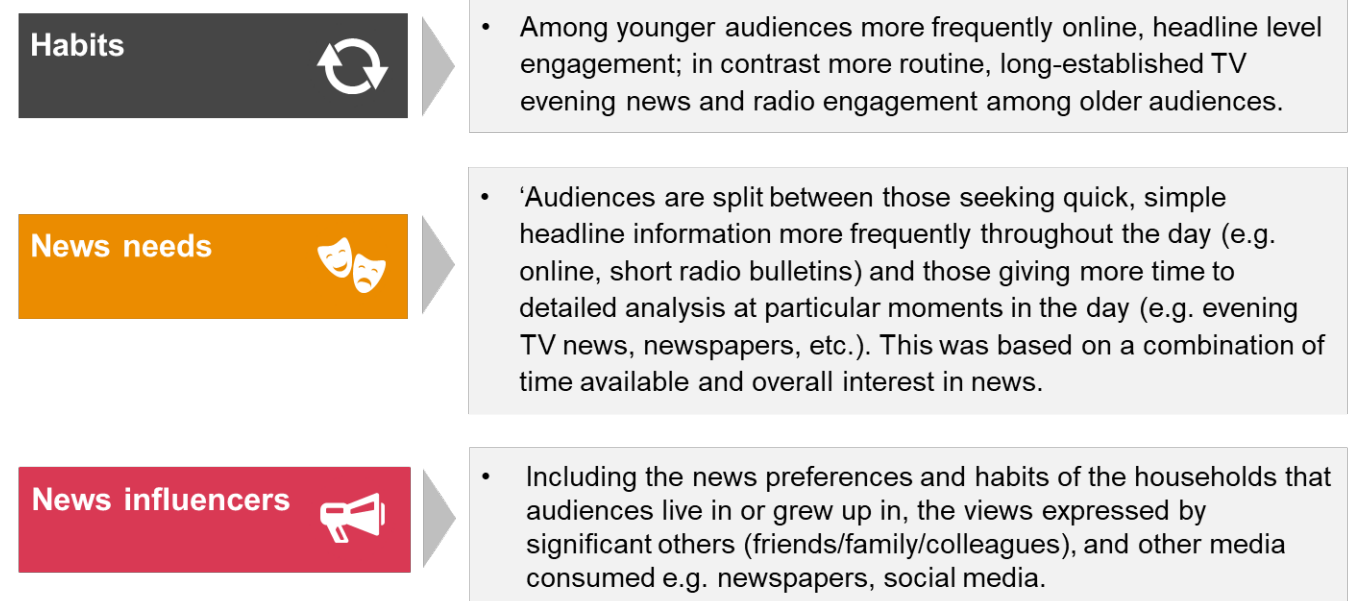
Main Findings

Section 1: Context – UK news audience behaviours

News consumption is driven by established habits, needs and influencers

“I think people are creatures of habit, and we tend to go where we always have. It’s partly what you grew up with. So I’m ITV [News] as I grew up in an ITV News household.” Lower BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Nottingham

News consumption is frequently based on a combination of:



The implication is that engagement with BBC news is ‘handed down’ through generations and can set expectations about what news should be and how it should be presented. The influence of ‘other media’ (e.g. newspapers, social media) is also important in setting expectations and perceptions of BBC news, both positively and negatively.

Long established patterns of TV or radio consumption also appears to have some impact on online news choices; there was some correlation in choice of brands between TV/radio they grew up with and ‘go to’ sources for online news. e.g. Sky News TV consumers getting the Sky News app on their phone, and similarly BBC TV news viewers downloading the BBC News app.

Heavy news consumption does not necessarily correlate to a strong interest in serious or so-called 'hard' news

"I check news daily on my phone. I like hearing about the celebrities I watch on TV or who I follow online. Brexit, politics, nah. Not for me." Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, Swansea

In this sample, despite all recruits being regular consumers of news, the methods of access and depth of engagement varied considerably. This impacted on the choices of providers, the time spent engaging in news, and how often news was sought.

Our research identified two types of news consumers. For simplicity, these are described throughout the report as those more interested in 'hard' news and those more interested in 'soft' news.

Typically, 'hard' news consumers were:

- Spending more time with news and more habitual/routine in where and when they got their news; whether routine checking throughout the day online, morning radio news or regular evening TV news
- More selective about their news sources (i.e. seeking reputable, accurate providers)
- Using a range of news platforms (TV, online, radio and/or newspapers)
- Interested in 'hard' news i.e. breaking news in more depth, important developments in politics, science, health, etc., and more dismissive of 'soft' news (e.g. entertainment news, celebrity news). They prioritised 'important' news (for them/for society).
- Looking to be informed and educated by news output.

In contrast, the "soft" news consumers were typically:

- Looking for headline level information to keep informed, i.e. online news feeds, short radio bulletins, 'lighter' TV news (e.g. via shows such as Good Morning Britain on ITV)
- Prioritising news more relevant to them, i.e. that fit with their interests, affected them or their local area (rather than news that's important to all)
- Seeking news that's succinct and easy to digest (less detail, less depth)
- Looking to be informed and entertained by news output (i.e. higher focus on celebrity news, sport news, magazine style content within the news).

Figure 4 below highlights how this split in news engagement plays out across news audiences, with only breaking news and today's headlines being seen as universally important and interesting.

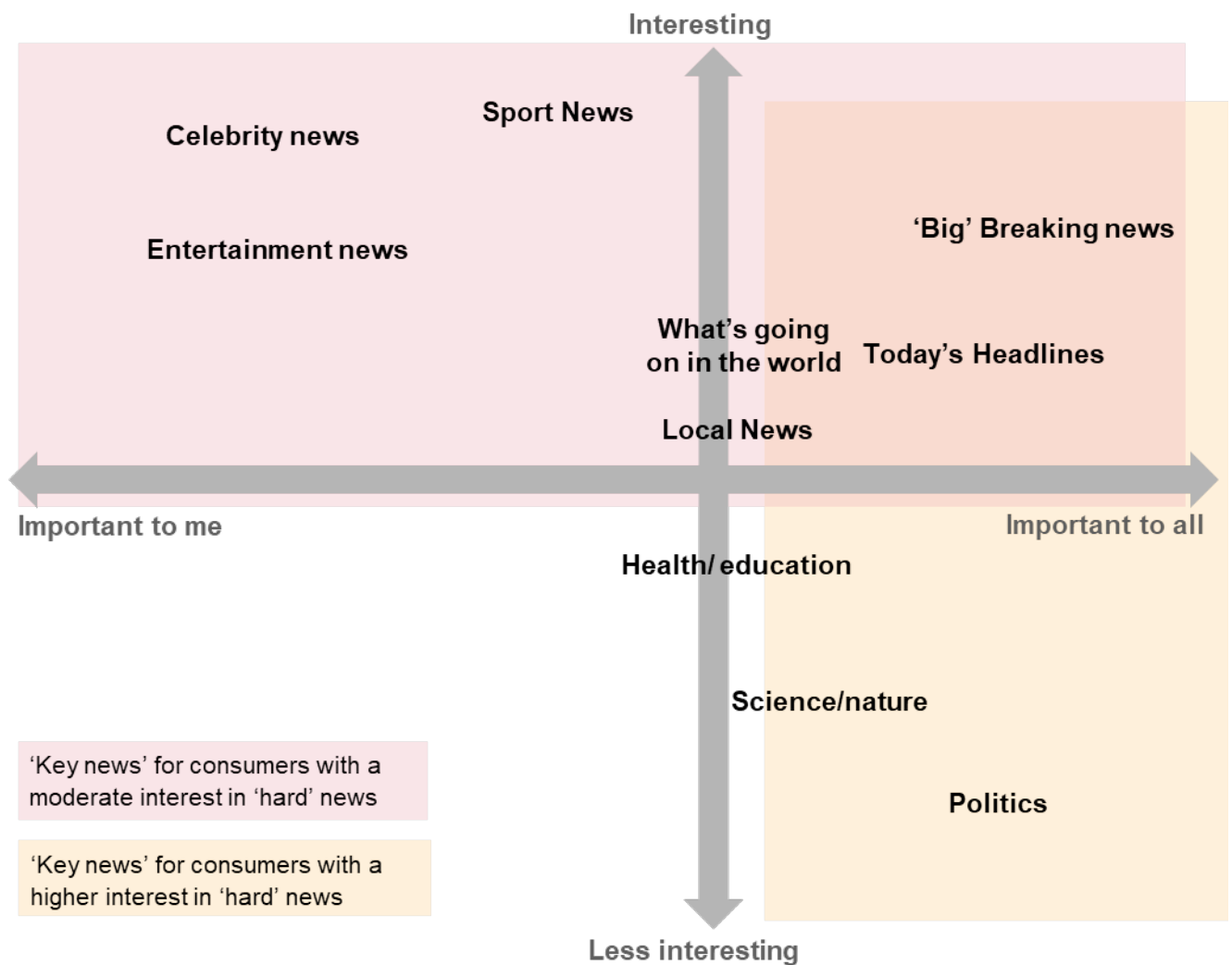


Figure 4: Matrix of importance and interest for our news audiences

A lot of societally 'important' news did not hold the attention of all news consumers, with widespread complaints about politics (and particularly Brexit) dominating news. Many said they were fatigued by news about Brexit and it represented a reason to tune out of related news reports.

Younger and older audiences had different views about what constituted important news. Younger audiences appeared more interested in larger global issues (e.g. climate change), whereas in contrast, older audiences were more often drawn to local/national and UK news.

Section 2: Audience needs and wants from a news provider

Audiences see UK broadcasters' role as providing an authoritative take on news, as a counter to widespread non-regulated and 'agenda led' news sources

"I'm realising how much I rely on social media for news. Facebook and Twitter. ... There's a lot on there that's not reliable, but it's fun and fast with news." Lower BBC Engagement, 18-20, Thurrock

UK broadcasters (specifically BBC, ITV, Sky, Channel 4) were collectively seen as familiar and reliable news sources within the growing array of news outlets which are perceived as less trustworthy, skewed and providers of fake news. Preferences and 'go to' choices of UK broadcasters were based on the aforementioned habits, needs and influencers.

Other broadcasters and media outlets (e.g. RT, Al Jazeera, Vice) were positioned as offering an 'alternative' view, typically by those more engaged in hard news. That said, users of these sources felt these outlets might have an agenda and a skewed perspective on issues.

Social media and other aggregated news feeds – especially popular with younger audiences and audiences from lower socio-economic groups in this sample - were seen as providing a wide array of perspectives, particularly around breaking news and topics of interest. However, there was concern that the sources can be skewed, with a higher risk of fake news.

Newspapers (both on- and offline) were considered a source for more opinion-based analysis and a depth of coverage on a wider array of news. Purchasing a physical newspaper was typically restricted to an older audience more engaged in news, who had more time to engage with in-depth reporting.

Universally, audiences want UK broadcasters to provide news that's accurate, trustworthy and unbiased

"I'd say none of the news outlets are perfect, but they do a similar job. Give the facts. But the BBC's the one you feel wouldn't have an agenda. It's not got a Murdoch pumping money into it." Lower BBC engagement, 21-34, C2DE, London

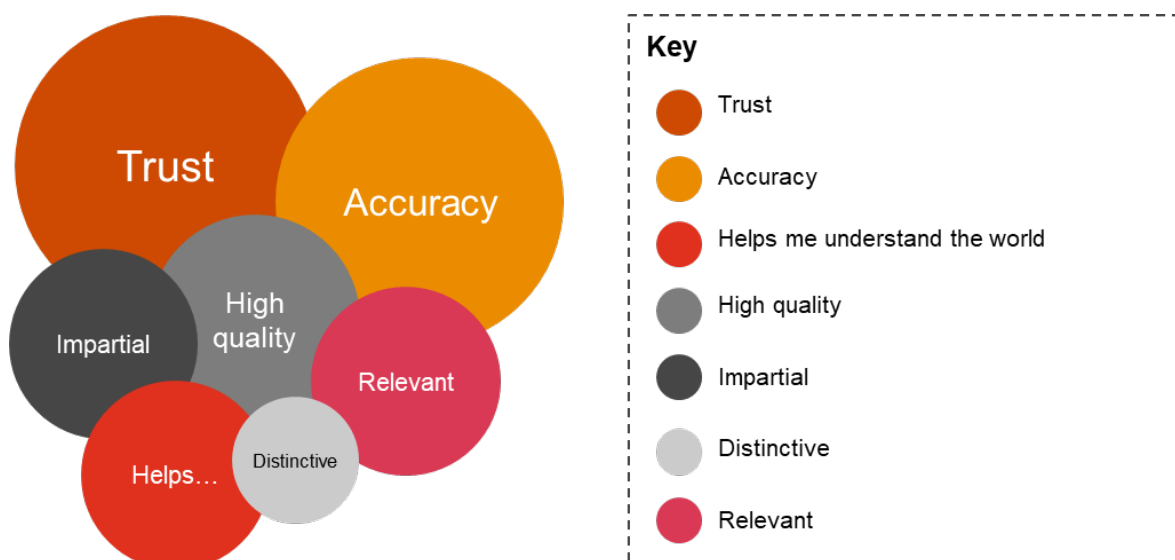
When exploring audience needs from their 'main' news providers, some core universal needs emerged:

- **Accuracy** i.e. providing 'facts'; there is a strong desire to avoid fake news, or at least know where to access reputable, accountable news as a counterpoint.
- **Trustworthy** i.e. 'reliable' and 'long established'; trust was seen as earned by being consistent in delivery over a long period.
- **Unbiased** i.e. 'impartial' in presenting a 'rounded' view of an issue or debate – be it political (a spectrum of views across the political divide) or breaking news (a fair context and background to the story or avoiding generalisations, particularly around ethnicity or religion).

BBC News was seen as the standard-bearer of reliable, trusted news sources in the UK, and a 'go to' choice for a wider array of audiences seeking to verify facts and avoid fake, speculative, or emotional takes on news.

BBC News met many news consumers' key needs – although some key BBC News 'strengths' are not necessarily priority attributes or a reason to engage i.e. 'distinctiveness' and to a lesser extent 'high quality'

Figure 5 shows the hierarchy of audience priorities for a 'good' news provider and the prevalence of key associations we tested across the UK.



NB. Size of circle represents prevalence

Figure 5: Hierarchy of needs from a 'good' news provider using prompted attributes

The importance of 'impartiality' as a core attribute of news provision was noted across all workshops. However, it was particularly emphasised at the workshops with people from minority ethnic backgrounds, regarding the portrayal of minority groups in the news. The BBC was not perceived to perform better or worse than other UK broadcasters on the issue of portrayal.

'Relevance' of news coverage (and by association the provider) was particularly important to the youngest participants (16-20 year olds) and some audiences from minority ethnic backgrounds. This was about news reflecting their interests, their community and giving 'their face and their voice' more prominence.

Relevance was also more important to audiences aged 55+, reflecting a higher level of interest in local and UK news among this audience i.e. likely to be more personally interesting or impactful. The 55+ age group also valued 'high quality' news more than other groups, with this being linked to professionalism in the structure and delivery.

In contrast, 'distinctiveness' was rarely highlighted as an important trait for a news provider. That said, the BBC's 'distinctiveness' was noted across the UK, in the consistency of the language and attributes associated with BBC News. This was notably more consistent than language and attributes associated with other UK broadcasters.

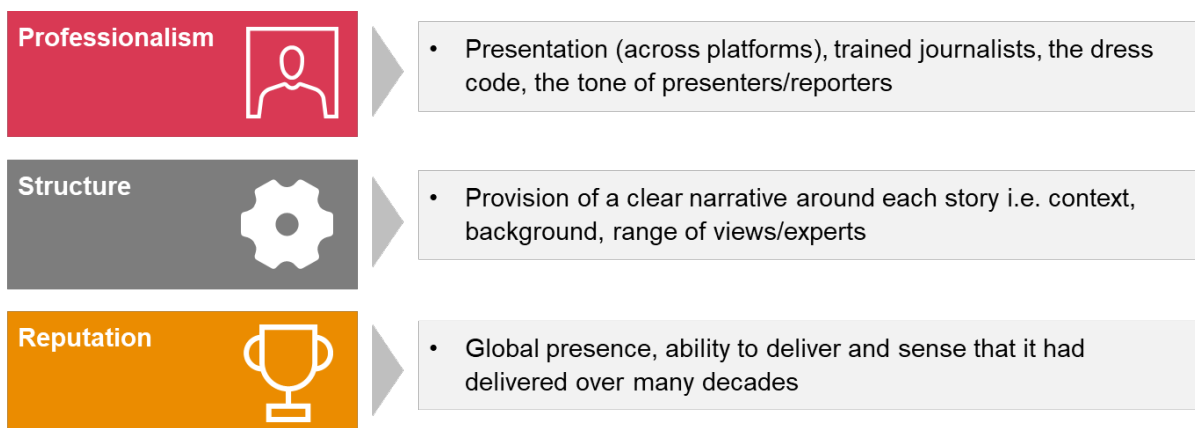
Section 3 – Meeting audience needs: BBC News performance vs. competition

Across the UK, BBC News has a distinctive set of attributes and is consistently positioned as a trusted, reliable and unbiased news provider

“The BBC [News] is a long-standing, powerful brand that inspires trust, has gravitas around the world. It’s perceived as the gold standard of journalism. It’s impartial. Facts.” Higher BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Nottingham

UK-wide, the consensus was that BBC News is a reliable ‘go to’ source for breaking news, even among those less engaged in its output overall.

BBC News has widespread and distinctive associations; an accurate, reliable source for verifying the facts, often based on its heritage and history. It also has an established reputation for **‘high quality’** output based on its:



This strong reputation was apparent, irrespective of level of engagement with BBC news and current affairs content.

In comparison, Sky News was seen as faster than the BBC for breaking news, which could be both an advantage and a disadvantage; Sky News could be a ‘go to’ to get the quickest, freshest take on a breaking story, but audiences sometimes questioned its accuracy. The BBC’s take on breaking news, if a little slower, was widely seen as more accurate. This view was borne out in the example case studies shown in the workshops related to the Sri Lanka bombings and fire at Notre Dame.

Compared to BBC News, ITV News coverage was positioned as a slightly ‘lighter’ take on the news; less heavy-going, more opinionated and personality-driven (e.g. Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid on Good Morning Britain). Channel 4 News, a more niche choice in this sample, was seen as more direct, risk-taking and challenging in its approach than the BBC; perceived as more divisive, but very engaging to a loyal minority of frequent viewers.

BBC News is widely seen as providing high quality coverage, but ‘high quality’ is not always a reason to engage

“It feels like there’s a real formula to the BBC’s news. I guess that’s a good thing if you like it. But I find it too dry. A bit boring. A bit obsessed with Brexit.” Lower BBC Engagement, 21-34, C2DE, London

Among news audiences, the BBC News brand and BBC master brand associations are fairly indistinguishable, which can be both a positive (e.g. trusted, reliable, professional) and a drawback (e.g. formal, serious, dry – a reason not to engage).

Coverage is routinely recognised as high quality, particularly around ‘heavier-going’ topics such as politics. This ‘quality’ is reflected in the perceived structure, level of detail (context, commentary, range of views) and overall ‘balance’ in the reporting. However, for those less engaged by BBC news, this perceived focus on politics to the exclusion of other news made the experience heavy-going and too detailed. Across the workshops this view was particularly expressed by younger audiences, some minority ethnic audiences, and C2DE audiences.

BBC News is a well trusted source, but there are low-level challenges based on perceived political bias and ‘cover ups’

“I trust them to give the facts but I’m less trusting that they are not biased towards the government.” Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, C2DE, Lame

On the whole, UK-wide, audiences trusted the BBC’s news coverage. The BBC’s output was frequently felt to be held up to a higher standard, and scrutinised more than its counterpart news broadcasters. The broad consensus was that it upheld its reputation for balance and neutrality.

However, there were a few questions about how much audiences trusted BBC news output, among both younger and, conversely, older audiences in this sample:

- Younger audiences felt BBC News was not ‘aimed at them’ and that it covered relevant topics but in ways that could alienate the audience. For example, there was criticism of the BBC’s coverage of climate change protests; the accusation was that the BBC focused more on the disruption caused, rather than the issue at hand. Younger audiences also cited perceived anti-Corbyn bias in BBC political reporting more frequently than other age groups.
- Older audiences and those with stronger political affiliations were more likely to query trust in the BBC’s political coverage, perceived as too left- or right-wing depending on their political persuasion. Among older audiences, there were also a few mentions of the reputational damage done to the BBC by the Savile scandal, and alleged cover-ups over BBC pay.

There were some isolated comments questioning ‘trust’ in BBC News expressed by participants in our Black British and British Muslim workshops. However, this reflected broader criticism of the negative portrayal of ethnic minority groups across UK broadcasters’ coverage, rather than a specific critique of the BBC.

‘Duly impartial’ news and current affairs coverage is recognised as a challenge for the BBC

“I think often the left and right in the political arena complain that the BBC is biased towards the other one. That to me says it’s hard but they’re doing something right!” Lower BBC Engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Brighton

When shown a definition of ‘due impartiality’, audiences recognised the challenges for the BBC to be perceived as duly impartial because:

- Impartiality is subjectively defined and experienced
- Opinions of those less engaged in BBC News coverage are often based on perception, and less on experience (from word of mouth/newspapers/other media)

- BBC is scrutinised more than other news providers - any editorial choices can be scrutinised and criticised if they are not meeting an audience member's personal or political view.

Spontaneously, BBC News was often cited as providing impartial coverage. Reporting was widely perceived as measured in both its approach and tone; not emotive, not argumentative or confrontational compared to other news providers. For example, in the case studies shown in the sessions, Channel 4 News' Brexit Extension report and LBC's Nick Ferrari's coverage of climate change protests were perceived to be more openly opinionated and agenda-driven than the BBC News coverage of the same topics.

Overall, the consensus view was that the BBC's news coverage is less agenda-driven and seeks to reflect a broad spectrum of opinion. Those more engaged in BBC News felt it was balanced. Less politically engaged audiences did not scrutinise coverage as much and across the workshops a high number of participants stated they were not very interested in politics. Being duly impartial in its approach to stories also led to accusations of the BBC being a bit too 'middle of the road' or 'boring', particularly from those less engaged in the BBC's news coverage.

Low-level accusations of bias were noted across the UK. The more politically engaged news audiences from both sides of the political spectrum were most sceptical; the BBC was accused of being both too left-wing and too right-wing. Criticisms noted were:

- **Providing undue prominence to extreme political views** at the expense of more 'balanced' or 'typical' perspectives. e.g. general public vox pops, guests and audience members on political current affairs programmes such as Question Time.
- **Suspicion about relationship with Government** – that the BBC was slow to criticise the government and call it to account, due to being reliant on Government for funding and its governance.
- **Providing slanted 'political' coverage** - e.g. Brexit, Israel-Palestine, characterisation of the left (Corbyn in the Russian hat) and the right ('Maybot', etc.).
- In Scotland, **particular references to the perceived bias** in the BBC's coverage of the Scottish Referendum towards the 'no' vote (i.e. coverage was seen as slanted against Scottish independence).

Framing of news stories also contributed to questions about impartiality. In particular, the level of 'challenge' to more extreme views was perceived as inconsistent. Audiences felt these challenges were more robust on radio (e.g. John Humphries and Nick Robinson on the Today programme; Jeremy Vine on Radio 2) and on some politics current affairs TV (e.g. Newsnight, Politics Today, This Week) but less so in other forums (e.g. BBC Breakfast, the evening News, and Andrew Marr on Sunday).

Other criticisms around framing of stories were based on:

- **Lack of positive portrayal and representation of certain minority groups**; that the BBC focused too much on negatives when reporting on UK & International news (e.g. knife crime positioned as a black gang issue; stories about Muslims from across the world seen as focusing on conflict/religious intolerance, etc.).
- **Coverage of religious conflict** e.g. Israel-Palestine, the BBC was seen as failing to provide full contextual understanding, particularly by some Jewish news consumers.

- **Covert bias** – feeling that presenters/interviews were expressing a view but less overtly than other broadcasters. There was low-level criticism that it was dishonest to claim impartiality whilst their views were fairly evident (e.g. Nick Robinson on climate change protests), when compared to presenters such as Piers Morgan on ITV or Nick Ferrari / James O'Brien on LBC who were positioned as being 'upfront' with their views.

Not all news consumers feel BBC News is 'relevant' to them

"It's aimed at a certain audience. ... There's not a lot about certain cultures, races. I feel they could be a bit more diverse." Black British, Female, 25-44, Bristol

On the whole, BBC News caters well to those more interested in serious, hard news topics ('important to all'), but less well for those seeking lighter, 'softer' news. The criticisms about it being a bit dry, formulaic and lacking opinion and 'entertainment' value were especially apparent among some younger, lower engaged, minority ethnic and C2DE audiences.

In this sample, more of the younger audiences (16-20s) questioned whether the BBC helped them understand the world. As a cohort who were less engaged in news overall, the BBC was perceived as more for their parents than for them with too much UK news, and less of a focus on world news and their specific news interests.

Across the workshops with news audiences from minority ethnic backgrounds, there was a feeling BBC News could increase its 'relatability' by:

- **Showing greater diversity:** in terms of presenters, 'voices' in reporting/on street vox pops (particularly from Black British and British Muslim participants)
- **More 'positive' portrayal of ethnic populations in news:** there were low-level mentions of the BBC not being the 'standard-bearer' they would expect it to be in terms of 'positive' portrayal of ethnic populations in the UK and abroad. Examples given were knife crime being assumed to be a black gang issue; portrayal of Muslims (especially in international news – e.g. Syria).

Older audiences and those in the Nations were more critical of the BBC's perceived 'London bias', with some feeling the focus was on Westminster/London at the expense of regional and nations news. Nations audiences felt coverage of Nations' news was limited. Examples of this were:

- In Northern Ireland, limited discussion of Stormont, or the impact of the Brexit border backstop.
- In Scotland, some preferred STV's local coverage; seen as focusing more on Scottish issues, more informal, perceived 'brighter' presentation style ('more Scottish voices').
- In Wales, appreciation of local BBC radio coverage, but more criticism of local BBC news coverage – felt to be too broad, and focused on South West Wales/Cardiff.

Across the devolved nations, news consumers also said they were not always clear if news stories were relevant to them or not (e.g. news article on SATs used as a case study in the sessions), and it was felt the BBC could provide greater clarity.

Section 4 – Perceptions of BBC News by platform

TV news dominates perceptions and associations with BBC News

“They’re very professional, they seem as though they’ve got a background in journalism. You’ve got proper journalists, they’re not just presenters.” Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea

Brand associations with BBC News were largely driven by TV news; serious, informative, trustworthy - but politics heavy. Figure 6 shows the range of words associated with BBC TV News across the study. The size of the words represents the frequency with which they were mentioned.



Figure 6: top of mind associations with BBC TV News

BBC TV news was frequently depicted as very structured, clear and predictable in terms of format and presentation of the news. For many, a key strength was consistency of delivery.

However, there was low-level but widespread criticism that BBC TV news presenters lacked personality and character and could be a reason to switch over to other providers. In particular, evening news presenters were seen as very serious compared to other channels' anchors (e.g. ITV, C4). Likewise, BBC Breakfast news presenters were positioned as lacking the character, chemistry and opinion of ITV's Good Morning Britain presenters, Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid. Across the workshops, the lack of 'opinion' expressed on BBC Breakfast contributed to the view that its news content was less entertaining than Good Morning Britain (ITV).

Overall, the consensus view was that the BBC's TV news coverage caters better for 'hard' news, irrespective of how 'interesting' this is to audiences. News audiences with only a moderate interest in 'hard' news often felt it was too detailed and too formal.

Younger and less engaged BBC TV news audiences felt journalists such as Stacey Dooley or Reggie Yates brought news/current affairs topics to life and helped improve 'relatability'. There was a desire for more 'relatable' characters in TV news reporting.

BBC radio news has a more characterful and diverse image than its TV counterpart

“I think the BBC try to meet a variety of different audiences in different ways. ... There’s so many different styles of [news] radio, depending on whether it’s 1Xtra or 5Live or Radio 4.”
Black British, Female, 25-44, Bristol

Compared to TV news, BBC radio news was seen as more challenging, personality-led, diverse and catering for a wider range of audiences and their differing levels of interest in news. Figure 7 shows the range of top of mind associations with BBC radio news.



Figure 7: top of mind associations with BBC Radio News

Top of mind language such as ‘diverse’, ‘variety’ and ‘interesting’ reflects the range of audiences BBC radio news captures. This spans more engaged news consumers listening to Radio 4’s Today programme (typically older and from higher socio-economic groups, seeking depth and variety of news content) through to those getting short hourly news bulletins from Radio 1 (younger, less news engaged, but getting the headlines they need). Other news consumers mentioned listening to Radio 2 and Radio 5 Live, but often these were positioned as background listening (e.g. at work, while driving) and content specific to news and/or current affairs was not referenced in any detail.

In contrast to TV news, radio news presenters were seen to show more character and personality. The overriding view was that radio presenters appeared more willing to challenge and offer opinion than TV counterparts, which audiences felt made for more divisive but engaging content.

Local BBC radio was also praised for its news coverage, getting low-level but consistent praise about being more personable, accessible and relevant than either of the BBC’s local TV or online news coverage.

BBC News online appeals to a broader news audience when used – but it struggles to stand out, particularly among younger audiences

“BBC Online is so easy to use and you can tailor it so you only see the news you want to see and are interested in.” Eastern European (Polish), 25-44, Peterborough

BBC News online was seen as providing greater breadth and depth than BBC TV / radio news with a wider overall appeal across life stages. Figure 8 highlights the top of mind associations, including positive associations such as ‘informative’, ‘current’, ‘quick’ and ‘easy’.



Figure 8: top of mind associations with BBC News Online

The ability to cherry pick ‘interesting’ news and tailor content was particularly important to the Nations audiences and younger audiences in this sample.

However, BBC News online struggled to stand out among the plethora of online news feed options available to audiences, particularly for younger news consumers. Young news consumers were less aware of BBC News online (app/website) as a destination, and indicated they might not be aware of or look at the source when clicking through to news content from aggregators or social media. That said, it was widely positioned as a convenient, ‘go to’ option either directly or via links in news feed – and where brand is noted, the BBC was seen as a reputable option for breaking news or story of interest.

Figure 8 also highlights that there were a few low-level complaints that BBC Online is still dominated by politics (as per TV news), and that the lead stories could show greater variety in topics/coverage.

Section 5 – Perceptions of BBC Current Affairs output vs. competition

BBC and other broadcasters' current affairs programming was often opportunistic rather than appointment viewing and more likely to be watched if it coincided with their evening 'viewing time'

"I watch Panorama and Dispatches [Channel 4]. But I wouldn't watch them all the time. It depends on the topic. ... and if I happen to turn it on." Lower BBC engagement, 35-54, ABC1, Brighton

The consensus was that current affairs content was dominated by politics and therefore fairly polarising in terms of engagement and ability to hold news consumers' interest, other than among those who were the most politically engaged. Panel and/or audience question shows such as Question Time were particularly divisive and contributed to queries about due impartiality and providing a platform for extreme viewpoints. Levels of engagement were typically aligned to interest in 'hard' news and levels of engagement with BBC TV News. Question Time and Newsnight were mentioned as potential viewing, depending on mood.

Overall, current affairs programming that coincided with 'viewing time' in the evening was more likely to hold audience attention. This was rarely 'planned' or 'appointment' viewing, but if it was on during the evening often prior to or after the evening news, there was potential to keep watching if the topic or guests were interesting.

Aside from politics programming, investigative journalism was perceived to be engaging and enlightening, although it was not always felt to be relevant.. Topics of personal importance, experience or more gritty exposés tended to resonate. In particular, social 'reality' documentaries were a key area of engagement for younger audiences; presenters such as Stacey Dooley or Reggie Yates were popular with younger audiences, who saw them as 'relatable' personalities (younger, diverse, less middle class) who were able to bring a topic to life.

Overall, BBC current affairs coverage provided more opinion and challenge than news, but other broadcasters' content appeared to have more consistent impact

"Dispatches is a bit more gritty, tackles tougher issues I think than Panorama. Panorama goes so far, but I'm sure it's a lot tamer than it used to be." Higher BBC Engagement, 55+, ABC1, Swansea

The consensus among less regular BBC news audiences was that its current affairs output was more opinionated, challenging and ultimately engaging than its news output. However, across the workshops it frequently compared less favourably to current affairs content from other broadcasters, especially Channel 4. This was particularly evident among younger audiences, who saw Channel 4 as more willing to tackle controversial topics that felt relevant to their lives (e.g. drugs / gangs).

Questioning the BBC's impartiality in its political coverage appeared to stem more from its current affairs programming than news. The BBC's political programming (particularly Question Time and Newsnight) was seen as Brexit-dominated both by viewers and non-viewers; the majority felt this was repetitive and off-putting. In addition, there was frequent low-level criticism of the prominence of extreme views in political programming (e.g. giving a platform for UKIP and Tommy Robinson) which irritated or frustrated viewers seeking 'clarity' on political issues.

Flagship shows such as Panorama were familiar and well-liked, although there was low-level criticism about it being more formulaic and 'safer' in recent years. In comparison, where

watched, competitor programming such as Dispatches (Channel 4) received praise for being grittier, taking more risks and covering topics in more depth than its BBC counterpart.

Among younger audiences, Channel 4 content such as The Last Leg was more regularly watched, albeit opportunistically. For this younger audience it was seen as an engaging vehicle for current affairs; relatable, light-hearted, informal and accessible.

For a more in-depth and visual review of the qualitative research findings, please refer to the Detailed Report which can be found here [\[insert title/link here\]](#).

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