

MINOTAUR STUDY FINDS SHARP FALL IN COVERAGE OF EU AFFAIRS BY TODAY

This study by Minotaur considered the coverage by the Today programme of EU-related items on the BBC Radio 4 **Today** programme over three weeks before the EU leaders' summits in 2000 (Feira, Portugal) and 2002 (Seville). The aim was to examine whether the coverage met the important BBC Charter obligation of being wide-ranging.

The findings outlined below raise very considerable cause for concern.

An earlier report by Minotaur on Today's coverage of EU-related affairs in 2000 found that there were already grounds for concern in that not enough time was being devoted to the key issues, amounting in some cases to bias by default.

The latest report found evidence of a **sharp decline** in coverage:

- ❑ Proportion of programme devoted to EU-affairs down from 14% to 7% **(-50%)**
- ❑ Number of programme items down from 103 to 69 **(-32%)**
- ❑ Running time of items reduced from 317 minutes to 137 **(-57%)**
- ❑ Average length of programme interviews on EU-related topics down from 4minutes 32 seconds to 3minutes 11seconds **(-33%)**.
- ❑ The number of speakers on EU-related coverage fell from 69 to 51**(-32%)**
- ❑ Items in Business News fell from 19 (20% of the total of 91) to four (4.3% of 96) **(-500%)**

There seems to have been a significant demotion in the importance of European news coverage at a time when the debate about membership of the euro continued to be as strong as ever and when the EU was considering enlargement and procedural reform, the impact of which on the UK will be profound. An outside indicator of the importance of EU-related matters during the period was that broadsheet newspapers carried 169 separate stories on EU-related themes. Dozens of these were not even mentioned by Today. In the case of Business News, EU-related matters appeared to have been relegated to almost nothing.

Coverage in 2000

As mentioned above, Minotaur found in its survey of 2000 that its coverage of the build-up to the Feira summit was already lacking in proper consideration of several areas. There was an insufficient range of speakers, inadequate consideration of issues such as voting reform and tax harmonisation, and not enough an analysis of steps to augment the France-Germany access within the EU. And some issues – such as steps towards the Nice Treaty – seemed to be almost ignored.

But by comparison with 2002, the coverage was abundant. It spanned 103 programme items, 317 minutes and the contribution of 69 speakers (46 of them pro-euro and 15 euro-sceptic, the remainder neutral). The full list is contained in the appendix, with separate lists divided by date and category.

Analysis shows that the topics covered divided into 10 major categories and a range of one-off items. The group categories were seven reports on steps towards the charter of human rights, six on talks between France and Germany developing their links within Europe, seven on Conservative efforts to keep the pound or challenge the government on its European policies, three on an OECD report arguing that Britain was ready to join the euro, 15 on the government's policy on the euro, culminating in an alleged cabinet split, 12 in the immediate build-up to and from the summit itself (covering issues such as the withholding tax, EU procedure, and the charter of fundamental rights), four on controversy about the value of the euro, and two on fisheries policy. In addition, there were sundry items on a wide range of topics including Edward Heath saying joining the EU was his biggest achievement, Barbara Castle looking back at the 25 years' since the referendum on continued membership of the EU, proposals on MEP pay rises, a report on support for the euro on government members' constituencies, Chris Patten denying he was bored with being a commissioner, MEPs voting on new warnings on cigarette packets,

the London Chamber of Commerce warning that being outside the euro was causing problems, and a report saying that sub post offices were under threat because of EU measures.

This range meant that the summit itself was covered in (what seems in the context of 2002 to have been reasonable depth, with reports from Portugal itself (three on each day of the summit), analysis of the important measures on withholding tax, the charter of fundamental rights, and the extent of EU power. It included interviews with Tony Blair and foreign secretary Robin Cook. There was also time for extensive coverage of the row in the cabinet over policy towards the euro, with wide-ranging interviews with all participants, including Gordon Brown. And speakers drawn into the other major areas of coverage included government ministers Margaret Beckett, Keith Vaz, Lady Scotland, Melanie Johnson, Barbara Roche, a range of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs, several EU commissioners (and their spokesmen), as well as French, Danish and German politicians (and the German and French ambassadors to London).

Coverage 2002

The coverage in 2000 was much narrower: 7% of the programme, divided into 69 programme items running to 137 minutes and including 51 speakers. The full list is contained in the appendix.

Key points to emerge were:

- ❑ Though the number of reports from Feira and Seville on the two days of the summits were broadly the same, the Seville summit was reduced almost to a one-story event, focused on the topic of asylum. Other big themes such as enlargement and procedural reform, together with background issues such as the row between France and Germany over the euro stability pact, were covered only minimally both in the build-up and at the summit itself (with one interview per topic).
- ❑ This was in contrast to 2000, where issues such as the charter of fundamental rights and the relationship between France and Germany – both important areas linked to the summit - were considered in some depth, with seven and five interviews respectively.
- ❑ In 2002, the main summit issue of asylum was considered mainly from the very narrow perspective of whether other countries agreed with the British government's proposals over linking aid to the effectiveness of controlling flows of immigrants. This was an important element of what was going on, but there were other background issues – such as community-wide measures on asylum policy adopted at Seville - that were not adequately analysed.
- ❑ The range of those interviewed on EU-related matters shrank significantly. An important comparison was that in the corresponding period in 2000, there were interviews with government ministers Tony Blair, Robin Cook, Gordon Brown, Margaret Beckett, Keith Vaz, Barbara Roche, Elliot Morley and Melanie Johnson. In 2002, the list of government ministers interviewed was reduced to only Jack Straw, Peter Hain, Michael Meacher and Elliott Morley. Only four Conservatives appeared anywhere in the programme on EU-related matters in 2002: the shadow agriculture minister David Liddington, interviewed briefly about BSE; Michael Jack MP, very briefly about the fridge mountain; former MEP Edward Macmillan Scott, who called for tougher sanctions against Robert Mugabe; and John Whittingdale, with a short soundbite about EU policy towards company bail-outs. In 2000, the list had been William Hague, Francis Maude, John Redwood, Michael Portillo (three of whom were featured in more than one interview) and Anne Widdecombe from the front bench and Lord Lawson, Lord Lamont, Kenneth Clarke and Julian Lewis from elsewhere in the party. There was only one interview in 2002 with a Liberal Democrat, compared with two in 2000, and appearances by EU commissioners fell from five to two.
- ❑ The reduction in the number of interviews with the key politicians meant, in turn, that EU-related issues were treated in a rather one dimensional basis. The Conservative or euro-sceptic input on asylum was entirely missing, as it was on enlargement, the euro stability pact and EU procedural change. The Liberal Democrat perspective on any EU-related issue was sought only once in an interview with Charles Kennedy on the prospects for a euro referendum

- ❑ Coverage of the referendum and policies towards the euro were both very considerably reduced between 2000 and 2002. During 2000, there was a very strong story in this area – the possibility of a cabinet split. Even so coverage in 2002 looked extremely thin. It was typified by the treatment of the row, at the beginning of the monitoring period, over the Conservative’s approach to the euro campaign, sparked by the party’s director of strategy telling the Independent newspaper that in his view, the Conservatives should take a back-seat role. This was front page news in most broadsheets over a two-day period. But on Today, it merited only a brief mention in the newspaper review and one interview with George Eustace, of Business for Sterling, which would coordinate the ‘no vote’ in the campaign. Other treatment of the euro debate was confined to a brief look at how business was adapting to uncertainty about joining, an interview with Charles Kennedy about his unease about continuing delays, an interview with Sir Ken Jackson about his doubts about the strength of the pro-euro camp, two mentions of Tony Blair fielding questions in parliament on euro-related matters, and two on business news about the performance of the dollar against the euro.
- ❑ Very few features in 2002- when the average length was reduced by almost a minute – gave adequate time for full exploration of the issues involved. Exceptions which stood out were the coverage of the fridge mountain, when voices representing all sides in the issue were included, and the interview of Peter Hain on asylum, during the summit when there was time to come to grips with the nitty-gritty of what had gone on. More typical was the exploration of the euro stability pact, confined to one interview with a BBC correspondent, and discussion of enlargement, which was focused on one interview with Romano Prodi’s spokesman not about the wide issues of enlargement but on Romano Prodi’s linked procedural reforms (he trotted out the totally predictable party line), and fragmentary treatment of the implications on EU policy of the French election victory by President Chirac which amounted to one interview with a French deputy and discussions about the implications of talks between Tony Blair and President Chirac over BSE.
- ❑ Business news, at 6.15 daily, with updates at 6.50 and 8.40, carried only four stories on EU-related matters in 2002 out of a total of 96 items. By contrast, 71 were on home stories and 21 world news. This compared to totals in 2000 of 44 on home affairs, 28 on world and 19 on Europe out of the total of 91 items. In 2000 coverage included meetings of the Ecofin ministers looking at fears that the UK could be pushed aside by the euro members, the EU wanting to put VAT on internet purchases, an OECD report looking at convergence between the pound and the eurozone exchange rates, exchange rate levels, a survey of banks supporting euro entry reports on Gordon Brown’s Mansion House speech discussion on tax harmonisation, worries that the exchange rate could hit jobs, EU moves towards tax harmonisation, and EU moves aimed at travel improvements. In 2002, there were two stories about the weakening strength of the dollar against the euro, one about a threatened strike by air traffic controllers, and one about an expected court ruling on the long-running trade dispute between Phillips and Remington. The fall seems inexplicable, as analysis of the content of the broadsheets showed a large raft of important EU-related business stories that were not covered, including:
 - ❑ Proposals for reform of EU competition rules,
 - ❑ A ruling by the European court that the EU commission’s ban on the takeover by Airtours of First Choice had been wrong
 - ❑ A ruling on the reform of the holding by governments of golden shares
 - ❑ The acceptance by Guernsey – after a long battle - of the need to disclose the tax affairs of EU residents
 - ❑ Proposals for the reform of the and CAP fisheries policy
 - ❑ Commission inquiry into pensions sales reform
 - ❑ MEPs vote to allow the cross-border selling of pensions
 - ❑ Rows in Germany over EU aid threat to UK defence jobs
 - ❑ Extensive debate over the euro stability pact, including a row between France and Germany
 - ❑ EU competition ruling that the sale of Uefa TV rights should be opened up
 - ❑ FSA warning that EU plans on harmonisation of listing requirements could lead to lower standards
 - ❑ Report warning that businesses were unprepared for enlargement
 - ❑ Chemical companies warning that new EU regulations could force them out of Europe
 - ❑ A major report by the CBI worrying about the impact of EU measures on jobs

There were many more.

Coverage by broadsheet newspapers 2002

In order to create an outside yardstick with which to measure whether the “wide ranging” criterion was being met, the coverage of European issues by the main broadsheet newspaper titles was also tracked. The Financial Times covered 100 stories, the Times 52, The Guardian 50, the Independent 44 and the Daily Telegraph 36 stories. The full list is contained in section...

In total, they covered almost 170 separate stories, ranging over a wide spectrum of edicts, proposals, rulings and reports as well as the main themes linked to the EU summit: enlargement, asylum, procedural reform, Irish neutrality, and the performance of the euro .

Because newspapers have more space than the Today programme (by a ratio of approximately 2:1), it was decided to concentrate in the first part of the investigation only on the items covered by more than one title on the same day, on the grounds that this suggested – in collective editorial judgment – that these were stories of higher significance than the others.

There were 34 stories which fell into this category.

June 5: Trichet being considered as new chairman of ECB; Mario Monti promises competition law changes, including those on golden shares

June 6: The Conservative row over its role in the campaign over the euro; a court ruling that the French government’s bail out of Air France had been illegal

June 7: EU court rules that the commission’s decision to block the Air Tours merger with First Choice was illegal; ECB considers raising interest rates; commission suggests changes to car pricing rules

June 10: The implications to the EU of President Chirac’s victory

June 12: MEPs vote to ban all animal testing on cosmetics; divisions emerge on new proposals for EU fishing quotas; the EU considers a ban on German organic produce following a cancer scare

June 13: The UK under fire for its proposals on immigration

June 14: Blunkett wins approval for his package of asylum reforms

June 15: Czech political parties unsure of policy to Europe as general election looms

June 17: EU decides to expand trade with Iran

June 18: Evidence of cabinet rift over asylum; row between France and Germany over the euro stability pact

June 19: Blair debates whether to go with euro referendum; Romano Prodi announces sweeping package of commission reforms; the looming strike of air traffic controllers

June 20: MPs attack Michael Meacher over the fridge mountain; air traffic control strike; France likely to break stability pact; revised proposals over immigration; Seville “under siege” as summit approaches

June 21: CBI and Italian equivalent attack EU bureaucracy; continuing row over fridge mountain; finance ministers to consider France’s wishes to break the stability pact

June 22: Warning from financial watchdog over impact of new EU accountancy standards; Summit decisions on illegal immigration; the Seville terror campaign; Finance ministers’ decision over French position on the stability pact; summit declaration on Irish neutrality to pave way for a new referendum on the Nice treaty.

Of these stories, Today covered eight, but only four of them in anywhere the same detail.

- ❑ Trade with Iran. The moves towards expanding links were covered by a news bulletin item and an interview with Chris Patten, with a similar level of analysis to that in the newspapers.
- ❑ The fridge mountain. As above, this was covered in roughly the same depth as in the broadsheets as (mainly) a domestic story about the logistics of the handling of the mountain in the context of the critical parliamentary report (of the conduct of Michael Meacher).
- ❑ The air traffic controllers' strike. Today's coverage matched the range and depth of the newspaper reports, with the main thrust of coverage was on the impact on flights to and from the UK.
- ❑ The debate over asylum measures. Here, Today's coverage almost matched that of the broadsheets, though the main focus of the Today interviews to explore whether the proposals were "fair" and were supported by other agencies involved. The two with government ministers attempted to establish whether there had been a climb-down on the government's original policy. The broadsheets devoted more space to looking at the overall context of the broad package of asylum measures.

Four stories were covered at a much lesser level than in the broadsheets:

- ❑ The Tory euro row. Broadsheet coverage included reaction from all political angles and the implications for the future of the Conservative's strategy on the euro. By contrast, as previously mentioned, Today found time only for a mention of the original story in the newspaper review and a follow-up from the relatively oblique angle of an interview with the head of Business for Sterling about whether he agreed with the Conservative head of strategy in saying that the Tories should not lead the 'no' campaign.
- ❑ The Chirac victory and its aftermath. The broadsheets analysed the likely impact on the France-Germany axis, the relationship between France and Britain and the approach of the President to the euro stability pact (the latter over several days). Today's treatment was limited to one brief item on the euro stability pact, a similarly brief interview over the likely relations between France and the EU, and mentions of the Tony Blair meeting with President Chirac to discuss BSE. The small amount of time involved meant that these were no more than tasters.
- ❑ Romano Prodi's reforms. All the broadsheets covered this story on the day of their announcement (June 19), with the matter judged sufficiently important to merit an editorial in the Financial Times. The FT's reporter, George Parker, included comment that the reforms were being seen as the most important in EU's history. The measures were analysed from many different perspectives, including the possibility of the development of a two-tier commission. By contrast Today covered this story with one item on June 22, an interview with Romano Prodi's main spokesman, who claimed that the reforms amounted to little more than house-keeping. It was prefaced with a brief soundbite from an Icelandic businessman who was worried that enlargement of the community was a step too far.
- ❑ The finance ministers' decision over the euro stability pact. This was covered on Today by a brief interview with a BBC correspondent Patrick Bartlett at 6.07am, who said that the debate over the topic was mainly a row between France and Germany with chancellor Gordon Brown sitting on the sidelines. The broadsheet coverage looked at the implications for the euro project as a whole, the reasons why France did not want to meet the monetary targets set-down under the treaty – essentially because it would hobble its attempts to stimulate the economy – and the compromise eventually reached.

Of the remaining total, Today did not cover at least seven especially-important major EU-related stories that had special significance for the UK.

- ❑ Proposals to change the competition rules over golden shares (and more broadly the commission's proposals for the shake-up of competition law)

- ❑ The court ruling that the commission's blocking of the Air Tours merger with First Choice had been illegal – which had significance both for the business community and the wider travelling public
- ❑ Proposals on car price reform that could lead to cheaper prices in the UK
- ❑ A vote by MEPs to ban all cosmetics tested on animals (including a rebellion by Labour UK MEPs against the official government party line)
- ❑ Dissension within Europe over proposed fisheries reform, likely to impact on the UK because it would delay introduction of new quotas
- ❑ A CBI report on Brussels bureaucracy, notable through being linked with its Italian counterpart, and complaining that new laws were stifling competition and expansion in the UK
- ❑ The build up to the declaration at the EU summit protecting Irish neutrality, paving the way towards a second referendum on the Nice Treaty
- ❑ There were several more, but it seems particularly hard to understand why the stories in this list above were not included.

There were several more, and in addition, the programme did not cover a wide agenda of items carried in only one newspaper that – it could be argued – would have been of interest to the Today audience.

POSSIBLE CAUSES

The central question investigated by Minotaur was whether these changes were justified by the news agenda. Analysis of the programme content shows that possible reasons were:

- ❑ A rise in foreign coverage. The proportion of programme features devoted to foreign stories rose between 2000 and 2002 from 15% to 26%. The main areas of coverage during 2002 were the India-Pakistan dispute and tensions in Israel.
- ❑ The football world cup. There were 65 items on prospects for the England team (outside the regular sports slots).
- ❑ The possibility that coverage in 2000 was unusually high. Analysis shows that a running story about possible splits in the Cabinet over EU-related policies attracted approximately 59 minutes of coverage over 15 programme items. However, it does not account for anywhere near the full amount of the reduction. Even if this is all subtracted from the 2000 coverage, the total of EU-related items still fell from 11% (rather than 14%) to 7%.
- ❑ In 2000, the summit was on weekdays, giving Today the opportunity to cover the whole summit, with three items on the day after. In 2002, it closed on Saturday so there was no equivalent programme on the Sunday. On the Monday (June 24) there was no coverage of any EU-related matter emanating from the summit.
- ❑ The Conservatives. There was little evidence in 2002 that the Conservative party was pro-active in making contributions about Europe. In 2000, shadow ministers William Hague, Michael Portillo, Francis Maude and John Redwood were all interviewed at least once on a range of EU matters, including ones generated by the Conservative party itself such as the 'keep the pound' campaign. In 2002, there were no Conservative-generated stories, and only a single shadow minister – David Liddington – featured in the programme, speaking briefly about BSE. The only other contributions from Conservative figures were interviews with Michael Jack MP, about the fridge mountain, and with the former MEP Edward Macmillan Scott on Robert Mugabe, and a brief soundbite from a parliamentary question from John Whittingdale MP.

Conclusion

A drop of 50% in the proportion of the Today programme devoted to EU-related affairs is *prima facie* a serious cause for concern, indicating that programme may not be meeting its overall obligation to be wide-ranging in its coverage.

The concern is heightened in the context of fears – expressed in many quarters – that the corporation is moving towards a planned reduction in its commitment towards serious political reportage. *Prima facie*, this is concrete evidence that this may already have happened.

This impression is strengthened by the large number of the EU-related stories considered important enough to be covered in detail by national newspapers that were not mentioned at all on Today. And examination of the programme transcripts underlines that other stories that were mentioned were presented – even by the programme’s own standards as demonstrated in 2000 – on a very limited basis.

The job of the Today programme is not to cover every story that is on the national agenda, but to bring listeners – in its own editorial style and disciplines – reasonably wide-ranging coverage.

The programme editors do not fulfil quotas of coverage according to rigid time templates. They strive to achieve balance using minute-by-minute judgments on the relative importance of stories. The overall need to be wide-ranging remains in the background as the foundation on which the programme is built.

The key issue is whether, against this background, the very significant fall in coverage of EU-related events between the two periods was justified.

- a) by pressures on the news agenda exerted by other more important events
- b) and/or by the relative unimportance of the EU-related items
- c) or by other factors, such as the decision by the Conservative party to limit its involvement in this area

a) There was no doubt of the need by the programme to cover the Israeli and Pakistan-India tensions or the world cup. The question is one of degree. The answer is in three parts:

1. An either/or judgment about the relevant importance of these particular world affairs stories as compared to EU-related events is not easily resolvable in any objective sense.
2. The same applies to world cup coverage (absorbed in the culture sport and arts category) which rose from 159 minutes in 2000 to 218 in 2002. This increase could also have put pressure on the space devoted to EU-related stories.
3. But the key point is that *if* foreign news and/or world cup coverage was judged to be of extra urgency and importance, it would be expected that domestic news coverage would also have been reduced as there were no stories that merited especially urgent or substantial coverage. In fact it rose by 3%. This suggests strongly that home stories were considered to be more important to those emanating from the EU.

The conclusion is therefore that EU-related coverage suffered an unjustified reduction, the victim probably of over-inflated domestic coverage and possibly – but not certainly - too much importance being attached to international affairs and world cup coverage.

b) The evidence presented in previous sections indicates clearly and unequivocally that there were numerous EU-related news items on the national agenda that Today decided not to cover and many others that were treated on a very limited basis. Today, of course, does not have an obligation to cover stories in the broadsheets, and indeed, might not do so for a variety of reasons, including timing, other internal priorities and a definite desire to plough its own distinctive furrow. Nor – even if it wanted to - does it have the space to cover the volume of material on the broadsheet agenda. But it does have a duty to be wide-ranging. In this context, it seems inexplicable – to give a few examples from the many more provided above – that there was only one interview in this key period on the topic of enlargement, that there was no effort to explore the big themes of EU involvement apart from asylum reform, that a major survey by the CBI pointing to bureaucratic problems being generated by the EU was completely

ignored, and that the ban by MEPs on cosmetics tested by animals was not covered. Even more inexplicable was the fall in the coverage of business affairs between 2000 and 2002, to the extent that they had almost vanished from the agenda. The absence of areas of coverage, and its lack of depth, is brought sharply into focus by the comparison with what was achieved in 2000. The conclusion is therefore that Today failed to bring its listeners sufficient material on EU-related matters, and that there is clear evidence that the commitment to reporting such matters was seriously reduced to the point where the “wide-ranging” requirement was not met.

c) The number of appearances by Conservatives fell from 12 in 2000 to four (one of them very minor indeed) in 2002. The survey therefore provides evidence that either there was a reduction in the programme invites to party spokesmen to comment on EU-related affairs, or that they declined to do so (although the programme made no mention of the party turning down invites to appear). In addition, there could have been a behind-the-scenes reluctance to appear by Conservatives, leading to a reduction in the number of stories being considered for coverage. But either way, this is not a major reason for the huge overall decline in EU-related items. The numbers involved were simply not large enough. And numerous of the stories not covered by the programme mentioned were not the type that necessarily required the views of politicians. In addition, the programme has an editorial duty to ensure that stories are covered even when politicians are reluctant to appear – to be pro-active in ensuring a wide-ranging agenda. A reduction in overall coverage simply because the obvious participants will not appear is not a valid excuse.

It is accepted by Minotaur that the evidence of only two three-week periods does not constitute unequivocal evidence of failure. More research needs carrying out. But it does present an extremely strong prima facie case that the BBC is not covering European affairs satisfactorily, or as much as it used to do.

It seems that, as the big decisions on enlargement, reform of the EU’s procedures and membership of the single currency approach resolution – precisely when people need more information and explanation of EU affairs - the corporation has downgraded its coverage to a fraction of its former levels.

The reasons for the fall are not clear. It may be that there is an editorial mindset that EU affairs are not interesting enough. Euro-sceptics could believe that the reluctance is part of a process to keep the electorate in the dark about the true scale and speed of the European project, while those wanting an early entry into the euro might argue that the absence of debate is keeping the referendum conveniently at bay.

The evidence presented here strongly supports the view that even relatively sophisticated audiences are being deprived of the news and analysis that they need to make up their minds on some of the most important issues facing the country and not informed properly about the range and nature of the European Union’s activities and aspirations. .

The corporation must demonstrate clearly – and in equal detail – its response to these findings. And the response should come not solely from its own editorial executives or the BBC governors Their response to criticism is often simply to close ranks, acting as judge and jury on its own affairs.