

The BBC and Europe

Executive summary

The aim of the survey was to examine whether on Today, its flagship news and current affairs programme, the BBC was meeting its remit of providing balanced and impartial coverage of controversial matters relating to Britain's membership of the EU.

The nine-week survey period was chosen at random, but it covered several important European-related stories, including the Feira summit, the French take over of the Presidency, and with it, reports of the development of a two-speed Europe; the Conservative push to develop a "save the Pound campaign"; growing reports of a Cabinet rift on Euro policy; claims by Nissan and others that the "high value of the Pound" was hitting manufacturing industry, with linked calls from the Pro-Euro-camp for urgent entry of EMU; and a series of "leaked memos" suggesting that although inward investment was at record levels, Britain being outside the Euro was damaging to long-term investment prospects.

The survey recorded, logged and analysed the 54 editions of the Today programme from May 22-July 21, amounting to 153 hours. Running logs of the programme were kept, listing topics and time of transmission. Some 250 items directly involving membership of the EU were noted and transcribed. In addition, a daily analysis of the programme output was maintained. It included what national newspapers were covering on Europe, and evaluated issues related to impartiality and balance interview by interview. This amounts to more than 1,000 pages of records, all of which are available on CD.

The main findings of the report were summarised in a 23-page report covering the most important journalistic issues raised by the survey. The report is supported by appended day logs. Minotaur Media Tracking also carried out three analytical tests:

1. To break down programme content by news topic, divided into Home, World, Europe, Science, Art and Transport. This found that coverage of Europe—related issues amounted to 9% of programme output. This was below the amount devoted to Science and World events, and, linked with points raised below about low levels in some areas of European coverage, is flagged as a matter for concern.
2. To establish the number of speakers who were Pro-Euro, Euro-sceptic and neutral in issues related to the European debate (see below) . This found a 2.5:1 ratio (87 to 34) in favour of the Pro-Euro camp, a figure which Minotaur Media Tracking found difficult to understand, given the need for balance.
3. To check whether European items were being delivered the same pace of delivery as others. A timed survey of 30 reports found that EU-related stories were delivered at an average of 191 words per minute , compared with the average of 175 words per minute for Science reports (which had similar problems of complexity), 169 words per minute on World news and 185 on Home news. This discrepancy, it was felt, warranted investigation, as it indicated that the speed of delivery might mar the clarity, of European items, as they often dealt with complex concepts (such as the Schengen agreement) .

Volume of Coverage: Minotaur Media Tracking concluded that, during the period as a whole, many important issues had not been tackled in as much depth as might have been expected. For example at the Feira EU Summit, the programme did not come to grips with the agenda sufficiently to convey to listeners the range and importance of what was going on. The danger was that listeners were not fully informed about important topics relating to the development of the EU and its powers, and of Britain's relationship to that development from the differing political perspectives. Coverage was subsumed by football hooliganism at Euro 2000, an important breaking story, but nonetheless arguably not as important in the longer term as main issues which were on the agenda and covered by the national press but which Today scarcely mentioned or came to grips with. The overview correspondent report suggested that the main event had been " a victory" over the Withholding Tax", along with one paragraph that suggested that the main decisions had been left to the summit at Nice in December on

January. There were no interviews with Euro-sceptics during the days of the summit, and the main wrap up interview with Robin Cook, saw him making – virtually without challenge - a number of surprising claims painting the conclusion in a positive light. This would have been perhaps more justifiable if there had been opposing views in the programme, but there were not.

The report also highlighted in this category that, with another important Europe story - the possibility of the development of a two-speed Europe, following the Franco-German summit of June 9 - the coverage came mainly from through an interview with the German ambassador in London, a source unlikely to give anything but a guarded and one-sided view of developments.

Speakers

Balance in journalism is not achieved through simplistic counting of the pros and antis in a debate. But, given the controversial nature of the issues being discussed on Europe, Minotaur Media Tracking found the breakdown of the number of speakers over the period as a whole – 87 from the Pro-Euro camp (including EU Commissioners and spokespeople). with 34 Euro-sceptics and 18 “neutral” hard to explain or understand. Analysis of periods of related topics central to the European debate – for example the Nissan call to enter the Euro claims and the leaked memo stories about damage being caused to inward investment because the UK was outside the Euro between June 30 and July 7 – showed similar imbalance, with a total of 15 Pro Euro speakers to 7 Euro-sceptics and four neutral. It seems that here, although part of the coverage was to establish whether the Pro-Euro side was split on the speed of entry, Today did not take into account adequately the Euro-sceptic perspective. It was also noted that while the story from Nissan claiming that jobs could be at risk was elevated high in the bulletins, nowhere on the programme was it spelled out or elicited from interviewees that the record inward investment figures may have led to the creation of up to 50,000 jobs in the UK. And claims from prominent Pro-Euro speakers that “millions of jobs” might be at risk, went almost without challenge from Today’s interviewers.

The “high value of the Pound” Minotaur Media Tracking noted that while the adoption of shorthand is required to explain some stories, the choice of the phrase “the high value of the Pound” – as defining Britain’s difficulties in selling to some markets because of the level of exchange rate – caused problems with balance. The main one was that Pro-Euro figures such as Kenneth Clarke, Sir Len Jackson and senior Labour figures blamed problems in manufacturing industry directly on the “high value of the Pound”, and, in turn, used this as the basis for their argument that the UK should join the EMU sooner rather than later. By contrast, Euro-sceptics such as Michael Portillo blamed manufacturing industry’s woes on the “weak Euro” and on his part, claimed that this was a defining reason not to join the Single Currency. Against this politically loaded background, the evidence in the report underlines that Today used “high value of the Pound” too indiscriminately and did not sufficiently allow into play the Euro-sceptic perspective on the problem. This was particularly evident during the Nissan story, during the subsequent leaked memo claims and counter-claims, and by the treatment of a series of decisions by steelmaker Corus to reduce its UK workforce.

The report also mentioned other problems:

Structural: Some items covering the Euro-sceptic perspective were treated early in the programme, while the countervailing interviews or treatments came at peak time. This occurred, for example, on June 3, during the coverage of the memo warning of a meltdown in UK investment from Japan unless we joined the Euro. Three interviews agreeing with the viewpoint were broadcast during peak time (defined as between 7am-9am), while an important “balancing” perspective, from a Japanese analyst who contended that many more factors other than the Euro were in play, went out only during the business news at 6.17am.

Complexity: The programme failed to explain adequately some issues and, by trying to cover too much ground in short interviews, sometimes only succeeded in confusing matters. This happened, for example, on May 29, in attempting to explain the adoption of a new cross-border treaty with France and its relationship with the Schengen agreement. Problems arose when Today then brought the wider constitutional implications of the Schengen Agreement into the debate, namely the parts of the accord which have removed border controls amongst the signatory countries. Listeners were being told on the one hand about new, tougher measures to curb illegal immigration, on the other that there were possibilities that Britain’s border controls could be removed completely. Here then, were three separate issues, each deserving of their own coverage, placed together in such a way as to make each of them virtually unintelligible.

Missed topics: Coverage during the period – while examining, for example, important issues such as the Danish Referendum on the Euro and Austria’s attempts to have sanctions removed, did not cover

directly many important topics such as moves towards a common defence policy, and Corpus Juris, even though there were pegs and reasons to do so. The number of speakers from outside the UK – except from the Commission itself - was extremely limited.

Other concerns raised by the report included interviewers sometimes attempting to push an interview along pre-determined courses, as happened when Sue MacGregor asked the same question of a Nissan spokesman three times when he had answered affirmatively in the way he wanted on the first occasion; and an apparent readiness to associate the word “barmy” or “extremist” with the Euro-sceptic case (with no corresponding adjective to describe the views of the more extreme Pro-Euro speakers, such as Sir Ken Jackson).

Related Documents:

- [The BBC and Europe - TODAY survey: May 22 – July 21, 2000](#)
Preliminary findings, Conducted by Minotaur Media Tracking for Global Britain
- [Appendix 1 - List of Speakers](#)
- [Appendix 2 - Breakdown of content on Today program](#)
- [Letter from Malcolm Pearson to Sir Christopher Bland, Chairman of the BBC, 28th September 2000, \(Draft\)](#)