

# illuminating or Dimming Down? A Survey of UK Television News Coverage

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**Abstract**

TV news has become the most used and most trusted lens through which citizens of liberal democracies make sense of their world. This study of UK peak time TV news, based on an enhanced content analysis, casts doubt on the extent to which such coverage is able to illuminate this world accurately. With some exceptions in the case of Channel 4 News, the coverage closes down diversity, distorts and overstates terror and other violence, is repetitive and simplistic and is heavily dependent on official sources.

**Keywords:** TV News, content analysis, Propaganda Model, feminist media studies, news values, Orientalism.

## Background

Surveys across Europe have highlighted the continuing significance of television news, especially when produced by public service providers, as the most widely accessed and the most trusted source of current affairs information (Towler, 2002: 36-38; Ward, 2004: 3-5). This reliance and trust persists despite a decline in the production of factual programming (3WE, 2001; 3WE, 2003), some decline in audience figures for national providers in the face of global news media (Clausen, 2004: 41) and despite repeated and damaging exposure of inaccuracy and distortion across a range of TV news reporting. The Glasgow University Media Unit, Project Censored and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, for example, have maintained a flow of material which, given wider exposure, might have seriously undermined this trust. Exemplifying this material and with particular relevance for this study was Philo & Berry's extensive analysis of TV coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict (2004).

A preference for TV news presenters over newspaper journalists has been shown in the UK (MORI, 2003: 1; MORI, 2004: 3) and for TV over newspapers generally in the UK (MORI, 2003b). It's worth noting that these studies have rarely distinguished between the relative levels of trust for the broadsheet as opposed to the tabloid press, by contrast with television news. So it may be dangerous to make too many assumptions about a general preference for television news over newspapers. Beyond this debate over matters of trust concerning accuracy in the reporting of particular stories lie debates about choices made by editors and the consequent overall climate or sense of reality that the results of these choices create within TV news programmes. As Bunting states: 'What the media portray, like one of those fairground mirrors, is a grotesque species that murders, squabbles, bullies and dies' (Bunting, 2005: 2).

Bunting claims there has been a distortion of our perceptions of the world that results from a preoccupation with violence and suffering. The accuracy of each report becomes less of an issue than the decision to present and to repeat that type of story. If only a few story types, from the almost infinite range available to reporters, are repeated day-after-day within the relatively short window of evening news broadcasts, a powerful and pervasive definition of reality pushes out other perspectives. (This paper reports on an empirical study designed in part to measure the range covered in UK evening news). Though viewers may not be passive in their consumption of these broadcasts, the choices for interpretation have been narrowed and a climate or a dominant narrative established.

Although this paper makes no simple or direct claims about the impact of TV news consumption, it must be read against a background of the considerable power differential between producers and consumers in terms of their ability to define how events should be understood. In this, it agrees with Corner (2000: 394) that we should abandon: 'an unhelpful tendency to think about the media's impact upon society rather than the media's consequentiality within society', while, at the same time, remembering that media representations: 'not only promote and circulate an understanding of these and other categories [of meaning] they can often generate them', (Briggs & Cobley, 2002: 310).

In an effort to contribute to the above debate, this paper reports on an enhanced content analysis of UK television news coverage in August and September 2004. Judging by keyword searches of two of the most commonly cited media research journals (Media, Culture and Society (MCS) and the European Journal of Communication (EJC), content analysis is relatively rare. In the period 1999 to 2004, MCS published only three papers based on such

analysis while, between 1997 and 2004, EJC published fourteen. In these two periods MCS published a total of around two hundred research papers and EJC published around one hundred. Content analysis as a method is justly criticised for its limitations, especially if used in isolation or if based on the collection of insignificant data. However, its quantitative nature seems indispensable in providing an objective or factual basis upon which to build more discursive approaches. In the context of this paper, a content analysis of television news coverage offers the possibility of constructing at least some degree of shared reality (What was reported? What was ignored? What was first? What was last? What got the most time?). While it is important to go beyond such analysis to consider, for example, sources and labelling, quantitative data can be suggestive of ideology too. If, for example, reports of global conflict are predominantly focused on the presence of Islamic groups and ignore those characterised by the presence of Western 'security' forces or multinational corporations (as in Nigeria), then such allocation of broadcast time is legitimate for consideration in the light of explicitly 'political' theories such as those of Said or Chomsky. Further, where presenters carefully avoid the kind of labelling ('terrorist', 'fundamentalist', 'democrat') most clearly associated with ideologically driven reporting, then it may be in the more quantitative data (selection of topics for reporting) that the features of an ideological 'climate' become apparent - more of this later. This is, of course, not a new idea. Chomsky's 'Project Censored' website has for several years now reported on the politically motivated selectivity in media coverage of issues.

## Methods

This study of UK terrestrial television news is based on data from a survey of a random sample of twenty weekday evenings in August and September 2004. Six hundred and thirty news items were viewed and key characteristics recorded. Weather reports and repetitions of headlines were ignored. The content of BBC 1 National News (6-6.30pm), ITV National News (6.30-7pm) and Channel 4 News (7-8pm) was analysed, using an enhanced content analysis. In particular, the study set out to offer answers to the following questions:

1. What was the range of topics covered?
2. Which topics were common and which were rare or absent?
3. How much time was allocated to each topic, in total, and on average, for each item?
4. What was the sequencing of topics?
5. Which sources were used, which dominated, which were rarely used and which were ignored?
6. What use of sources, contextualisation, personalisation, and labelling was adopted and used across the differing topics?
7. How did the three programmes compare in terms of the above questions?

The results of the data analysis are presented below and evaluated later with a view to answering these questions. The answers are then discussed in order to respond to the question suggested in the title to this paper: To what extent does UK peak time television news fulfil its function of shining light onto the complex world of its viewers? This discussion derives evaluative criteria from, in the main, six key theoretical models: Herman and Chomsky's 'Propaganda Model' (1988), Edward Said's 'Orientalism' (1978, 1993), the 'Feminism' of Ang & Hermes (1996) and van Zoonen (1996), the 'News Values' model deriving originally from the work of Galtung and Ruge (1981) and an emerging 'New Sociology of Journalism' inspired by 'Chaos Theory' (McNair, 2003). This paper is neither primarily concerned with the theories themselves nor with the arguments about their place in media, cultural and

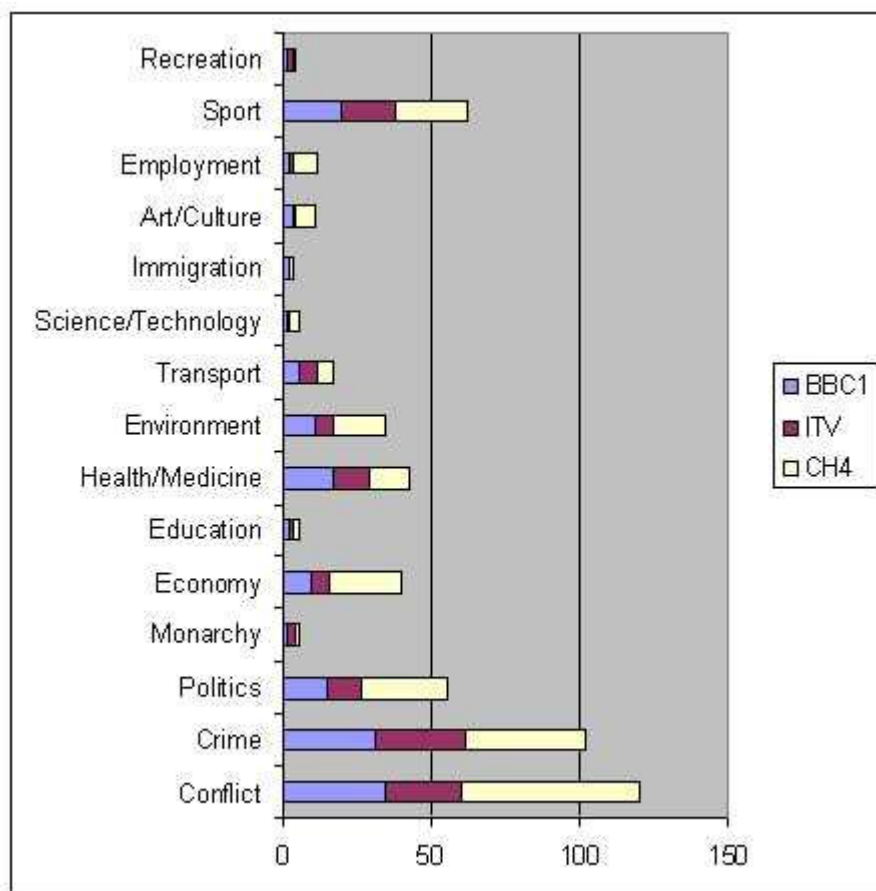
communication studies but is, in the first instance, an empirical study, the results of which are offered as material for subsequent debate. The five theories are used here to provide evaluative criteria and to stimulate discussion of the results.

In anticipation of a need to be able to discuss and to compare the coverage of these three programmes, 'alternative' stories published in independent Internet-based media were gathered. The sites monitored on six occasions during the same period as the TV broadcasts were the feminist Aviva, the 'critical' Media Mouse and Corporate Watch, the human rights focused Human Rights Watch and the 'environmentalist/rights' Greenpeace and Oxfam.

For each news item, a range of data were recorded including the topic, the message or direction of the piece, the sources used, personalisation or contextualisation and the labelling used to describe participants and events. These data were recorded in a spreadsheet and used to generate the graphs and other presentations below. Due to limited space, only selected graphs and tables are included in this paper. First, a set of graphs reveals the distribution of topics across the broadcast period and for each of the three programmes. Second, the sequencing of topics is presented in a set of graphs to illustrate trends toward the choice of certain topics to lead off and, with regard to this, the similarities or otherwise between the three programmes. Third, the degree of commonality and of difference between the range of topics chosen each day by each programme is illustrated in a single table. Fourth, a survey of topics not used by the three UK terrestrial news programmes and derived from the 'alternative' websites listed above or from academic sources, offers material for comparison and for later debate. Fifth and with the intention of enhancing the content analysis, a more discursive approach to the sources, contextualisation and labelling adopted by reporters and announcers on each of the three programmes is exemplified and discussed. For reasons of economy and of focus, this section concentrates only on stories of terror and conflict.

## Results: Content of BBC1, ITV and Channel 4 Evening News

Figure 1: The number of items broadcast for each group topic:

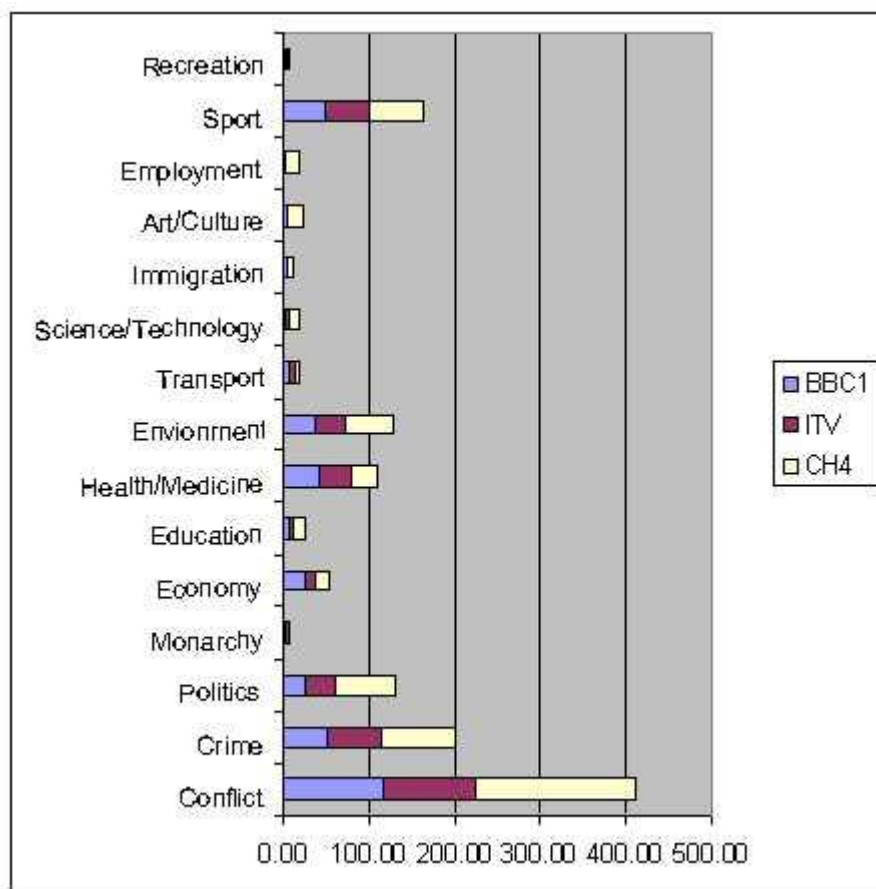


While most of the above categories are transparent, clarification is required for some. Conflict, the dominant category, includes reports of war, religious or ethnic conflict between groups. Crime covers all illegal activity other than that between nation states, ethnic or religious groups and includes 'white-collar' crime. Politics covers all non-violent political activity at regional, national or international levels (fortunately the UK Deputy Prime Minister did not punch anyone during the period of the study). Environment includes reports of damage to the environment such as that caused by pollution or by extreme weather. A more detailed breakdown can be found, below, in graphs for these categories.

Some categories were notably one or two-dimensional. Strikingly, only one Education topic, A-level results, featured. Science and Technology stories were almost always about space and space exploration. Employment reports were always about industrial relations problems. The Olympics and football dominated sport items with a smaller number on cricket and tennis. Art/Culture reports were exclusively obituaries, festival reports and reviews of new products.

Some categories, though comprising reports on two or three sub-categories, had an overwhelming dominance of one sub-category. Environment stories were nearly always about 'extreme weather'. Transport stories were mostly about accidents.

Figure 2: The total time allocation (minutes) for each group topic:



Evident from figures 1 and 2 is the dominance, in terms of overall time allocation and in the number of items broadcast, of conflict, crime, sport and politics. The narrowed gap between conflict and crime when number of items broadcast is compared with the overall time allocation illustrates the tendency across all three channels for crime reports to be, on average, shorter (1.96min) than conflict reports (3.57min). In part explaining this difference, crime reports, mostly of violent crime, were presented in an unproblematic and personalised way while reports of global conflict often featured a degree of contextualisation including possible explanatory factors. The relatively high time allocation for environment stories, given the actual number of reports, reflects the very long reports on the extreme weather events in Cornwall and Perthshire (UK) and in Florida (USA) (average=4.56min). Reports of the flooding in Cornwall ranged from six minutes to, in one case (ITV), twenty minutes, out of less than thirty minutes of total news programming. Initial comparison of the three channels, of which more later, suggests ITV News had the narrowest range (no reports of employment, art/culture or immigration) while Channel 4 News made use of its extra length to cover the widest range of topics and, in most cases, to allocate more time to each report. The latter impression was most true of conflict and politics reports but not true with regard to monarchy.

Figures 1 and 2 offer the first hint of supporting evidence for the critics who condemn the dominance of violence, confrontation and suffering in TV news. The dominance of the conflict category and, as we shall see below, of violent crime, of confrontational politics and of human suffering in reports on the environment is quite clear.

Fig 3: The number of conflict items broadcast:

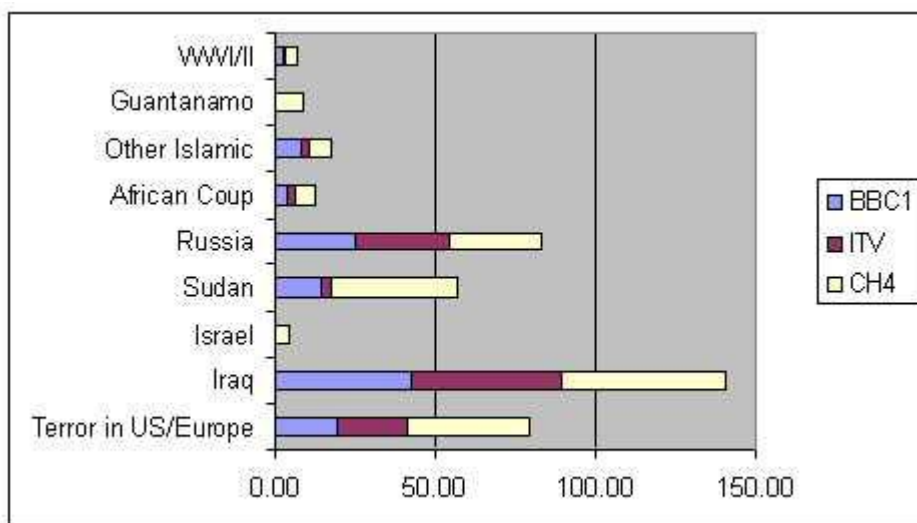
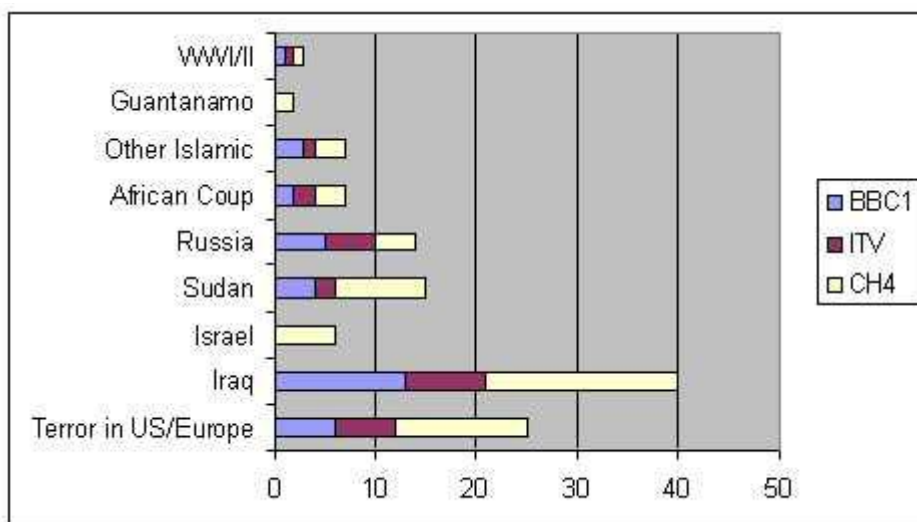


Fig 4: The total time allocation (minutes) for each conflict item broadcast:



Four topics dominated - The Beslan siege in the southern Russian region of Ossetia, the 'genocide' in the western Sudanese region of Darfur, the continuing/increasing violence in Iraq and the constant background of stories about threats to the USA and Europe from Islamic terrorism. Notably, conflict without an Islamic dimension, in Central Africa, in Nigeria, in Tibet or in Central and South America continues 'off-screen'. Only Channel 4 News operated across the restricted range revealed in figures 3 and 4. Channel 4's tendency to use its greater time allocation to explore, more fully, contextualising factors and conflicting perspectives is discussed later. ITV and BBC1 had comparable range of coverage but ITV tended to allocate its time more narrowly to the Beslan Siege, Iraq and Terrorist Threat. Differences in discourse are notable between ITV and the other two and these, also, are discussed below.

Fig 5: The number of crime items broadcast:

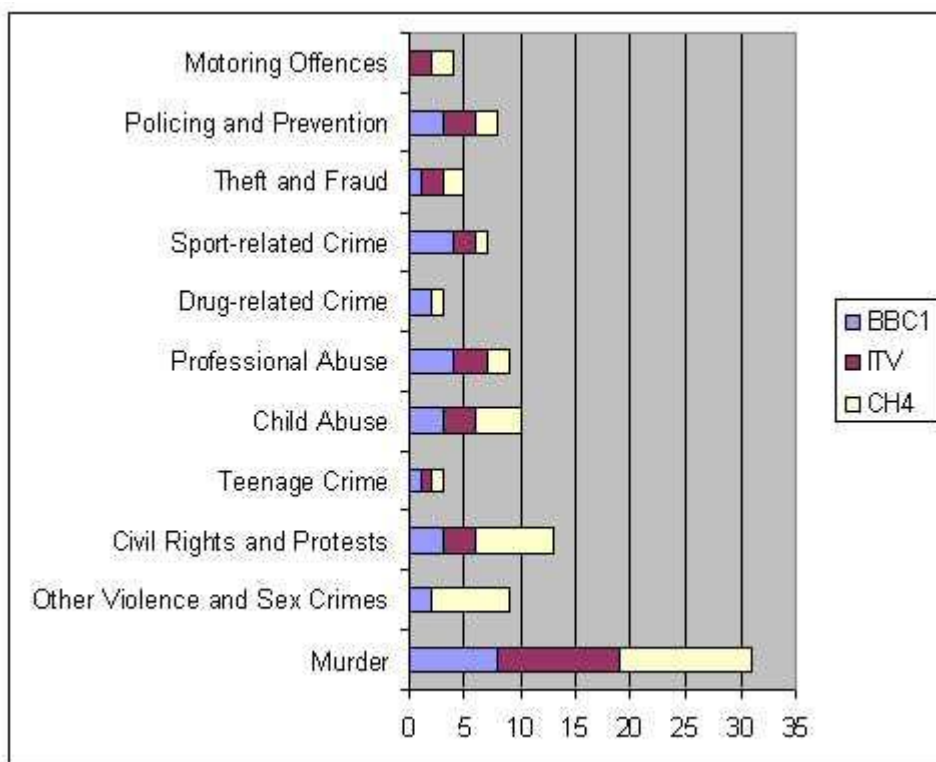
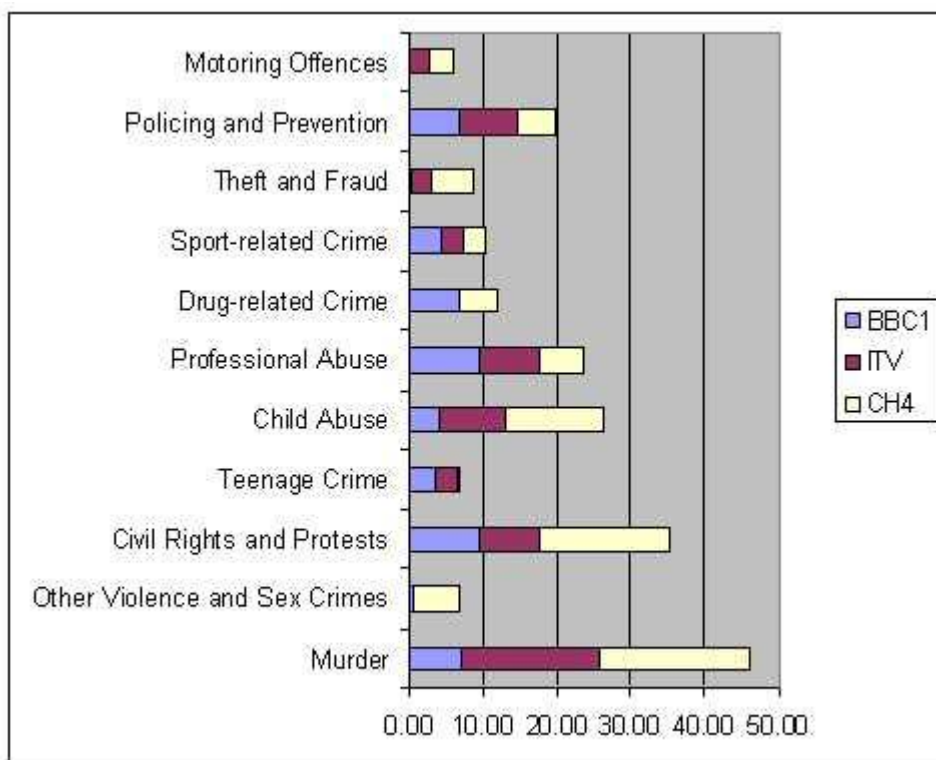


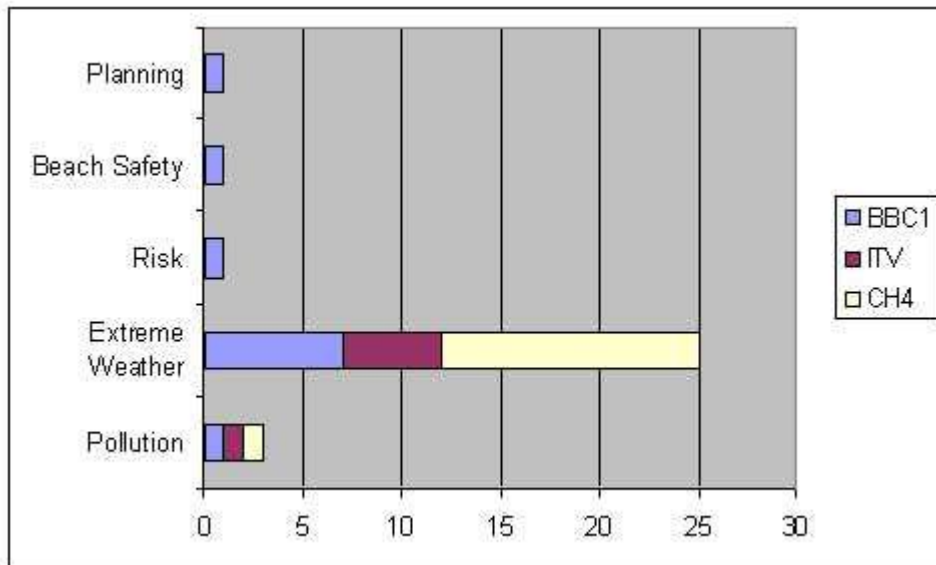
Fig 6: The total time allocation (minutes) for each crime item broadcast:



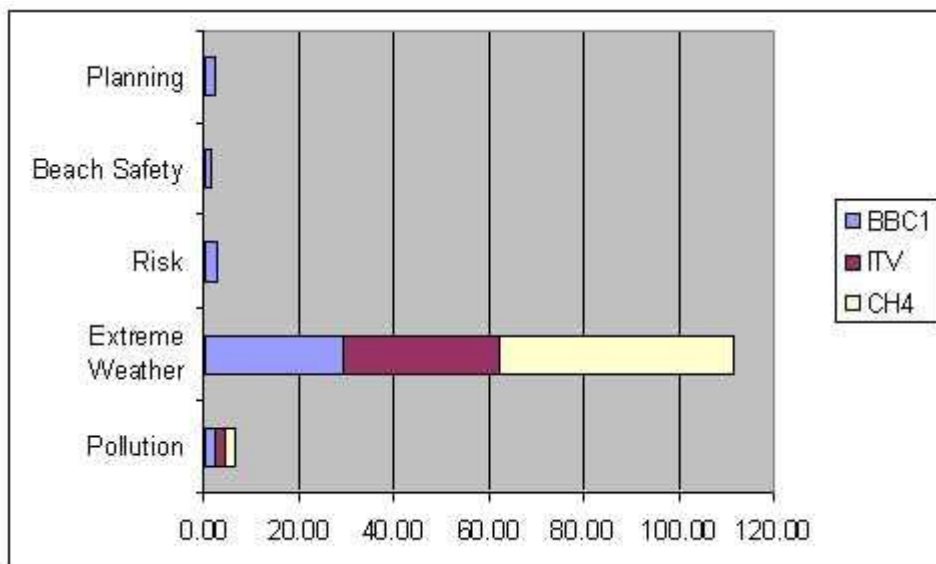
Violent crime completely dominates the reporting of crime despite its relative rarity compared with crimes of property (Social Trends, 2003: 169, Table 9.13). Even those

categories that are not, by definition, about violent crime, often featured violence. For example, though the civil rights and protest category contains many stories of protests by fathers denied access to their children there were also reports, sometimes lengthy, of the violent protests against the fox hunting ban and the threats to MPs associated with the passage of the Bill. Differences between the three programmes were less marked than for the conflict category. Channel 4 News was not distinctive in any way. The only notable distinction was ITV News' tendency to allocate a higher proportion of its time to murder reports.

*Fig 7: The number of environment items broadcast:*



*Fig 8: The total time allocation (minutes) for each environment item broadcast:*



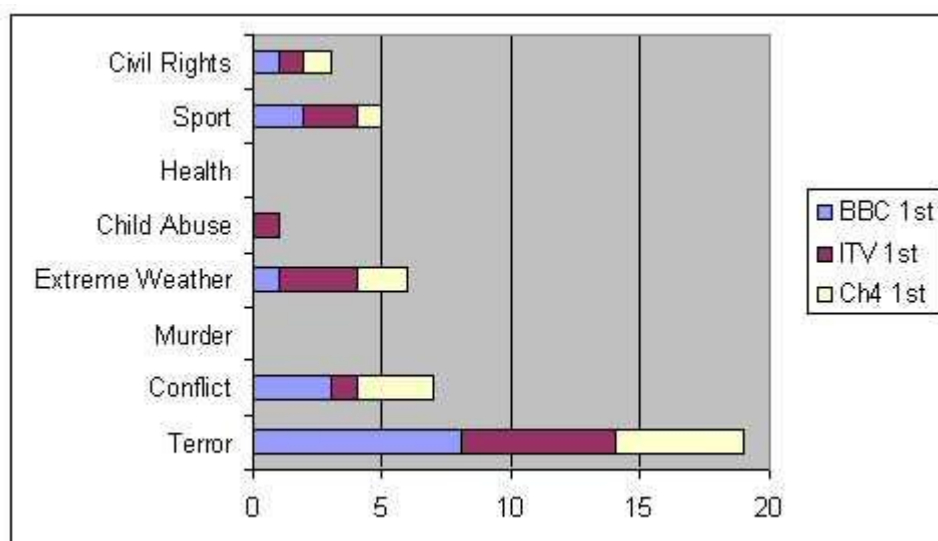
Again, violence and risk to human life dominated. Extended and dramatic images of the destruction and the human suffering associated with extreme weather (floods in the UK and storms in the USA) - took up much of the time. Explanation, however, was commonly

allocated quite extended periods of time. Sophisticated explanatory graphics and interviews with experts, often academics was used by all three programmes to offer the viewer a scientific explanation. Without exception, a simple connection between global warming and an increased frequency of extreme weather events was presented as definitive. Channel 4 News often went beyond this to link global warming explicitly to human factors and to draw attention to the likely worsening of the situation as India and China industrialises and modernise. This relative depth of scientific explanation contrasts markedly with the complete absence of reflection on the possible causes of crime and, except for Channel 4, the absence of any linkage between Islamic terror and the actions of western governments.

### Results: Sequence

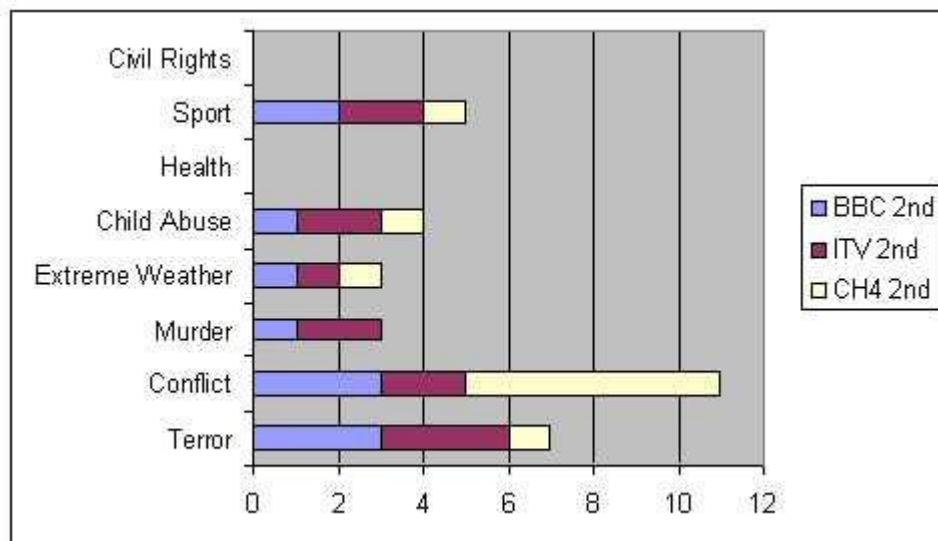
Figures 9 to 11, below, show the frequency with which topics and sub-topics appeared in first, second or third place in broadcasts. The use of sub-topics (child abuse, murder, extreme weather) clarifies their complete dominance of their parent topics (crime and environment) in opening reports.

*Fig 9: Topics appearing in first place*



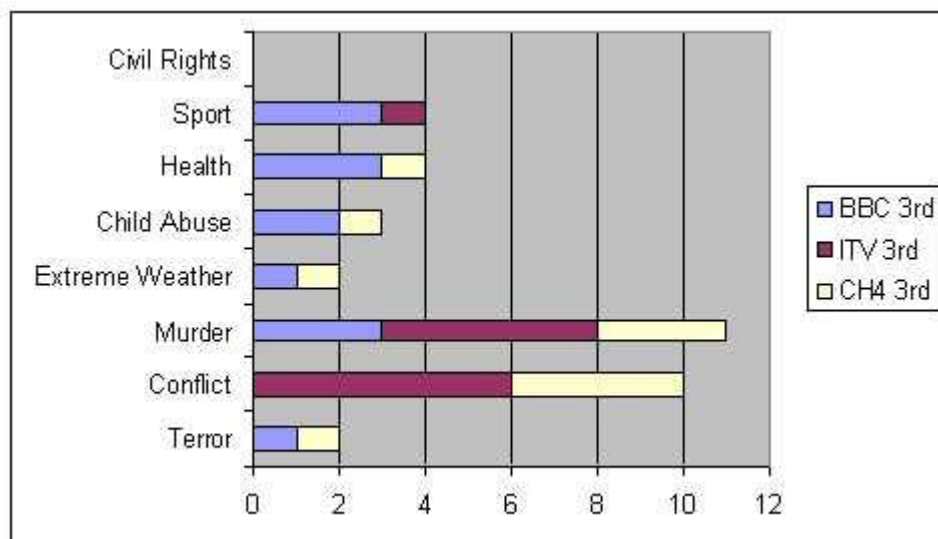
Reports of terror threats, especially to the UK or other 'Western' nations were most likely to be chosen as lead stories. Conflict in other parts of the world but especially in Iraq or in other Islamic countries tended to lead where no terror threat closer to home was available and, otherwise, dominated the second place position (see Fig 10). Only the extreme weather events in the UK or Florida (USA), the sports scandals and upsets at the Athens Olympics and the fathers' rights demonstrations at Buckingham Palace, could temporarily displace terror and conflict. The fathers' rights demonstrations might seem to be the only reports of non-violent incidents to be reported (on one day only) in such prominence. The only notable distinction between the three programmes was ITV's disproportionate attention to extreme weather and neglect of conflict, relative to the other two programmes.

*Fig 10: Topics appearing in second place*



The relatively constant availability of stories of terror threat to the UK or to other western countries seems to have pushed other dramatic reports of violence and suffering into second place. However, the perceived appeal of terror was such that on many occasions both first and second stories would report on this topic. Forms of 'domestic' (UK) violence begin to find a place here. Notable here is ITV's enthusiasm for reports of murder and child abuse.

*Fig 11: Topics appearing in third place*



Although, only six murder cases were reported, as figures 10 and 11 show, the initial reports along with repeated follow-up reports created quite a presence in the headlines and, thus, may have contributed notably to the overall climate.

The climate created by the overall distribution of topics across the opening three items per broadcast is quite clear. The classic sequence was terror threat or extreme weather, conflict in Iraq or Sudan and then murder or child abuse in the UK. This appears to confirm the

preoccupation with violence and human suffering reported impressionistically by Bunting (2005).

### **Results: Difference**

Table 1 below shows the average, minimum and maximum of the:

1. Number of items broadcast per evening;
2. Number of items broadcast by ITV but not by BBC1;
3. Number of items broadcast by CH4 but not by BBC or ITV.

Table 1: Difference

	1. BBC Items	2. ITV-BBC	3. CH4-(BBC+ITV)
Average	11	3	7
Max	13	7	14
Min	7	0	3

In each broadcast, ITV typically had the same number of items as BBC (c11) while Channel 4 typically had around eight to ten more (c20). BBC and ITV news were quite similar in terms of the stories selected for coverage, with an overlap of around 73 per cent. Channel 4 News made use of its extended time to broadcast on average seven additional reports not featured on the other two channels. However, Channel 4 News tended also to cover the same stories as the other two channels and, in most cases, did so in the first and second part of the programme. This latter point meant that although the final third of the Channel 4 News was relatively distinctive with coverage of the arts and of more complex economic or environmental issues, viewers of the first two parts only would have seen a quite similar selection of stories to that offered by BBC1 and ITV.

### **Results: Alternative Content**

UK TV news has been criticised for lack of attention to distribution of wealth or to welfare issues (Philo, 1995; Philo and Miller, 2000) or to the human costs of the Iraq War (Edwards, 2004; Williams, 2004). A heavy TV emphasis on conflict in the Islamic world coexists with neglect of problems in Nigeria (Adebanwi, 2004), in Fiji (Fickling, 2004) and of a wide range of religious violence, which does not involve Muslims - Sikhs and Hindus in India, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Christian militia in Africa and South America, and Anti-abortionists in the USA (Juergensmeyer, 2000). Finally, the flooding in the UK happened as thousands were dying or being made homeless in India and China (National Environmental Satellite Data and Information Service, 2004).

The concurrent survey of the feminist Aviva, the 'critical' Media Mouse and Corporate Watch, the human rights focused Human Rights Watch and the 'environmentalist/rights' Greenpeace and Oxfam revealed very little overlap in story selection with the three UK terrestrial TV news programmes.

*Aviva* headlined with, for example, 'Aids Pandemic Has a Woman's Face', 'Malnutrition Responsible for 50% of Child deaths', 'Fairplay Campaign for Olympic Garment Makers', and 'Child Bride Problems Ignored'.

*Media Mouse* reported on 'Military Contracts and the Reconstruction of Iraq', 'Iraqi Women and Torture' and 'Class and the Iraq War'. Corporate Watch headlined with 'Animal Testing Gets Bigger and Badder', 'Steal the Water Push the Powder' (Nestle in Brazil) and 'Nuclear contamination in Reading'.

*Human Rights Watch* reported on 'Nepal: Government and Maoist Rebels Target Civilians', 'Women and the Afghan Elections' and 'Thailand: Prosecute and Discipline Officials Responsible for Southern Violence'.

*Greenpeace* headlined 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' (President Bush gives permission to log Alaska's Tongass forest), 'US removes radioactive material from Iraq in secret airlift' and 'Think Again' (Ford abandons zero emission vehicle production). Oxfam reported on 'Counting the cost of conflict in Northern Uganda', 'EU sugar subsidies ruled illegal' and 'South Asia floods'.

A fuller reading of the above reports reveals dramatic and significant events which might easily have replaced some of the of the repetition and padding typical of the UK terrestrial news programmes.

### **Results: Sources, Contextualisation, Personalisation and Labelling**

This section focuses on description of the evidence of four key characteristics of the reporting: the sources used in constructing the report; the level and quality of contextualisation offered as a background explanation; the related extent to which personalisation was used and, finally, the kind of labelling used to describe events, to identify participants and to suggest their motives. A focus has been adopted, here, on four of those topics that dominated the news in this period - terror threats, conflict in Iraq, Russia (Beslan) and Sudan (Darfur).

#### *Sources*

The broadcasts surveyed in this study contained a great deal of material sourced, in the main, from political, military, NGO and, to a lesser extent, 'academic' elites.

Reports on the crisis in Sudan's Darfur region, for example, typically consisted of an impressionistic piece (usually in a refugee camp) from an on-the-spot reporter, an interview or a quote from a UN spokesperson condemning the Sudanese government, a film clip of a senior UK or US politician pressing the Sudanese government to resolve the problem and an interview with a Sudanese politician denying or reinterpreting the atrocities. On the August 5th, BBC1 News offered around four minutes of Nicholas Witchell reporting on the suffering of refugees in a camp. After listening to one particularly harrowing tale, the reporter probed further - 'You must be very upset?' he queried. 'Yes' the victim responded. Sources that might have shed explanatory light were not used. The reporter's observations were the only source used. ITV ignored the crisis that day but Channel 4 News allocated nearly nine minutes to the report, using primarily UN and US administration sources, followed, toward the end, by a short denial from a representative of the Sudanese government. Overall, the weight of sources

accessed (UN, US and UK administrations and reporters in refugee camps) was quite heavily disposed against the Sudanese government's position.

Reports on the Beslan school siege in the North Ossetian region of Russia tended to feature wide-ranging sources. On September 2nd all three programmes allowed an early prominence to official statements from President Putin and from Moscow citizens in street interviews. These, along with the harrowing reports from the siege scene, meant that the BBC and ITV reports presented a rather simple account in which the composition or motives of kidnappers were left unexplored. Channel 4 News, though initially covering similar ground, went on to offer varying perspectives on the wider conflict in the Caucasus region. One interesting difference between ITV and the other two programmes lay in the apparent selection by ITV of more emotive, indeed often hysterical, local sources. This observation is not to criticise the use of the highly emotive in what needed to be revealed as a highly emotive situation but, only, to record here the tendency by ITV to make more consistent use of such local sources. Though at times, government sources (Russian) were outnumbered by critical comment from US politicians, European politicians, human rights groups, and from the UN, it was notable that a number of non-attributed 'sources' often presented the Russian position. In addition, by contrast with the Darfur case, US/UK politicians were more restrained in public criticism of the Russian government's role and performance than they had been of the Islamic Sudanese regime.

In reports on Iraq, government (US, UK or Iraqi provisional) perspectives were accorded greater time and pre-eminence in broadcasts than had been the case for the two non-Western governments (Sudan and Russia). Though items critical of the US/UK stance had a presence, reports were often more narrowly dependent on UK and US government, military or security agency sources. Reporting on the Shia 'uprising' in Najaf, on August 6th and 12th, all three programmes made heavy use of US military spokesmen, official statements from the Iraqi (provisional) government in Baghdad and from 'sources', rarely attributed, known to their reporters (or to CNN) 'on the ground' in Najaf. A spokesman for the 'rebel cleric' Moqtada al-Sadr was typically quoted, later in the report, calling for resistance to the American forces.

Coverage of terror threats in the US and in Western Europe, on August 4th, 5th and 6th was heavily dominated on BBC and ITV news by UK, US and Pakistani police spokesmen, by UK politicians, by reports of speeches by US politicians and by commentary from a range of security and ex-security 'experts'. On the August 4th in its extended piece (sixteen minutes) on the topic, Channel 4 News used a range of sources beyond those adopted by the other two programmes. Notably, the reality and seriousness of the terror threat was not questioned other than implicitly by some of the Channel 4 News sources. Consideration of the possible amplification of the threat by politicians, security experts and some media in a manner comparable with a moral panic (Cohen, 1972) and as suggested in the contemporaneous TV series, *The Power of Nightmares* (BBC2, 2004) did not appear in any report.

Across the other topics, the fuller Channel 4 News versions made use of fairly wide-ranging sources including comment from representatives of Amnesty International, Oxfam and other human rights groups and offered a platform to individuals and groups more critical of the political administrations.

### *Contextualisation*

A lack of, or perhaps brevity in, contextualisation, by contrast with what we might expect to find in an extended piece in a Sunday broadsheet or 'serious' newspaper, could be expected in relatively short TV news items. Contextualisation was more often completely absent rather than just brief in most of the reports on the terror threat, Iraq, Beslan and Darfur, except in some Channel 4 reports.

Beslan and Darfur were little informed by the provision of such historical perspective. With regard to Beslan, we did not hear (except in a few relatively brief references in Channel 4 News reports) of the long history of Russian brutality in the region against Islamic populations nor of the scale of recent death and destruction in neighbouring Chechnya. As for Darfur, only simple stereotypes of cruel Arabs and helpless, feckless, black Africans were presented. No attempt was made to explore, for example, influencing factors such as desertification-induced population movement, the relatively recent settlement of each group or to clarify the identities of the competing groups: was this Arab against African or were both groups African; Islamicised Africans and Christianised or Animist Africans?

A lack of time for background explanation might be accepted as an explanation, at first sight, but it was clear that time could be found for contextualisation for some stories. The reports on the Cornwall floods (forty five to sixty per cent of total broadcast time) and for the failure of Olympic sportswoman Paula Radcliffe (c10 minutes) were very long. Much of this time (c20 per cent) was allocated to explanation from 'experts'.

### *Personalisation*

In sharp contrast to the overall lack of contextualisation was the heavy use of personalisation to communicate the trauma of the events in Darfur, Beslan, Iraq (and in Boscastle, Cornwall). Repeatedly, reporters would return to the interview with survivors as the dominant element in their reports. Personalisation is, of course, a perfectly valid mechanism by which to effectively communicate the impact of events on human beings. Viewers, naturally, are extremely interested in how other human beings fare in traumatic contexts. So, it is not the fact that personalisation was used in every single report considered here that is of interest but, rather, the possibility that its use pushed out other equally valuable or even more valuable forms of information. In particular, the heavy use of personalisation might offer a partial explanation for the tendency for contextualisation to be rare except, notably, in the reports of extreme weather or of Paula Radcliffe.

### *Labelling*

This data collection and analysis was restricted to consideration of the labelling of human participants, of events or of non-human forces. Though such analysis is inevitably partial, the choice of terminology such as 'fighter' or of 'insurgent' may be revealing of ideology and is certainly contributory to the climate creation central to the purpose of this study.

While definitive interpretations of such terms cannot be established, it is possible to argue that, for example, describing those who attack a US army column as 'fighters' suggests a different judgement of their legitimacy than using the term 'insurgent'. Indeed the latter term, when used to describe attackers who may well be native Iraqis could be seen as a fairly deliberate or 'patriotic' piece of misrepresentation designed to justify the UK/US intervention.

This example is, in fact, a good starting point and was a healthy reminder, for the author, of the value of empirical research. In casual news viewing, in the period immediately prior to the data collection, the author had noted the use of the term 'insurgent' and, perhaps oversensitised to its use, suspected it might turn out to be widely used in news reports. In fact, the three news programmes used a range of labels for those fighting the coalition forces but 'insurgent' was rare. While terms such as 'militia', 'Shi'ite militants' and 'fighters' featured regularly in reports on Iraq on all three programmes, 'insurgents' was used only once (ITV, August 17th) and 'insurgency' only three times (ITV, August 6th (2), BBC, 20th September (1)). Negative labelling of Islamic or Arab groups was absent. Sunni and Shi'ite or Shia groups were distinguished from each other and their leadership might be described as 'rebel' or 'radical' but none of the participants in the different Iraqi flashpoints was labelled 'Islamic', 'Arab', 'extremist' or 'fundamentalist'. Indeed, reporting on a conflict with no British troops present, a BBC News reporter spoke (August 19th) almost admiringly of the Shi'ite fighters' 'defiance' and of their being in 'no mood to capitulate'. On September 20th, BBC's Nicholas Witchell was to reveal the risk (for him) in using the term 'fighter', saying: 'freedom fighters ... the "foreign" fighters I should say'!

The siege of the school in Beslan was to offer ITV's reporters a major opportunity. On September 2nd, they screamed 'agony of mothers', 'some terrorists mothers themselves' and 'babies, toddlers held at gun point'. The kidnappers were labelled 'Chechen terrorists'. The earlier release of the babies and toddlers with their mothers did not result in moderation of the reference to babies and toddlers. BBC and Channel 4 were more restrained generally and avoided mistakes in labelling by referring to the kidnappers as 'armed militants' or, of course, 'kidnappers'. The later examination of the kidnappers found only a few Chechens, the inclusion of local Ossetians and the complete absence of the 'Arabs' required for the global Islamic terrorism thesis. On the September 7th, ITV continued in the same vein - 'three days after a town was visited by evil terrorist slaughter'. The use of outbursts, by ITV, from traumatised locals as evidence of causality - 'This was exactly what the terrorists wanted; the mass murder of children' was remarkable. BBC News and Channel 4 News broadcast many of the same images but their reporters were more restrained in the choice of emotive terms.

In Darfur (Sudan), by contrast, negative labels were more evident. While the government-supported 'militia' were often given the name 'Janjaweed', and the African resistance to the government were labelled 'rebels', the former were sometimes described as 'Arab militias' (BBC, August 12th) and 'Arab militia fighters' (BBC, August 5th). Further, the actions of the Janjaweed were labelled as 'atrocities' (Channel 4, August 13th), a 'humanitarian catastrophe' (BBC1, August 23rd) and 'ethnic cleansing' (ITV, August 23rd).

In reporting the arrests of 'terror suspects' on August 4th and 5th, BBC News adopted the same careful terminology used throughout by Channel 4 News. ITV, however, referred to 'men' and to 'twelve held in terror raids'. The term 'suspect' was not used by ITV and it was only toward the end of the August 5th report that ITV noted that they must sound a 'note of caution' in that 'no explosives have been found'. On August 4th, Channel 4 News was quick to remind viewers of the unproven nature of the charges - 'nothing found so far' - and to question the police strategy, 'A high risk strategy?' - 'A fishing expedition?' On both days, ITV offered drama with references to 'Al -Qaeda operatives' and to 'Target Heathrow' derived from 'conversations with sources both here and in Pakistan'. Then on August 6th, ITV went into overdrive with 'web of terror', 'chilling revelation' and the 'tentacles' of a network reaching into the UK.

## **Results: Summary**

Analysis of the data gathered for this study suggests the following comments.

There was a very heavy preference for stories of violence and human suffering regardless of how representation of such coverage occurred. There was a very strong tendency for stories of violence and human suffering to be pre-eminent in the sequencing, and to dominate the time allocations of broadcasts.

Within the categories of terror and conflict, there was a very strong tendency to focus on those contexts and events with an Islamic dimension regardless of how representation of such coverage occurred in terms of their global frequency and distribution.

Within the category of crime, there was a very strong tendency to select and to make prominent, stories of murder and of child abuse despite the statistical rarity of such events by contrast with property-related crimes.

Within many of the other topics, there was a very narrow range of story-types covered. Given the centrality of education to everyday lives, the focus on only one story (A-level Results) is notable. Similarly, given the everyday lived experience of environmental issues such as pollution, of waste disposal or of changing land-use, the narrow focus on extreme weather is remarkable.

In terms of content selection, BBC News and ITV News were very similar and Channel 4 News was only distinctive in the latter parts of broadcasts.

All three terrestrial TV news programmes ignored a wide range of alternative topics easily accessed through a plethora of reliable online sources.

There was a heavy reliance on official 'Western' sources in the coverage of war and terror though Channel 4 News did, at times, go beyond these to produce a more critical analysis.

In the coverage of extreme weather events (results not presented here due to lack of space), the dominant pessimistic paradigm, of human activity-derived global warming and consequent climate change, was largely embraced without question.

Contextualisation was only a regular feature in Channel 4 reports. Many BBC News and especially ITV News reports, offered very little explanation of possible causality, influence or of precedents. The only exception to this was the coverage of extreme weather events.

Personalisation of events was the dominant mode for both BBC and ITV. This was particularly true of ITV's coverage of the Beslan school siege. Channel 4 News had comparable quantities of personalisation but made use of its extra time to contextualise more often and more extensively.

There was very little evidence of the kind of negative, stereotyping and directing and/or labelling of Islamic groups or individuals. Indeed, with regard to the siege of Faluja, some of the labelling verged on being supportive of the Islamic participants. The terms used by ITV to describe events in Beslan and the UK terror threat was often hysterical and this combined

with heavy personalisation and weak contextualisation to produce a very low informative value.

Accepting the above summary, what does it mean for the initial purpose of this study - To what extent does UK peak time television news fulfil its function of shining light onto the complex world of its viewers? In the next and final section of this paper, the theoretical positions described at the outset are briefly outlined and applied to these findings with a view to answering the key research question and to suggest reasons for this situation.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Before an attempt to explain and to theorise the nature of TV news coverage exemplified by the results of this study and, in part, to justify the need for such explanation, a response to the overall research question above is required. On the basis of the data gathered for this study, the three main UK terrestrial news programmes failed to illuminate the complex world of their viewers. Although Channel 4 News was significantly more successful than the others in this function through its greater use of contextualisation, it shares in what can be demonstrated to be the other main failure - a range of topic selection, which is unrepresentative of either the lived experience or the wider information needs of its viewers.

Notably, the labelling used to describe participants and events was, on no occasion, nakedly partisan or overtly ideological. However, it was not in this but in the decisions to select certain topics for reporting, for prominence and in the use of sources, that the distortion was produced. The extent to which this decision-making process can be associated with ideological prompting (conscious or unconscious) is debated below.

The disproportionate reliance on stories of violence and human suffering does not reflect the social reality of the viewers and reinforces the kind of anxiety described earlier by Bunting. The focus on reports of terror and conflict with an Islamic dimension also distorts reality and exaggerates risk. Similarly, the narrowing of environmental issues to an apparent obsession with extreme weather massively exaggerates the evidence of threat and denies space to the many other important issues. What was covered was unrepresentative of lived experience and what was absent would also have been critical for a more meaningful account. The massive range of significant social, economic and environmental issues, addressed by the 'alternative content' section of this paper, needed to be explored more fully by these news programmes usefully informing their viewers in the process.

So, overall it can be argued that the dominant news media consumed by the people of Britain does not illuminate their complex world but, in the main, serves to dim perceptions through superficial investigation and the distortion of that world in ways which are damaging to the public sphere of a democratic society.

Accepting the above, what explanation can be offered for its genesis and its maintenance? Perhaps the most widely used and debated explanation is that found in Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) (1988). This model, with its roots in a Marxian understanding of social and economic structures (though Chomsky asserts anarchist principles in his political activism) argues that members of elites including, critically, media elites, 'interlock' in the context of education, work, recreation and cultural pursuits, creating a class (of shifting and permeable boundaries) with members acting through self-interest in the interests of the class. This compromises the independence of the media elites and results in a

form of self-censorship operating in the interests of their careers and lifestyles and consequently of their class. Silvio Berlusconi, his political party (Forza Italia) and his ownership of various media would be the epitome of this tendency (Mazzoleni, 1995). Rupert Murdoch and the drift of the Sunday Times (UK), after his purchase, from a broadly centre-liberal to a Thatcherite stance is another clear example (Curran, 1990). Several critics have questioned the universal applicability or definitive nature of PM (Corner, 2003; Lang & Lang, 2004) while others have asserted particular relevance in this time of narrowing corporate ownership of the media, powerful right-wing pressure groups, the dominance of shallow advertising values in news production (Klaehn, 2002; Klaehn, 2003) and critically the drive by governments to pursue a war agenda against public opinion (Miller, 2003).

Evidence of the usefulness of PM may be seen in, for example, the absence in the media of debate on the distribution of wealth in the UK (Philo & Miller, 2000: 835), the absence of corporate crime (Media Mouse and Corporate Watch) or the suppression of reporting on civilian casualties of NATO (Serbia) and Coalition (Iraq) bombing (Edwards 2004: 15; Hoijer, 2004: 515). Apparent contradiction of PM and perhaps support for Corner's assertion of a distinction between US and European media (2003) can be found in the diversity of UK news reporting on the Iraq War (Lewis, 2003; Robertson, 2004: 477) with, for example, Channel 4 News, the Independent and the Daily Mirror (England) and the Herald/Sunday Herald (Scotland), all of which adopted quite consistent anti-war positions. However, the overwhelming weight of media coverage of the Iraq war, in terms of viewing and reading figures, operated in support of the war agenda.

A possible resolution of the above may lie in the modification of PM to embrace the notion of competing elites. Davis (2003: 683) has usefully suggested that competition, using media between elites, is as characteristic of liberal democracies as the use of media by dominant elites to influence non-elite groups.

The results of this study cannot of course directly expose the operation of elites in forming media output. However, the consistently superficial and non-critical (of market-driven 'liberal' democracy) climate created by the two most watched of these three peak TV news programmes suggests stronger evidence for the effects of elite influence than is the case for the more diverse press agencies.

In evaluating the extent to which media coverage contains biases operating along the lines of race or ethnicity, as opposed to class, the late Edward Said's Orientalism (1978, 1993) has been the dominant theory. In essence, Orientalism argues that western (occidental) culture is so saturated with negative images of the oriental (especially in recent times, the Arab) that writers, even liberals, cannot resist using them. Writing specifically about media coverage of Islam, Said (1997) notes that it typically takes no account of distinctions between different forms of Islam (ibid: xvi), exaggerates the scale of 'fundamentalist' Islamic terrorism relative to other forms and fails to provide any empirical evidence of the spread of fundamentalism amongst Arab youth (ibid: xix). Providing supporting evidence for Said's criticisms of western media overstatement of the threat of fundamentalism is the work of Esposito (1992) and Karabell (1995). Indeed, it may be argued (Roy, 1994; Karabell, 1995; Said 1997:xxvii) that it is secularism which is most characteristic of Islam and which is its most cohesive force.

Supporting evidence for Orientalism can be seen in the media neglect of Iraqi child deaths during the period of sanctions and during the war (Edwards, 2004; Pilger, 2004). However its

general usefulness is questioned and perhaps undermined by an historical consideration of media demonising of non-oriental groups (Robertson, 2004: 478-479) on the basis of politics or ideology (Nazis, Communists). Indeed, in some cases, western media have campaigned in favour of Islamic groups (Afghans under Soviet control, Bosnia and Kosovan Muslims).

Looking at the data presented in this study, the heavy emphasis on terrorism and conflict in Islamic areas, the neglect of terrorism and conflict elsewhere and the neglect of civilian deaths in Iraq, does suggest an unjustifiable focus. Notably, the terminology used by reporters and presenters was consistently respectful of Islamic groups, and so if there was bias or evidence of Orientalism, it was in the tendency to select stories with a particular kind of Islamic dimension (violent, repressive, irrational) and in the use of sources.

Media bias serving the interests of patriarchy is a well-established research domain. However, in a review of feminist perspectives on the media, Liesbet van Zoonen notes that some progress has been made with, for example, special editions devoted to feminist media studies (Communication, 1986; Journal of Communication Inquiry, 1990): 'in general reviews of the main trends in communication theory and research, one finds few traces' (van Zoonen, 1996: 31-32). However, van Zoonen expresses particular concern for television news by asking: 'would it be very inappropriate to expect a decent and ethical representation of, for example, feminist issues and the women's movement?' (ibid: 49). The usefulness of feminism as a basis for media critique is, however, contested. Ang and Hermes (1996: 329-330), for example, note that: 'in the face of the tenacious resistance displayed by large groups of women against feminist politics it is clear that feminism cannot presume to possess the one and only truth about women'. Clearly, there is not space here to engage fully with this debate but it does seem important that a critique of feminism does not result in a retreat from politics. The extent to which Herman & Chomsky speak for non-elite social groups, to which Said speaks for Arabs or other Orientals or to which van Zoonen speaks for women can be challenged but the clarity and forcefulness, perhaps militancy, of their critique of liberal democracies provide the material for the development of debate.

Looking at the coverage reported in this study, van Zoonen's critique would seem not to have been addressed. The numerous reports in Aviva were rarely mirrored in the TV news coverage. Indeed, it was only in the rather brutal context of being represented as the typical victims of conflict that women were prominent in the surveyed reporting. Even here the victimisation of women in conflict zones remained for reporters, primarily a matter to be explained by ethnicity or religion.

So far we can see the possibility that the distortion apparent in this content analysis results from biases operating along the lines of all or some of class, ethnic or gender lines. The omission or at least the neglect of key themes relevant to the interests of the poor, of non-Western ethnic groups and of women does at least suggest an ideological process operating through the news selection and presentation processes adopted by a predominantly middle-class, white and male media elite. This view is unlikely to be acceptable to many of the latter group. As Stuart Hall (1981) argued more than twenty years ago: 'Journalists speak of "the news" as if events select themselves' (ibid: 234). The features by which media professionals recognise what is 'newsworthy' have been characterised as 'news values'. Hall notes that although most journalists feel they are known instinctively, few can define them. However, a great deal of research has been undertaken since Galtung and Ruge's (1981) work in the 1960's, with a view to exposing them. A useful set of twelve news values is collated in Allan (2004: 57-58). The list begins with 'conflict', 'relevance', 'timeliness', 'simplification' and

'personalisation' and finishes with 'negativity'. Interviews with eight press and TV news editors on the decisions they made about covering the hostage Kenneth Bigley in Iraq (Vass, 2004: 8) would seem to confirm the applicability of these characteristics, though there was also evidence of politically motivated decisions aimed at exposing or shielding the UK Prime Minister. Looking at the results of this study, these characteristics seem evident although the question of relevance is a matter for debate.

So, are the reporters and editors of the three news programmes surveyed here simply operating in pursuit of a set of professional values with no obvious ideological prompting? The strong match between these values and the data gathered here is dangerously attractive. Consequently, it is important to look past it to ask why is there such a strong match and most important, to ask why media professionals are socialised to be predisposed to certain kinds of story and certain ways of telling them. None of the three ideological critiques discussed earlier argues for an explicitly coercive relationship between dominant class, ethnic or gender groups and media professionals but rather they draw our attention to more subtle hegemonic influences leading to self-censorship. The regular use by media professionals of the notion of newsworthiness may push the self-censorship into the semiconscious or even the subconscious realms but it does not conceal from analysis the underpinning ideological imperatives that have driven its evolution. Allan's list goes beyond the kind of features which might be described as non-ideological to embrace two rather obviously ideological values - 'reference to elite nations' and 'reference to elite persons' - and in subsequent discussion, he goes on to deconstruct news values in ideological terms and to reveal them as operating to make what is ideological seem 'natural' (ibid: 58).

These four theoretical models are broadly structuralist, which as theory offer quite comprehensive explanatory and predictive potential. The results presented here might be taken as evidence of the presence of all or some of them amongst the background influences on reporters and editors. A radical alternative is offered by Brian McNair (2003) in his attempt to introduce chaos theory into media and cultural studies, equally attempted in other areas of knowledge. McNair describes capitalism as having evolved into a new cultural form which: 'if it remains ordered and hierarchical in significant ways, exhibits an increasingly fluid and unpredictable power dynamic...' (ibid: 554). The roots of this fluidity and unpredictability (chaos) he locates in an accelerated and intensified information flow enabled by new technologies, 'the collapse of social deference to elites' and pressures on the media to be 'transgressive' (ibid: 550). Though understandably hesitant to evaluate these changes in one direction, McNair does seem, overall, to be welcoming a kind of fragmentation and a proliferation of media institutions that, at least for the moment, has weakened the control of elites. Definitive structuralist models with claims to global explanatory potential are there to be challenged by this kind of reasoning. However, the extent to which all proponents of the Propaganda Model, of Feminist Media Studies, of News Values or of Orientalism, claim such definitiveness is not always clear. There are 'softer' versions that allow for the kind of uncertainty identified by McNair. The results of this study, notably, do not reveal the bright diversity suggested by him but rather a sad, dim, homogeneity. This is of course a study of only three TV news programmes. McNair's assessment is of the full range of media.

The above brief discussion of the utility of five theoretical models is clearly inconclusive. The first four have served the purpose of providing a structural explanation of bias deriving from the interests of class, ethnicity, gender or professional subculture and the last offers an explanation for recent fragmentation of control and the intensification of flows. 'Hard' evidence for the four structuralist models would, of course, require a more ethnographic

research method. This study reveals a pattern but cannot evidence any causality. So, where does this leave us?

The results of this study highlight a failure in UK TV news to further the interests of its audience and a tendency, unconscious or otherwise, to serve the interests of elites. Regardless of the ability of audiences to read differently the messages intended by reporters and editors, the power differential is so great as to create a climate of opinion that we can reasonably expect to be influential, either due to the weight of authoritative sources or by the insidious drip of repetition.

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