

# SMALL SCREEN, BIG WORLD

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTENT OF UK NEWS IN JANUARY 2016

HELEN MAGEE AND MARTIN SCOTT

**ibt**

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all the interviewees for their time and commitment.  
Cover picture courtesy of Doctors of the World. Design by birdy.

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## **About IBT**

IBT (The International Broadcasting Trust) is an educational charity working to promote high quality media coverage of the wider world. Our aim is to further awareness and understanding of the lives of the majority of the world's people and the issues which affect them.

IBT regularly publishes research and organizes events to encourage a greater understanding of the role the media plays in engaging people in the UK with the rest of the world. We are a membership-based organisation. If you are interested in joining please see our website [www.ibt.org.uk](http://www.ibt.org.uk)

# FOREWORD

Television news is hugely important – it's the main source of information about the rest of the world for most people in the UK. But how well does it cover global issues and stories? Is it too committed to the big story of the day? Does it provide enough context and analysis?

In this report we present a detailed picture of how television news on all the main UK TV channels covered international stories in a two week period in January 2016. And we contrast this with coverage on radio and online. The report also includes interviews with broadcasters, academics and NGOs.

The findings reveal a strong commitment to international stories but they also highlight some concerns.

The present study shows an increase in the amount of coverage, compared with a similar analysis which we conducted in 2009. However, it also shows a decline in the number of countries featured. We looked at who reporters interview and found that the type of voices featured across many of the bulletins is strikingly similar, leading some of our interviewees to raise concerns about homogenization in news coverage. Few NGO voices appear in these bulletins. It could be argued that featuring the voices of those directly affected by events, rather than NGOs, is an indication of greater authenticity in storytelling. But there may be a risk that some crucial context is lost.

We hope that the data we have gathered will provide a good evidence base for future discussion about the way television news covers international stories.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009 IBT published research on the quantity and nature of international news coverage by the main UK television and radio broadcasters. This report presents the results of a similar study conducted during a two week sample period in January 2016. The results were then used to inform interviews with news executives, NGOs and media academics. Five key findings were identified:

- **Increased quantity** The overall quantity of international content increased compared with the 2009 sample and so did the proportion of lead international stories. This is reflected in most of the bulletins with particularly significant increases on ITV News at Ten (17.8%) and BBC News at Ten (9.2%). This increase does not necessarily reflect a greater commitment to international coverage on the part of individual broadcasters, which many argue was always there. It is more likely to reflect an increasingly globalised world, a period dominated by international tensions and a demand for international news fed in part by the growth of new online sources.
- **Refugees in Europe the dominant story** There was a dramatic increase in coverage of migration/refugees which constituted 10.9% of all coverage compared to 0.4% in 2009. Clearly, this story has grown in importance since 2009 as the war in Syria has continued. But coverage also appears to have increased as the story has moved closer to Europe. A significant proportion of all coverage of Europe was about refugees (44.8%) and most coverage of refugees (81.3%) was set in Europe.
- **Fewer countries covered** Although there were increases in international news coverage, this was not spread evenly around the world. Most of the growth in international content was accounted for by the increase in coverage of Europe - from 14.1% to 23.2% since 2009. Excluding the almost entirely international bulletins of Al Jazeera English and BBC World Service, there were in fact fewer countries covered in 2016 (45) compared to 2009 (49).
- **Who speaks?** In terms of who speaks in the individual news items, the profiles of almost all the different bulletins were surprisingly similar. Affected individuals/vox pops, local government representatives and experts accounted for 74% of all speakers on average. The only exception was BBC Newsnight which featured more foreign government, business and multilateral institutions. Despite the humanitarian nature of many international stories, there were relatively few NGOs voices – only 1.9% international NGOs and 1.4% local NGOs. This was not considered surprising by the broadcasters interviewed. For them it reflected a greater drive for the ‘authentic voice’ of those directly affected by humanitarian emergencies. Increasingly sophisticated marketing by NGOs seems also to have created a heightened awareness amongst broadcasters of their distinct agendas
- **The online alternative** VICE News, BuzzFeed and other online news sites have all developed significantly since the 2009 study. They not only offer an alternative source of news, particularly for the younger audience, they are also beginning to influence the way mainstream broadcasters cover international news.

# THE INTERNATIONAL CONTENT OF UK NEWS IN JANUARY 2016

## INTERVIEWEES

**Glenda Cooper**, Lecturer in Journalism, City University

**Ben de Pear**, Editor, Channel 4 News

**Amy Fairbairn**, Communications and Media Manager, Mercy Corps

**Nick Harvey**, Communications Manager, Doctors of the World

**Jonathan Levy**, Director of Newsgathering, Sky News

**Brendan Paddy**, Head of Communications, DEC

**Ben Rayner**, Executive Producer, Al Jazeera English

**Paul Royall**, Editor of BBC News at Six and Ten

**Professor Richard Sambrook**, Director of the Centre for Journalism,  
University of Cardiff

**Tim Singleton**, Deputy Editor, ITV News

**Kevin Sutcliffe**, Head of News Programming, VICE Europe

## INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly interconnected world. Economic slowdown in China affects UK stock markets, jobs and pensions. The continuing conflict in Syria drives more and more refugees to seek safety in Europe. ISIS terrorism threatens all of us and viruses that emerge in Latin America can spread to all parts of the globe in a worryingly short space of time. In 2009 IBT conducted a review of international news in the UK (Scott, 2009). The report spoke then of the consequences of international events upon those of us living in the UK. Seven years later we are seeing those consequences ever more clearly whilst an increasing number of online sources and other international outlets open up different perspectives on the world, unhindered by public service obligations. Accurate news reporting plays an essential part in helping UK audiences to understand and navigate these issues. Research reveals that the vast majority of adults in the UK (95%) say they regularly follow the news and that television is still by far the most-used platform with 75% of UK adults saying they use TV as a source of news (Ofcom, 2014). But there has also been a growth in the number of those who use online sources, particularly in the 16-34 age group where 41% did so in 2014. Over a third (36%) of UK adults say they consume news through radio.

Ofcom also found that UK politics and current affairs, and worldwide current affairs, are seen to have societal importance by half (49%) of UK adults with UK and worldwide current affairs being of [personal] interest to 37% of UK adults. These findings echo the results of a global survey conducted by YouGov on behalf of BBC World News in March 2015. The study from eight countries (excluding the UK) revealed that 69% of people surveyed said they were more concerned about world events now than they had ever been before and nearly two thirds (64%) said that news stories from other parts of the world felt more relevant to them than they had in the past. The YouGov poll suggests that global news plays an important role in making people feel informed about what's going on in the world (68%) and better able to understand it (62%).

This study investigates the diversity of countries and topics covered by a range of widely-used news bulletins in the UK, over a two week period from January 11-24 2016. (A full methodology can be found in the Appendix). Two weeks can of course only ever offer a snapshot of news coverage. Therefore the purpose of this research is not to offer definitive findings about the nature of international news in the UK, but to act as a starting point for conversations with news broadcasters about the way international news is approached in general.

|  | Percentage of news items |      | Percentage of total duration |      | Percentage of lead items |      |
|--|--------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
|  | 2016                     | 2009 | 2016                         | 2009 | 2016                     | 2009 |
| Domestic                                 | 36.8                     | 43.5 | 40.0                         | 45.5 | 28                       | 50.3 |
| Domestic with reference to international | 10.3                     | 10.6 | 12.3                         | 7.9  | 17.2                     | 5.0  |
| International with reference to domestic | 5.1                      | 5.9  | 6.8                          | 8.3  | 3.8                      | 9.4  |
| International                            | 47.9                     | 40.0 | 40.9                         | 38.3 | 51.0                     | 35.2 |

Table 1: Proportion of international, domestic and 'hybrid' news items, in 2016 and 2009

## QUANTITY

Table 1 shows that the overall quantity of international content has increased significantly when compared with the 2009 study. Nearly half of all news items in this period were international (47.9%). This represents a nearly 8% increase on 2009.

News editors interviewed for this report were not surprised by this increase. There was a clear consensus that we are living through a period of heightened international tension. Paul Royall, Editor of BBC News at Six and Ten, believes *we are in a period of quite serious, intense, global movement and disorder with what is going on with IS and the Middle East and now with Europe and so that doesn't really surprise me.*

Others argue that international news coverage has been further driven by audience demand and developments in digital media that enable news to be both created and consumed through a wide range of devices. Kevin Sutcliffe, Head of News Programming at VICE Europe, thinks this is particularly true for younger audiences: *Social media and the way media is consumed and therefore the appetite for it has changed. There's a thirst there that's technologically driven.*

Jonathan Levy, Director of Newsgathering at Sky News, says that the traditional view that foreign news does not drive audiences has not been his experience. In a year dominated by foreign news, the channel has done well in the ratings and he has seen international news move much more into the mainstream. *When I started at Sky 14 years ago the foreign desk was on the margins. Now it's increasingly central.*

During this sample period there were several significant international news stories including four terrorist incidents, the break of the siege in the Syrian town of Madaya, the continuing refugee/migrant crisis in Europe and the outbreak of the Zika virus in Latin America. This is reflected in the number of lead news items. Over half of all lead items in the sample period were purely international (51.0%) – this compares to 35.2% in 2009. But none of these stories dominated the bulletins for any length of time. The countries covered most frequently and extensively were in order: USA, Syria, France, Iran, Turkey, China, Iraq, Burkina Faso, Indonesia and Pakistan.

Figure 1 (see next page) shows that The World Tonight, BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Sky News, BBC 6 O'clock News, and Five News all showed significant increases in international coverage since 2009. BBC News at Ten broadcast a 50:50 split between domestic and international news, representing a 9.2% increase on the sample period in 2009. But the major increase in international coverage was on ITV News at Ten which broadcast 17.8% more foreign news in 2016.

Tim Singleton, Deputy Editor of ITV News, acknowledges that the world is now more connected than ever before, but he does not believe that the increase in international news coverage on ITV News represents a greater commitment than in 2009. He argues that international news has always been fundamental to ITV News: *The whole history of ITN is based on our reputation for eyewitness reporting from around the world. Paul Davies reporting from Dubrovnik, Michael Nicholson in Cyprus, Sandy Gall in Afghanistan. It's part of our DNA.* However, the data in Figure 1 also shows that there is noticeably less international news on both BBC and ITV early evening bulletins than on their 10 o'clock bulletins. Paul Royall, Editor of the BBC Six and Ten O'clock News explains:

*At 6 o'clock the day is still going on – households are busier. At 10 o'clock you are sitting back and ok – tell me what is happening today and more. By 10 the filtering process has gone through another round. We've got correspondents in places all around the world slowly building material up for the moment when we can go – ok – I've got that story and the analysis we need, we can offer this story and give the audience context and depth.*

In 2016, Al Jazeera English, Newsnight and Channel 4 News maintained the same or slightly more international coverage than in 2009. Ben de Pear, Editor of Channel 4 News, argues that the programme sees international news as central to its remit: *We don't place it above domestic news per se, but we have a long tradition of reporting international news that other people haven't reported or reporting it first or giving our whole programme over to international issues.* There were minor declines on ITV Evening News, Today and the BBC World Service.

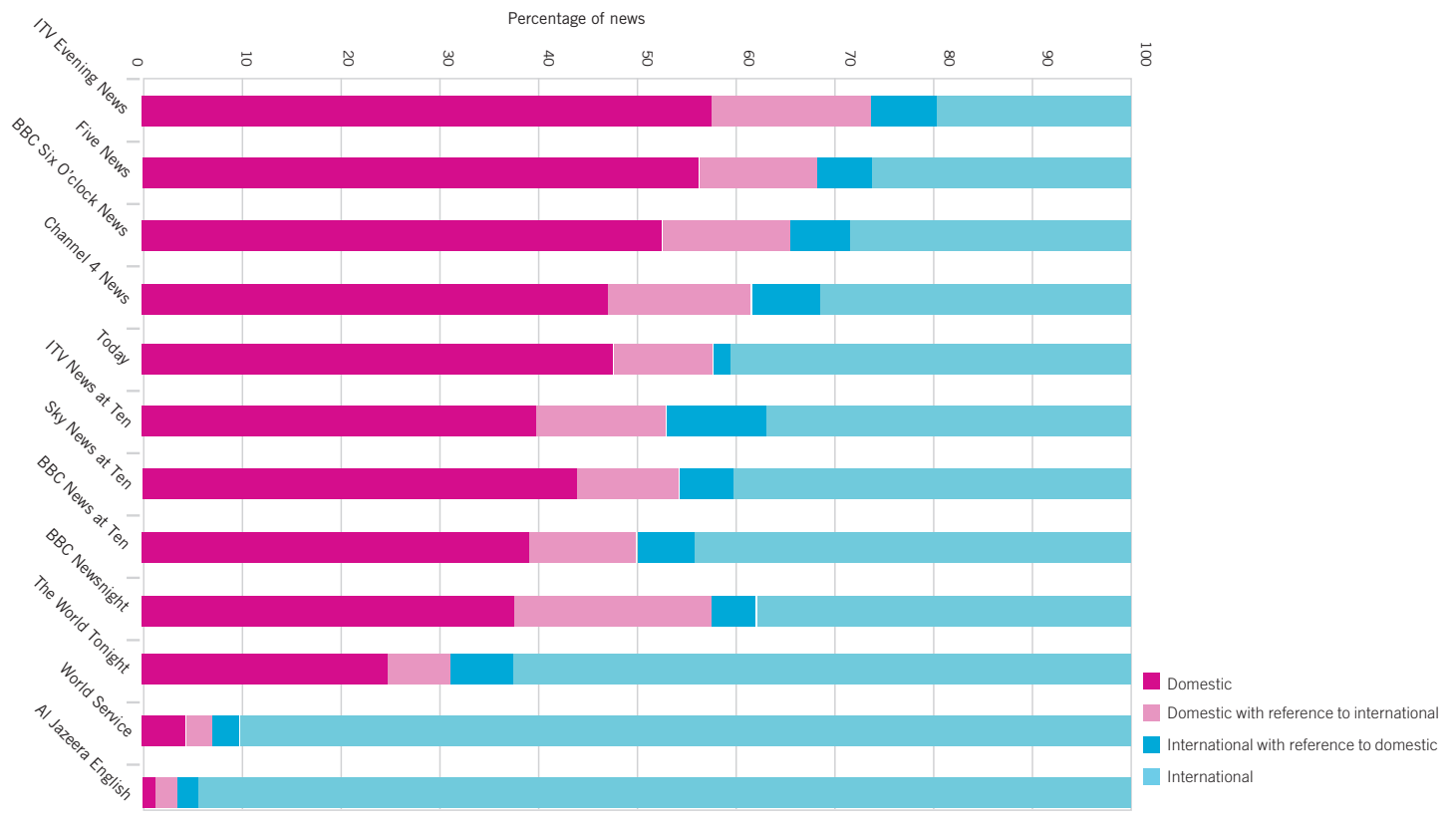


Figure 1: Proportion of international, domestic and 'hybrid' news coverage for each bulletin, 2016

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND THE REFUGEE/MIGRANT CRISIS

Brendan Paddy, Head of Communications at the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), thinks the refugee/migrant crisis constitutes a significant part of the increase in international coverage because *it's foreign news about us. The refugee crisis which is about Syria, which is about Eritrea, which is about a lot of what's going on in sub Saharan Africa and to some extent it's about the wider issues of migration within the EU, in the UK has been predominantly covered as an immigration story.*

In the two week period under study, nearly 11% of all international coverage featured refugees/migrants compared to just 0.4% in the 2009 sample period. BBC Newsnight had the greatest focus on refugees (26.3%). It was the dominant European story (44.8%) and 81.3% of all coverage of refugees was based in Europe rather than elsewhere in the world. News editors generally feel it is inevitable that a UK audience will take more interest as a story gets closer to home and that they need to reflect this. Hence, Tim Singleton does not apologise for ITV News' reporting of the story in Europe when such a large population of refugees is on the move across the continent. But he also emphasises the commitment of ITV News and other broadcasters to report from the source of the problem when possible.

*Across the range of British broadcasting over the last year, you've seen very strong reporting from source, where we can do it. We mustn't shrink from that responsibility if the audience is going to understand it. I was just looking at the response to Dan Rivers' piece from Syria last night [29th February 2016] on Twitter, for example, people saying 'Wow what a report. I understand now why so many people want to leave.'*

Ben Rayner, Executive Producer, Al Jazeera English, agrees and argues that although Al Jazeera English will cover developments in Europe, people often come to them for stories

about the Middle East. *We go back to the earlier part of the journey, further back down the chain to the cause of it. We're constantly in the camps of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.*

Concerns have been expressed about the impact of media coverage on the political debate around the migrant issue in the UK. A new research report, *Moving Stories – International Review of How Media Cover Migration*, looks at coverage of the current refugee/ migrant crisis in 14 countries including the UK (Ethical Journalism Network, 2016). It finds that the subject is often reported through the prism of politics and is dominated by numbers and emotions. Reporting is frequently simplistic with migrants seen as a threat and there is little reporting of the benefits of migration.

Richard Sambrook, Director of the Centre for Journalism, University of Cardiff, is critical of the emotional nature of some UK reporting which he feels is often based on scant evidence or analysis: *There's too much of 'another boat has sunk' and 'we can't take all these people.' No deeper, more sophisticated analysis that connects the refugees' plight to events in Syria or Iraq.* Brendan Paddy also fears that as the refugee crisis has become a story about the UK, it has led to a hardening of attitudes and had a negative influence on policy:

*The best you can hope for is people supporting the position the government has taken: 'What we should do is provide support to try and keep them in the region because then it's not our problem.' That's one of the dangers of an international story becoming a domestic story.*

Tim Singleton is aware of the way terminology can be hijacked for political gain and is very particular about the use of the term 'refugee' or 'migrant'. Jonathan Levy recognises that coverage has both increased sympathy, but also hardened attitudes, but does not believe it is for broadcasters to second guess how this will inform the debate: *Our obligation is to observe and disclose.*

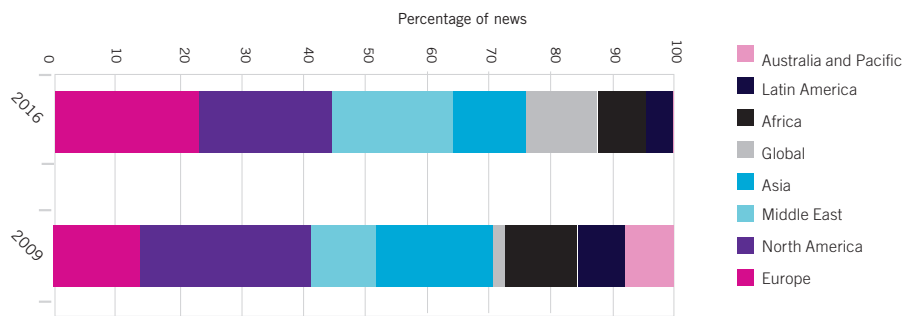


Figure 2: Geographic distribution of international news on UK TV and radio bulletins, in 2016 and 2009

Other research has raised concerns about the lack of migrant voices in press coverage of the refugee/migrant crisis (Crawley, McMahon and Jones, 2016). The research revealed that 85% of articles did not have a refugee or migrant perspective. Our own research does not show this for broadcast news, where the voices of affected individuals featured in 39% of the stories studied. However, there may be other similarities in the way refugees are portrayed across both print and broadcast media. Crawley and colleagues found that 46% of all the articles framed migration as a threat and migrants as actual or potential ‘villains.’ A further 38% of articles were rooted in the victim frame. Many of the TV and radio bulletins during the sample period also focused on this villain/victim frame with extensive coverage of the sexual attacks in Cologne and the drownings in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. Glenda Cooper, Lecturer in Journalism at City University, argues that some *very simple and dramatic imagery of suffering has helped propel the story to the top of the news agenda.*

The approach of VICE News to the refugee/migrant story has been different. Rather than being governed by the news agenda, Kevin Sutcliffe explains that they like to pick up on emerging trends and have been filming short mini-series on a range of topics. Their most successful was ‘Europe or Die’: *We decided to do all the main entry points into Europe for migrants and refugees when it wasn’t particularly in the headlines. We’ve now done 20 pieces over the last year or so.* He is concerned that much of the news coverage of this subject plays to a populist agenda and appeals to basic instincts. *What a lot of domestic coverage seems to be about is fear – migrants and refugees as the zombie horde that are trying to overrun civilisation.*

Nick Harvey, Communications Manager at Doctors of the World (which works in the refugee camps in Calais and Dunkirk), fears that audiences are losing interest in a story that has been running for a long time. For him, the danger lies in the broadcasters’ response which is to focus on the more sensational aspects of the story which can give false impressions of what is really happening.

*I watched some BBC coverage when they were dismantling the camp in Calais and they focused on one migrant who had a machete - that’s what’s happening on a wider scale with news coverage – they’re focusing disproportionately on conflict and when something’s kicking off - and this gives the false impression that there’s a load of people constantly kicking off across Europe which then feeds into people’s concerns, particularly on the right of the political spectrum, about immigration.*

Coverage of the refugee/migrant crisis and the war in Syria highlight the importance of context for Richard Sambrook, who is a former BBC Director of News. He feels that *broadcasting is very good at covering events, but less good at covering processes.* He argues that *one of the problems is the decline in current affairs and*

*documentaries that can provide that analysis and context. Channel 4 News does a fantastic job, but only has a very small audience.* News editors recognise the difficulty of providing such context in a short news bulletin but are trying to address it. Tim Singleton explains that News at Ten was relaunched in October 2015 *with a pledge to do news a bit differently. We’re not so concerned about the news agenda – we want to explain a bit more and provide extra context.* The aim to carry out more studio interviews with specialist correspondents like International Affairs Editor, Rageh Omaar, was reflected in their coverage during the two week sample period.

## NEGLECTED COUNTRIES AND ISSUES

Despite the increase in international coverage, fewer countries were actually featured than in 2009. This was largely because much of the increase was driven by coverage of Europe which rose from 14.1 to 23.2% (see Figure 2). Excluding the almost entirely international bulletins of Al Jazeera English and BBC World Service, 45 countries were covered in 2016 compared to 49 across the same bulletins in 2009. In seven of the twelve bulletins examined, the number of countries reported on declined.

Figure 2 also shows that coverage of the Middle East and of global/multi-state issues increased. (The two week period featured multi-state meetings of the IAAF, World Anglican leaders and the World Economic Forum, and the global impact of falling oil prices). There were corresponding decreases in the proportion of news about Asia, North America, Africa, Australia and Latin America (despite the outbreak of the Zika virus). However, with the exception of Australia and the Pacific, there appears to be a more even distribution of reporting around the regions of the world in 2016 than in 2009 and no region received more than 25% of all coverage.

Al Jazeera English perhaps unsurprisingly devoted nearly one third of its bulletins (30.3%) to the Middle East, but Sky News and Channel 4 News also had a relatively high proportion of reports from this region (22.9 and 21.3%). BBC and ITV News bulletins were heavily focused on Europe and North America. Five News had the highest focus on North America with 40% of its coverage from that region whilst Channel 4 News had only 17%. Ben de Pear says that Channel 4 prides itself on giving more time to voices from other countries and using correspondents from those countries:

*We have a Latin American correspondent who is Latin American. We have an African reporter who is Somali. And we do a wide range of films with people who are from those countries who are not just ‘I am the white English middle aged man standing in a field saying what the people behind me think.’*

Table 2 shows the countries that featured most in international new stories during the two week sample period. It reveals the extent



| Rank | Country      | Number of news items | Percentage of all international items | Main news story   |
|------|--------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1    | USA          | 144                  | 20.6                                  | Multiple (e.g. Oscars diversity/snowstorm )                                 |
| 2    | Syria        | 54                   | 7.7                                   | Aid convoy to Madaya  |
| 3    | France       | 36                   | 5.1                                   | Multiple (e.g. French clinical trial volunteer dies/ Port of Calais closed) |
| 4    | Iran         | 24                   | 3.4                                   | Iran deal with US   |
| 5    | Turkey       | 24                   | 3.4                                   | Istanbul bomb attacks   |
| 6    | China        | 19                   | 2.7                                   | Chinese economic slow down  |
| 7    | Iraq         | 18                   | 2.6                                   | UN report on civilian casualties in Iraq                                    |
| 8    | Burkina Faso | 16                   | 2.3                                   | Burkina Faso hotel attacked by Islamist gunmen                              |
| 9    | Indonesia    | 16                   | 2.3                                   | Terrorist attack  |
| 10   | Pakistan     | 16                   | 2.3                                   | Gunmen storm university   |

Table 2: Top 10 countries featured in international coverage in 2016

to which the USA still dominates with far more news items than any other country, although proportionately less than in 2009.

Kevin Sutcliffe suggests that *sitting in London, it still seems to be the case that Latin America is quiet in news terms, although it's probably not. If you did a heat map, it would be Middle East, Ukraine, probably bits of Africa where unpleasant things are happening, then it's American elections, natural disasters. Then it gets a bit smaller and quieter. The heat map shows you the commitment to what is thought to be important in the news cycle.*

Several interviewees believe that coverage of individual countries by UK broadcasters is still governed primarily by old colonial connections. Al Jazeera English is not limited in this way. However, Ben Rayner argues that this has its challenges as well – *how interested are viewers in the British exit vote on the EU, for example – how interesting is that to someone in Nigeria or the Philippines? Global news is almost more difficult than domestic news where it's more obvious what the audience is interested in. Sometimes we will say 'is this story too local – does it travel to other countries?'*

Nick Harvey believes it is very important to look at those areas of the world that broadcasters are not covering. He recognises that access is a major problem in some parts of Africa and that journalists are working under pressure with little time to devote to under-reported conflicts. But he feels that news priorities are set by the political, economic and military links to the UK together with geographic and cultural proximity. He also points to the importance of simplicity and drama – *If you have a clear bad guy, a clear reason why something is happening, a clear message; 'this is a disaster', then people can start to engage with it more easily. If a story is complex, morally ambiguous, involving many actors with overlapping interests, audiences lose interest.*

Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, Al Jazeera English was the only bulletin to report on it in the two weeks, featuring seven different stories including the delays in peace talks, Saudi-led airstrikes on a police HQ, a suicide bomb attack in Aden and UN efforts to access a besieged Yemeni city. Ben Rayner says that Yemen is a story that other broadcasters have dipped in and out of occasionally, although usually only when they can do a high quality field report from there. *But we cover it constantly. Though Yemen is not somewhere we can deploy to safely, we think the story is significant in itself – and what it tells you about Iran and Saudi Arabia.* He argues that Al Jazeera English aims to report the international stories that others do not cover: *The Ugandan election is just as important as the French election.* They are trying to redress the balance of news that has become too skewed towards a western perspective, dominated by the big western news agencies that supply the footage that everyone uses.

The BBC World Service was the only bulletin to cover the humanitarian deal to assist Cubans migrating to the US, archaeologists' discovery of an ancient cult in the Honduras jungle, Myanmar peace talks and the trial of the former Thai Prime Minister. Burundi only featured in Al Jazeera English and World Service news coverage during the sample period with one item on security forces being accused of gang rape (Al Jazeera English) and one item on the UN Security Council trying to end violence (World Service).

News producers often highlight logistical, budgetary and security issues when talking about their coverage of international news. These are vital concerns, particularly when reporting from the Middle East and parts of Africa, and especially for broadcasters who do not have the extensive resources of the world's biggest news organisation, the BBC. Tim Singleton says that ITV News has to choose its targets carefully: *We tried to get to Yemen last year but the reality is for us is that we can't hang around for 2-3 months at a time trying to crack a story like that. We don't have the multiple Middle East bureaux the BBC has or the budget to be able to invest in quite the same way. We've just had a very successful trip there this year and found evidence of US weaponry that was put before John Kerry, so we know we can have impact. But we have to pick our moments.*

But the vagaries of access to countries in the Middle East can work both ways. Paul Royall notes that *ITV have been in Damascus for the past few days because it was their turn to get a visa and we'll then have 10 days – that is how that rotation works. ITV have been in Tehran – they won't let the BBC in.*

Kevin Sutcliffe does not believe it is possible to extrapolate a lack of interest in certain areas of the world from a two week sample period. He understands why there might be widespread coverage of a terrorist attack in Istanbul, but nothing on an attack in Cameroon where *it is still very difficult to get anything out other than a few pictures and a bit of ropey video.* However, he does describe a different editorial approach at VICE News from the main TV bulletins:

*We're intentionally interested in Al Qaeda in Africa, for instance. That just comes down to editorial direction, what we think is important. I think Al Qaeda is a generational story, that's the story that you can link back to Afghanistan, to Bin Laden – oh and look, now we've got IS, where's that come from? We keep going back to Yemen, we've filmed with Al Nusra. We've filmed Al Qaeda in Syria – to remind everyone that all attempts to eradicate this ideology are unsuccessful.*

Sutcliffe accepts that news stories like this are hard to undertake because of the expense and the security issues. He says BBC correspondents on the news bulletin treadmill may not always be able to cover them:

*If you talk to any of the correspondents in the field, they're feeding not just their bulletins, they're feeding numerous outlets, anything from*

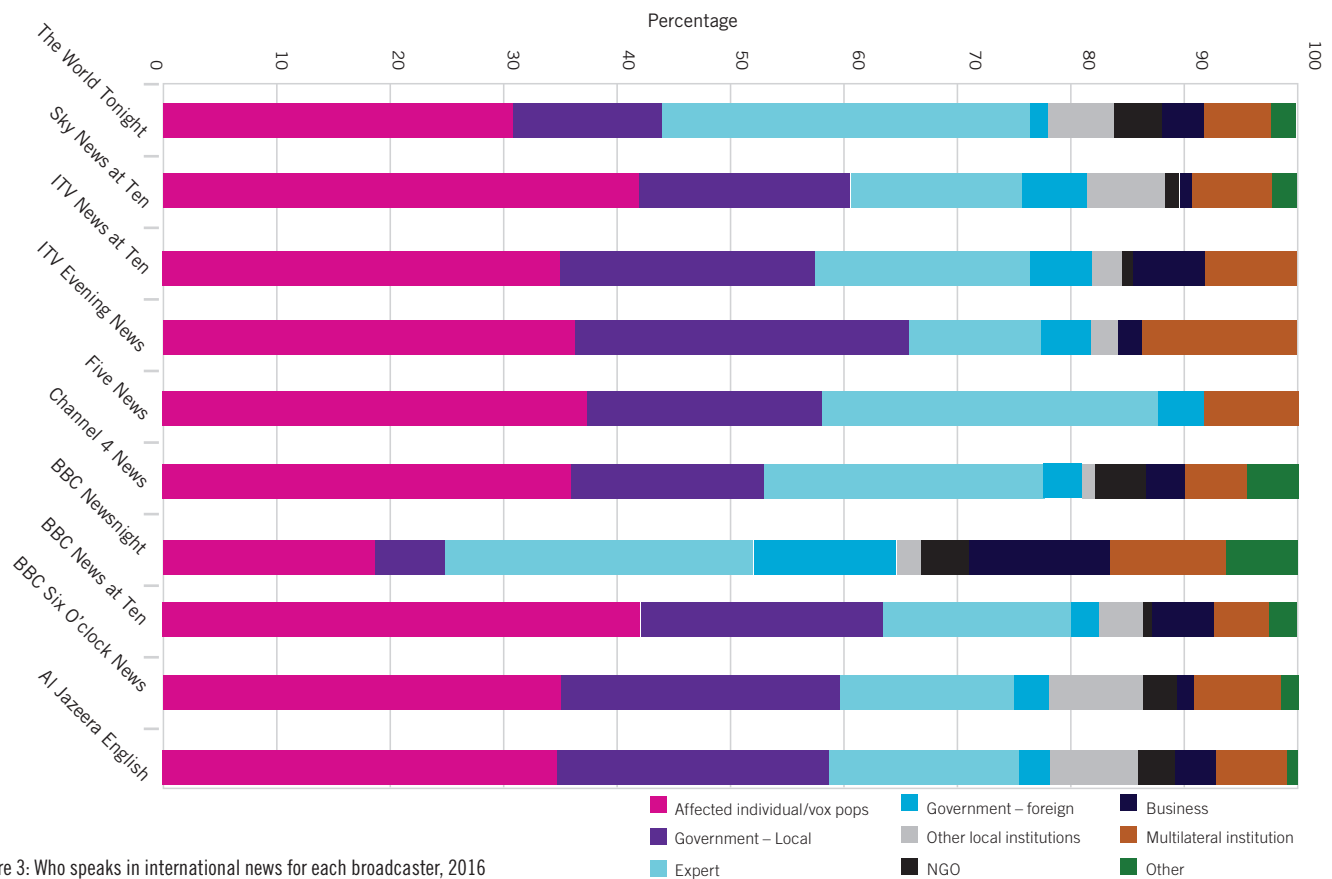


Figure 3: Who speaks in international news for each broadcaster, 2016

radio, local TV, bulletins at 1, 6 and 10. We did a piece, 'Ambushed in South Sudan'. On the same trip with us were the BBC. We made this longer film over a couple of weeks where it's an anatomy of an African war. Alastair Leithead, BBC correspondent, is in the same ambush and he files a 3 minute piece for that night's 6 O'clock News.

Paul Royall recognises the need for another platform for showcasing important international stories that do not make the main BBC news bulletins or Newsnight and hopes to address this issue. *BBC News is currently working on a run of programmes that will probably go out on BBC 2 – which is exactly all this – global affairs stories that are all on my list of things I want to get on the 10 O'clock News but when you've got a busy news day they sometimes go below the line and you can't get them on.* ITV launched a similar programme, On Assignment, in March 2014. It airs once a month straight after News at Ten and features three long-form international reports from ITV News correspondents and specialist editors.

News editors accepted that audiences generally tend to engage more with people they know, but they nevertheless resisted the idea that foreign news always has to be 'domesticated' in order to appeal to a UK audience. Ben de Pear argues that Channel 4 News starts from the point that *the audience is sophisticated enough to understand what we are saying. I don't think we need to say 'the people of Milton Keynes – this affects you because...' That can be very patronising and I think the news is moving away from that.*

### WHO SPEAKS?

The similarity of voices featured across all bulletins is striking. Affected individuals/vox pops, local government and experts dominate. As Figure 3 shows, these three categories account for between 75 and 80% of all voices for eight of the ten bulletins. The one exception is BBC Newsnight which has a very different profile with fewer individual voices and more from foreign government, business and multilateral institutions. Glenda Cooper refers to *template reporting when it comes to international news. It seems we have swapped one template of reporting international news with*

*another – you get the vox pops, then the local government, then the expert to say 'this is how it works'.* Paul Royall acknowledges that it's possible to identify a formula in the way certain stories are told, but he would be concerned if there was too much similarity because *you always want to find fresh and new ways to tell stories and so it's interesting that there is a bit of a homogenisation there and that's something I would need to think about actually.*

Figure 3 also shows that, aside from Newsnight, every bulletin featured at least 30% affected individuals/vox pops, with Sky and BBC News at Ten both featuring over 40%. Among those interviewed there was widespread support for the move towards individual voices in news coverage, with most editors sharing Ben de Pear's view that there is *nothing more authentic than the voice of people who are suffering directly from wars.*

Paul Royall believes that using these voices actually helps to connect the story to the UK audience: *You are going to make them care and connect more if you tell it through ordinary lives and experiences in terms of empathy and identifying with what is going on.* The use of 'ordinary' commentators in news bulletins may also have been boosted in recent years by a greater willingness to use voice-over or subtitles for non-English speakers. Some VICE News reports, for example, feature no English speakers other than the reporter.

However, Glenda Cooper does not believe that individual voices necessarily provide a comprehensive and accurate account: *Just because you are talking to people on the ground, doesn't mean you get the full picture, you might get what people describe as 'authentic' which is an emotional, personal, dramatic, way of telling you the story, but that doesn't always tell you the full picture.*

In contrast to affected individuals and vox pops, NGOs were relatively seldom heard (1.9% international NGOs and 1.4% local NGOs) and were less likely to appear even than multilateral institutions such as the UN. There may be several reasons why NGO voices featured so infrequently. NGOs may simply not have been available on the ground or they may have themselves set up the interviews with affected individuals. For some time broadcasters have felt the need to

speak more directly to those affected by humanitarian disasters rather than to intermediaries. Richard Sambrook thinks this is a healthy and good trend and is not surprised that it is reflected in the refugee/migrant story. *That's not to say that NGOs don't have a legitimate voice, but I don't think we should filter everything through NGOs.*

Brendan Paddy, from the DEC, is surprised at the lack of NGO voices, but not necessarily concerned: *If you told me that NGOs are now getting less coverage because people who are directly affected by these situations are now speaking for themselves, that would be a good thing in many respects.* But he suspects that in the case of refugees it could be explained by the ready availability of educated, English speaking interviewees: *You can rock up to a Syrian doctor who's fled Aleppo and is making his way across Europe and in an incredibly articulate way he can tell you exactly why he left. You don't need an NGO to mediate.*

Jonathan Levy, from Sky News, agrees that the lack of NGO voices in the coverage of the refugee/migrant crisis can be partly explained by the ease with which journalists can communicate directly with the refugees. However, he also feels that the absence of NGOs is part of the broader evolution of international news:

*I think the NGOs struggle to have an impact on the debate mainly because they don't say anything that's particularly surprising. Foreign news has evolved to an extent that it's quite sophisticated now; you can be live in all kinds of ways, we can get to people. A head and shoulder shot of someone from Save the Children saying this is very bad doesn't really compete with the actual story of a real person who's made the boat journey and recorded it on their mobile phone. We're more likely to use NGOs as live guests in daytime. By the evening, we'd hope that our correspondents have been out talking to people themselves rather than having NGOs as interlocutors. That's a slightly old fashioned way of doing it.*

The presence or absence of NGOs in a news item also reflects the particular perspective of broadcasters and Amy Fairbairn from Mercy Corps argues that much of the recent international news coverage has been *skewed towards the academic or military side of things rather than the humanitarian and developmental. Al Jazeera English are more open when we as NGOs want to talk about humanitarian needs.* She compares this to BBC Newsnight which rarely features NGO voices, and the BBC more widely which must *toe the line between being balanced and fair and representative. So often when we're pitching, they're thinking 'well, who's going to tell the other side?'*

Whilst Glenda Cooper is surprised by the lack of NGO voices because *NGOs have worked very hard to professionalise their press operation*, it is the increasing sophistication of NGOs' marketing strategies that for Tim Singleton means that ITV News is probably less likely to use their material.

*I think it's fair to say that NGOs market themselves in a way they didn't 10 or 15 years ago – they're always keen to get their emblems and their names in the background, they all have their own media*

*departments now churning out video and we are less likely these days to use their material because we're more circumspect now.*

Although he acknowledges the assistance NGOs provide, Kevin Sutcliffe also remains cautious about providing publicity for their particular agendas. *They come with demands – product placement almost to be honest.* He highlights the lack of voices from non-Western NGOs. *Oxfam, Save, MSF hog a lot of column inches. I wonder whether people know how many non-English speaking NGOs are out there. The Red Crescent does a lot and yet is absent from most Western coverage.*

Amy Fairbairn agrees that broadcasters question NGOs' impartiality, but she also feels that perhaps NGOs have made it more difficult for themselves.

*As NGOs often try to appeal to as wide a public group as possible, we've become increasingly homogenised in terms of our messaging and are not controversial enough or not provocative. We haven't done ourselves any favours. We have to deal internally about how provocative we can be. It's a question of balancing security of staff, staying impartial, and being newsworthy as well.*

But it is the search for authenticity and immediacy that seems to outweigh other considerations for most news broadcasters as Ben Rayner illustrates:

*When I'm subbing someone's script and it's too long and they have the local person and the local minister and a soundbite from the Red Cross or whatever – the thing that's going to go is the NGO – because we are trying to get people who are closer to the story and directly affected. That doesn't mean the NGO isn't large in the story. They might have led us to the story - they may well have been doing studio lives off the back of it – but they might not necessarily have been in the package.*

## THE ONLINE ALTERNATIVE

According to Ofcom research, 16-24 year olds are watching just 27 hours of broadcast news coverage a year. During the two week sample period of this research, the lead international news items of VICE News, BuzzFeed, BBC Online and IRIN were monitored in order to compare them with those covered on the main bulletins. IRIN, a humanitarian news agency, predictably covered many more humanitarian stories including: *Congo's Forgotten War, Boko Haram and Cameroon's Prisons and Uganda and the Burundi Crisis.* But a range of stories were also featured on other sites that received no coverage on the main bulletins (although a few were covered by Al Jazeera English or BBC World Service). They included: *Hospital bombing in Yemen* (BuzzFeed and VICE News); *Media crackdown in Uganda ahead of the election* (VICE News); *Tokyo police crackdown on businesses that exploit underage girls* (VICE News); *Cuban migrants stranded in Costa Rica back on the road* (VICE News); *New president in Guatemala takes office* (VICE News);

*Uber fighting sexual harassment in Egypt* (BuzzFeed) and *Iranian poets sentenced to lashings flee country* (BuzzFeed). There were international stories that featured on BBC Online but not in the main BBC bulletins, although several were human interest rather than hard news stories, for example *Car ploughs into Sydney service station*; *How Moscow gets rid of snow*; *What does Obama keep in his pocket?*

Richard Sambrook highlights the advantages that online news has over the main broadcasters: *Vice is very determinedly going for the under 30s audience. Any broadcaster has to appeal to all audiences and doesn't have that luxury to target a niche. The other thing about BuzzFeed and Vice is they can just go and do a story and wait until they're ready to put it online – they don't have even 30 minutes a day to fill.* Kevin Sutcliffe readily accepts that VICE News' editorial style is a reaction to the 24 hour rolling news cycle. Although they target 16-35 year-olds, he says that this is quite a large proportion of the world population and to him it does not feel like a niche audience. He believes that VICE News offers a fresher tone than the overly managed news provided by the main broadcasters:

*We're placing you with our reporters in the thick of it, a real sense of being there and responding and reacting to what is being found around them. If you look at a VICE News film on Syria or a VICE News film in Sudan, they feel different. We don't stand in front of the story and tell everybody that over your shoulder something is happening and then go back to the studio.*

Although Glenda Cooper thinks *there are issues with the increasing subjective first person approach* and questions whether this 'fashion' will still be there in a few years' time, she does accept that *it has brought a different form of storytelling and people engage with that.* Brendan Paddy believes that the big broadcasters are now looking at the kind of longer form content produced by online news providers and are trying to learn how to engage an audience *because I know that one of their fears is that they make a principled stand to cover one of these stories and then the audience just isn't there.* Amy Fairbairn has direct experience of the impact stories on VICE News and other online news sites can have:

*In 2014/2015 we published our big flagship report on youth and conflict. It looked at youth in Colombia, Afghanistan and Somalia and why they turned to extremist groups. I pitched it to Vice and they covered it. And the moment we got it on Vice everyone called us, CNN, BBC. It was the first time we'd successfully pitched to Vice and we saw how influential they were in terms of reaching a different demographic, but also that they are one of the outlets that are followed by the more traditional big beasts in broadcasting. So we do try to work a lot with Vice, BuzzFeed, IRIN, Middle East Eye and now the Independent online, depending on the audience.*

Channel 4 News has embraced online and focused much more on its digital service in the last 18 months. This has been rewarded with a growing global audience which has implications for the nature of the

news it covers. Ben de Pear thinks *a lot of the stuff we put online is international – three quarters of it - and the thing that I am most proud of is that our digital has exactly the same remit as the TV programme whereas other people's can be quite different. So we don't put dogs on skateboards, we don't have the latest celebrity row, we don't do clickbait.*

## CONCLUSION

The UK is generally well served by the main TV and radio bulletins which continue to be the principal source of international news for the majority of the UK population. Whilst it would be unwise to draw too many conclusions from this brief sample period, the data gathered, together with the interviews conducted, do highlight some concerns.

Despite the increase in coverage since the 2009 study, driven in part by audience demand, certain areas of the world remain relatively under-represented. Excluding the bulletins of Al Jazeera English and BBC World Service, fewer countries were featured than in 2009 and most of the increase was accounted for by stories from Europe. The profile of the voices featured across many of the bulletins was strikingly similar, leading some commentators to raise concerns about homogenization in news coverage. The treatment of complex issues like the refugee/migrant crisis was too emotive for those who felt it reflected the tendency of news broadcasting to cover events better than processes. Few NGO voices were featured in these bulletins. News producers saw the trend towards the voices of those directly affected by events as a sign of greater authenticity in storytelling and in some cases questioned whether NGOs had anything new to say. There is however a risk that in prioritising the search for the 'authentic' voice, context is lost.

But the evidence from this study also suggests the commitment to international news is strong. Moreover, the development of online news sites such as VICE News and BuzzFeed provides an increasing variety of alternatives to the main terrestrial bulletins. Their presence may not only feed the appetite for international stories, but also influence the way UK broadcasters cover them and contribute to the quality and diversification of international coverage in the future.

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# APPENDIX

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The content of nine digital and terrestrial TV bulletins and three radio bulletins were recorded and analysed over a two week period from Monday 11th to Sunday 24th January 2016:

- BBC1 News at Six; BBC1 News at Ten; BBC2 Newsnight
- ITV1 Evening News; ITV1 News at Ten
- Channel 4 News
- Channel 5, 5 News
- Sky News, 10pm News
- Al Jazeera English 7pm bulletin
- BBC Radio 4 Today 8am bulletin; The World Tonight
- BBC World Service 7am bulletin

The equivalent weekend bulletins were also analysed.

This two week period was chosen as it avoided any major diary events and extreme seasonal fluctuations in the news cycle. Only straight news items were included in the analysis. Headlines, teasers, musical introductions, end titles, summaries, advertisements newspaper reviews, sports and weather coverage were not included.

### International/domestic

News items were categorised as either domestic, domestic with reference to international, international with reference to domestic or international.

- To be defined as 'international', the news report must consist almost entirely of material filmed in other countries or explicit discussion of other countries or citizens from other countries.
- To be defined as 'domestic', the news report must contain almost no material filmed in other countries or explicit discussion of other countries or citizens from other countries.
- To be defined as 'international with reference to domestic', the principal location or discussion must be directly related to countries outside the UK or non-UK citizens but there will be some secondary material filmed in the UK or explicit discussion of the UK or UK citizens.
- To be defined as 'domestic with reference to international', the principal location or discussion must be directly related to the UK or to UK citizens but there will be some secondary material filmed in other countries or explicit discussion of other countries or citizens from other countries.

All stories were then coded by position, length and topic (except the World Service 7am and Today 8 am bulletins where length was not noted). International and international with reference to domestic stories were additionally coded according to principal country (or institution), treatment (interview/discussion, two-ways, VT packages or live voice overs) and voices heard.

### Topics (adapted from Harrison, 2000):

- **Politics** including inter or intra party conflict and disagreement, enacted government policies, elections or election campaigns, parliamentary debates, official information or reports, local government actions, politicians' personal lives, political implications of events or actions
- **Economics and business affairs** including government actions such as tax increases, city news, exchange rates, trade talks or international meetings

- **Law and order** including human rights, criminal proceedings, inquests, non-violent crime, corruption
- **Violence** including war, terrorist attacks, violent demonstrations, mass random killings, riots, violent crime, murder, armed robbery, funerals of people killed violently and control of violence by authorities
- **Human interest (light)** including light, humorous, unusual or celebrity stories, historic occasions, nostalgia, centenaries or ceremonies
- **Human interest (serious)** including tragic stories about 'ordinary' people, victims of crime or violence, individuals protesting for their rights
- **Health** including government policy, scientific medical discoveries, official reports and statistics, general health stories and the work of private or charitable health organisations
- **Environment** including environmental pollution and the environmental consequences of disasters, climate change
- **Science** including scientific inventions or breakthroughs
- **Disasters** including earthquakes, floods, typhoons and cyclones, or damage or death caused by accident such as plane crashes or explosions. Does not include droughts or famine caused by human action. Where the cause of droughts or famine is not clear it is coded as a 'disaster'. Also includes 'near misses'
- **Education** including government policy, stories about educational institutions, official reports or statistics, general education stories and the work of private or charitable education organisations
- **Sport** including; incidents involving sportsmen and women or teams, sporting occasions or achievements
- **Religion** including visits or announcements by religious leaders, religious ceremonies or festivals
- **Weather** including the predictions or consequences of extreme weather conditions reported on as part of the main news bulletin
- **International relations** including diplomatic relations, conferences and meetings, not based on violence or economics
- **Migration** including refugees, asylum seekers
- **Other** including arts and culture, all stories which do not fit into any of the above categories

### Voices heard

- Affected individual/vox pops
- Government representative: local/foreign
- Other: local/international
- NGOs: local/international
- Expert: local/international
- Business: local/international
- Multilateral institution
- Other

### Online news

In order to allow comparison with broadcast news and identify news stories not covered by the bulletins in the sample, the content of the following online news sources was also monitored during this period:

- BuzzFeed News
- VICE News
- BBC News
- IRIN (an independent news agency focussing on humanitarian stories from around the world)

To sample online stories, only prominently placed articles with teasers on the front two pages of each website were included.

