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There seems to be great concern now that young people aren’t watching television news but hasn’t that always been the case?

I’m doing some work in Eastern Europe at the moment where there’s a kind of question on the future of news in countries where they’ve never really had proper news before the last 10 years. So I’m asking channel operators who ask me to advise them, why do you think you’re doing news? Because if you look at the BBC it was amazingly late to start doing news on television, and even on radio there wasn’t much news early on, and that’s because the newspapers thought that radio was going to be a terrible threat to them so that at the initial stages of the BBC there were all sorts of controls on whether there would be radio news, what kind of news it should be, everything to protect the newspapers. The newspapers were anxious to keep out the new kid on the block. But to me it’s pretty inexplicable why television news in Britain was so slow to start. It really didn’t start until 1953-54, and ITN started in 1955 so actually the BBC’s lead over commercial television was only a year or so. Given that eventually they got round to it they then regarded it as one of their core propositions but it certainly wasn’t at the start. In the case of commercial television news they regarded it as the issue of being in competition with the BBC but again if you look at the history of ITV there were those in the early days who were against doing much news then.

So the reason I mention they’ve got this history is that it’s sort of a given now that television news should be there but it wasn’t always like that in the early days, it sort of became a given for both the BBC and ITV. This becomes relevant when you look at the last few years in commercial television in particular. I suppose what happened was, certainly among people of my generation, that there was always the news on TV and it was this big important thing but maybe it was always more important for the people who ran television and for the people who they wanted to watch and they expected to watch, people like themselves if you like. So there’s probably a kind of echo chamber going on here between those who set up, who licensed stations, those who ran stations and their friends who watched it. Certainly in the early days of commercial news you get quite a lot of mentions of people like us watching it. I don’t think young people were ever considered other than the children’s hour talking down sort of slots. So once you have a full proper licensing system as you have in commercial television, and indeed in the BBC’s charter, news is put in the whole time so nobody can bid for an ITV station unless they’re going to do news, it becomes an automatic assumption but again not so much with the audience in mind but with democracy in mind, which is a pretty healthy ambition.

So it’s a good thing that television carries the news irrespective of how many people are watching it?

Yes, it should just be there, but no one ever said who exactly will watch it and what is the purpose of it. It had a public purpose but younger people were never
considered in the purpose. So you ended up as I say with this kind of children’s hour time slots on BBC and ITV and then there was the news. Now in the case of ITV the early evening news was on at something like ten to six and it was quite a family moment. Kids had come home from school and certainly in my home and I remember in my wife’s home you would gather around the television for an early evening meal, which was a shared experience, and the television news, normally the ITV news rather than BBC news in those days, would be the kind of background, some people watched and some didn’t watch. The moment those sorts of shared experiences started to disappear so did the audience for younger people watching news. But they were probably only there in the first place because of family pressure, they didn’t choose to be there. I suppose the obvious starting point when we see a dramatic change is when they were given options. They were given options either to watch other channels on second TV sets in homes, which didn’t exist before, or they could do play station type games or do other things in the summer. But in truth, for half the year they didn’t really have an option either to be in their home with their parents watching television or doing something else in the home. And they just grasped those opportunities which they’d never been given before. When was that? Well I suppose crudely it’s the start of Sky as a carrier, that’s when the options began, and it’s been down hill all the way in terms of not picking up the options that their families and legislators and regulators wanted them to take up.

When and why did broadcasters really start to worry about the aging news audiences?

Well I suppose there were two pressures. First of all there’s the pressure of total viewing, so if any one demographic group started defecting that would affect the overall numbers. But secondly, as advertisers became more and more sophisticated about who they wanted to reach, this demographic, which varies but 16-34 is one definition of it, became more and more attractive to advertisers. In some of the countries that I do work in the TV companies are only interested in 16-34 audiences and if you’ve got an audience over 50 the advertisers won’t pay for them, they’ll say I’m just not interested in those people, I’ll only pay you for the 16-34.

So it became a double imperative. The total viewing figures were going down, which was an ego trip as much as anything else, but in terms of commercial issues the failure to attract this younger audience was a problem too. Of course this creates pressure on the schedule in commercial television, hence the move of ITV’s News At 10 out of its slot. Indeed the move of the BBC’s 9 O’clock news, which considering the history the 9 O’clock news had going back to the Second World War, was quite a big deal. It went through very quickly, it was a very clever move by Greg Dyke but it was done because of the entirely commercial reasons of ITV to move out of what was seen as their slot, the 10 O’clock. These changes were all done for competitive scheduling reasons, there’s no kind of wider public purpose to them. I’m not saying that 16-34 year olds were actually staying up that late to watch them but, as a result, news within a commercial TV schedule began to be run down. Certainly when I worked in
commercial television there were people who wished there wasn’t any news on ITV. I think there are people within Channel 5 now who wish they didn’t have to do a news on Channel 5.

Although interestingly as I travel abroad I find...I was in Estonia the other day, a tiny country, and they all take it as a given that there should be a TV news. But in countries where you can’t take a centre break in the middle of the news the commercial value of news is diminished as a result and again that’s an argument for not having the news. In the UK where you can take a centre break that’s not such a problem but again, commercially, for Channel 5 that news audience is a useless audience really, too old, too small. Channel 4’s different, Channel 4 News audience has been the youngest but that I think is very much the student audience. Certainly students here [at City University] are heavy users of Channel 4 news.

**Is the content and presentation of news changed as well as the scheduling?**

It’s interesting how in different places in different countries now you’ve got faster and faster news, shorter and shorter news and a longer and slower news and there’s a kind of divide going on. Certainly even half hour news programmes in Britain in general the story count is going down rather than up and stories are being covered in more depth. But now you’ve also got this phenomenon in a lot of countries in Europe of pieces that barely last a minute and there are about 20 of them in 20 minutes, but then you watch ITV news and that and there are about four stories. That I think is a division between those who believe the audience has a shorter attention span than they used to have, of which there’s plenty of evidence for that, and those who say that actually the only way to engage them is to make it more interesting, that there are plenty of ways of getting fast news nowadays, including what was termed ambient news, news you bump into around you, so what you now need to do on television now is really take the audience on a journey. That’s clearly what’s going on with younger people and Channel 4 news, they are interested enough and engaged enough to go on this longer journey. But there are other ones, like the BBC3 60 Seconds, where it’s ‘we’re sorry to have to do this and we’ll make it as painless as possible and try to get it over with as fast as we can but we have to do it’. That’s what Five news used to do. They used to have news summaries virtually every hour and then they were hoping to trade that off to get rid of the bulletin, they were hoping to say to the regulator can we now get rid of the bulletin, our way of doing news is in summaries. The regulator wouldn’t accept that.

**A number of people seem to be saying that to attract a younger audience what we mean by ‘news’ has to be redefined.**

There’s a definition of news as opposed to information. One way I look at it if you look on the BBC’s news website in the bottom right hand corner it has the most read stories on the site. On the day of a big story that’s often the big story but on other days it’s really intriguing. It tells you what the users are actually using. But
given that it’s actually appeared on the BBC news website it must be news under some definition. If you take the Britney Spears phenomenon, in both her sane and insane periods, there was just unbelievable traffic flows for anything about Britney Spears. Now we regard that as not proper news but it is news of a kind and it happens to appeal to a particular audience. So the means of communication are greater than they’ve ever been and the interest in some stories is greater than it’s ever been amongst young people but the consumption pattern, the kind of linear sit down for half an hour and trust me to tell you what you need to think, that’s still an attractive proposition to many people, they don’t have to make a selection, somebody’s made the selection for them. Apart from the longer deeper news, the middle ground, if you like, doesn’t seem to be as attractive. But I suspect it never was, people were effectively forced to watch it and given the choice they won’t. They certainly don’t like that ‘you sit down for half an hour while I tell you’ approach.

Why is that young people are watching less TV news, are they just less interested in what fills the traditional news agenda?

The question is have you looked at other ways of measuring young people’s interest in world events? If you take the green story you argue that they’re more interested in that than older people. Are they aware of the complexities of British parliamentary politics? Probably not. Given that British public policy now is to want more than half the country to go to university, that’s still a staggering statistic, what I find here, for instance, which is hopefully an interesting anecdote, is we do a journalism course at under graduate level and at post graduate level and the under graduates, even though they register for a course in journalism, are not really interested in anything. At postgraduate level, which is only a year after they’ve graduated, they’re fantastic. This is arguably one of the best journalism schools in the country and we can pick and choose, but at under graduate level I’ve had ridiculous moments. One student I asked, what do you make of BBC news? She said I’ve never seen BBC news. I said, sorry, say that again, are you from abroad or have you lived on the moon or something? She said, no, I’ve just never seen it. That’s quite something for somebody who’s on a journalism course. And then last year I had another similar incident when I asked the students to go off and watch BBC and ITV news off and on for a week so we could compare them. When they came back and I asked, what did you make of it? One says, I haven’t seen it, I haven’t got a television. And they’re doing a course in journalism? Would that have happened ten years ago? I don’t think it would.

Now whether the internet has legitimised ignoring terrestrial TV on the basis that you can be cool by doing all this other stuff without actually watching terrestrial TV maybe that’s a rationale for it. But in terms of the social peer pressure of ‘did you watch this last night?’ that probably still applies to Big Brother but clearly there’s no great peer pressure in being aware what’s going on. It’s a very scattered response but it’s from those students who are really interested to those who don’t watch television at all even though they’re on a journalism course to a group of people who I guess are too busy doing things to each other to watch television.
It’s often claimed that young people are interested in news and political issues but they’re not interested in political process and the way news is presented.

I think we’ve all got a little bit sceptical about attempts to make the presentation hip, if you like. I did some work for BBC Wales about political programmes. It might be worth looking at Wales as an intriguing test case because there you’ve got this Assembly which cost a lot of public money, deeply rooted into the community in all sorts of measurable ways and it’s not what people are interested in, even in the television companies. I was having real trouble in BBC Wales, the head of television news said she didn’t fancy that story at all. I said, you know, this is meant to be a big thing? I know it’s not a novelty for them but you’ve got this amazing building, there’s all this money gone into it and you don’t seem to cover it. So if that was a genuine attempt to take politics more to the grass roots. So when I hear this rather flip phrase that we’re too Westminster-centric I say well, is BBC Wales too Cardiff-centric? It can’t be as simple as that. Certainly you can say that Westminster is up its own whatever but here’s an example of a really well funded…and the BBC is very well resourced to report it but even the people doing the reporting don’t seem very interested in it.

**Does presentation really matter?**

The presenter of the BBC Wales Sunday lunchtime news doesn’t wear a tie. He talks to the leaders of the Tory group on the Welsh Assembly and all that absolutely classic stuff but he wears a slightly mauve shirt and no tie. I don’t think that matters at all. But I think the BBC went through that phase. That report by Sian Keivill, I think that was quite a defining moment really because Greg Dyke, who was very good at flip decisions, said, right, send her off and let’s make politics more interesting.

I do quite a lot of work for Channel 4 and they have stealthily abandoned all political coverage outside Channel 4 News and some documentaries. Weekly current affairs has disappeared, and they have had a number of attempts at making it more interesting. So you can’t point to many successes for that attempt at a presentation level [to make politics more interesting].

**Given the apparent lack of public interest (not just from young people) in the political process, do you think Westminster based politics is overrepresented in news and current affairs television?**

The question that started this is about voting turn out and the BBC feeling that it has a kind of public responsibility to sustain or increase voter turnout. I’m not sure where it’s ever said that in the [BBC] Charter, and to a certain extent that’s partly the politicians passing the buck to broadcasting. But have you looked at that issue of voter turn out because it seems to me that a lot of the rationale internally for the BBC doing these things is, firstly, it’s about ratings and,
secondly, we must take our share of the blame for voter turnout. If that is true I’m not sure it’s their responsibility to artificially correct it.

**Once there’s been an investment in the Westminster based infrastructure doesn’t that influence the amount of coverage irrespective of audience interest?**

I’m not sure about that, that they get on the air just because they’re there you mean? I’m not convinced by that. I can see why it appears a logical argument but if you take Gayle Morris Jones, the editor of BBC Wales Today, even though they’ve got massive resources sitting there she doesn’t want to put it on the air, so I’m not sure that it’s true. I can see why it appears to be true but I’m not sure it is. This division in broadcasting between input and output is rather greater than it is in newspapers, and certainly there’s no equivalent of it on the internet. On television news there is somebody who orders the stuff up, if you like, and then there’s somebody who decides what goes out. Now obviously there’s an element of wastage involved but the output editors normally are pretty independently minded and they’ll say, well, I don’t care, I’m not interested, you may have swum the Atlantic to get that piece of video but actually it’s not very interesting. And they act as a kind of buffer that things will get on. All the research I ever saw at ITN about viewer response was that the number one hate was politics. It just kept being mentioned time and time again.

**Did that mean politicians, the political system, rather than politics per se?**

They particularly disliked politicians and they loved seeming politicians getting kicked, but I can’t remember any other subject that was anywhere nearly as often mentioned [negatively] as politics. That’s the issue that underlies a lot of this stuff about younger people. No one cares whether younger people are more or less interested in sport or music, it’s why aren’t they interested in politics? Well the answer is they’re just not.

**The BBC seems to be planning to create some kind of news programme specifically focused on a young, predominately teenage audience. Do you think that’s the way forward in tackling this problem?**

I would have thought for a publicly funded public service that’s an entirely logical thing to do and one applauds it. Certainly I wouldn’t expect it to be a priority for a commercial broadcaster unless it can be seen to produce results in the this 16/-34 age group and makes them more attractive to advertisers, in other words if you could create a piece of programming which was news based and can produce ratings then the commercial case for doing it would be strong. On the other hand what you wouldn’t see is commercial broadcasters doing that because they feel it’s a good thing.

**What about more opinionated or attitude driven programming, given the success of films like Super Size Me and the Michael Moore work in cinema?**
First of all, in current affairs you’ve got much more flexibility in choosing the subject matter. In news the agenda doesn’t set itself but certainly there is a series of events each day which logically would appear. In current affairs you could have no events of the week or even the year. So that’s an option. The second thing is that the style of current affairs can be dramatically different. So I think current affairs has more possibilities in that area than news, I’m not saying news is hamstrung by its format but it’s certainly not as flexible as current affairs. And of course the difference is the issue of impartiality. All TV news services in Britain are bound by rules of impartiality. There are services here that by-pass it like video on the web but their audiences are small.

**What about something like Jon Stewarts Daily Show, could something like that work here?**

That’s fantastic, brilliantly written. Why can’t we make it here? The answer is it does cost a lot of money. I don’t know how many writers it has on it. It’s interesting because CNN show that programme so it clearly has its place in a news offering as opposed to just being a counter to news on the Comedy Channel where it started. It’s had outings in other places so other people have recognised the attraction. However, I’ve never looked at its audience figures on More 4 but I guess they’re tiny. But even something like the West Wing, I know it’s fiction but that is another way of looking at politics and that never did terribly well in Britain in ratings terms. It was widely watched by the commentariat but not really by viewers.

**How optimistic are you about the future of news provision and younger audiences in general?**

If you just re-categorise news in different ways you could come up with a wildly optimistic scenario. If you take this issue of ambient news, the text phenomenon as a way of spreading word of mouth information stands above almost anything else. When did humans ever get the chance to communicate information to each other so quickly, so cheaply and so easily? It’s just that those of us from a news background don’t regard that as news. 9/11 is the classic example. How did people find out it had happened? Through ambient news. People weren’t sitting down watching the news at two in the afternoon but they were directed to it. So I’m not wildly pessimistic. If you said to people 9/11 is happening and they said I’m not really interested then the game is up but if they’re interested enough to say to other people ‘have you heard about this’.

**What about user generated content, there’s a lot of talk about it but how much of a role does it have to play in television news?**

I think you have to slightly break down user generated content because if you look at YouTube there is broadcaster’s content which has been sampled, if you like, and then there is genuine UGC like the Coca-cola-mentos things (by mixing
these sweets with Cocacola you create these mini explosions which people have posted on YouTube). On user generated news I'm a little bit of an old fart on this because when I started at ITN in 1972 there was an extraordinary fire at an entertainment centre on the isle of Man and the whole thing was beautifully shot by somebody with their amateur camera. So the idea that people are in interesting places when things happen and record them and give them to broadcasters has been there for a long time, what's happened is a multiplication factor by the number of people who have a camera in their phone. So I don't think the principle is very different. Broadcasters have always been open to that material. The question is has anyone yet created a package of news because it's user generated? I've seen some pull togethers of user generated content on a more regular basis and it's completely useless, completely unwatchable, there simply isn't enough of it to justify it. ITV did a user generated review of the year. It was a complete waste of time, a complete waste of time. They really gave it a go and I admire the initiative behind it but it was quite revealing. Anything of any interest had already appeared because broadcasters had sucked it in already and everything else was ‘me talking to Tom Cruise outside the opening of a premier’ sort of stuff

So has it significantly changed the composition of news and has it created a significant new communication channel for anything like the mainstream news agenda? No. Has it created a new source of entertainment? Absolutely, yes. Accessing content bites is an extraordinary phenomenon but of people actually filming news incidents it's not terribly new and actually creating compilations of this stuff into a usable form hasn't happened. Maybe it might in due course but it hasn't yet.

What about your students, are they not using new media in journalistic ways?

Here I find there are not that many people blogging, not that many video-blogging, and yet these are the sorts of people who should be. It's not just because boring old farts like me are teaching them.

So are they still looking to traditional media when it comes to thinking about careers in journalism?

They are actually. When Jon Snow comes in the room they give him a standing ovation and want to know how they can get work experience on Channel 4 News. How do they get on to Newsnight? That's probably because these people are very job driven because they've paid quite a lot of money to do this course, they're in debt and they need to get a job. I don’t think it accounts for the motivation of a lot of other people in terms of user generated content, they’re just generally having fun or doing different things.

Looking ahead, do you see terrestrial television news basically having to manage an inevitable decline in its younger viewing figures?
If you look at the demographics in TV news, and I look across Europe, you see the same old facts. People get more interested at 40, very interested at 50, extremely interested at 60. These waves of generations are all going to get to a certain period so the question is when this generation gets to a certain age will it have changed? At the moment the number of people in their 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond who want to watch the television news in this country is still enough to sustain the services. The fact that there are people under 40 who are not watching is a problem, it can be easily explained but it’s not the end of the world. The idea that if they don’t watch the news now they won’t watch it later, to be honest I don’t know if it’s ever been tested. There are other models of this, you know, if we don’t get them to take out an account with our bank when they’re at university. You know, there are other things where people assume that if you don’t catch people young you’ve missed them but maybe in television news that isn’t the case. I don’t know the answer to that but I think the working assumption would be that this is age related and it’s life style related.

My own amount of viewing of television news has definitely gone down, partly because I don’t do it full time as a job anymore but also because I know I can catch up on it on various devices. Now that’s a factor, that you couldn’t catch up before, unless you videotaped programmes, it was difficult to catch up, but now, particularly with Sky+, although I’m not sure many young people would set it for the BBC 6 O’clock news on the off chance, and the ability to go to websites and record stuff, you can. It’s rather like the morning after pill, I missed out, something went wrong last night but I can do something about it the next day. Maybe that is a function that might be the undoing of traditional news in the very long run.

The other thing is in terms of the ability to sample items of the news, that exists already now on the BBC news player. What’s intrigued me is that Sky has had the function for at least five years or longer to offer items as a menu and for you to select from the menu but they’ve never done it. In other words you could chose to see whichever items you want. They offer a lot of other functionality and interactivity but if you’re selling linearity, if you’re selling people a continuous experience, offering people the option to opt out and take it as a bit by bit experience…

I noticed that once they started offering limited choice, like you could look at the top story or you could look at showbiz or sport, it seemed to me the ratings did go down a bit so maybe they fear that giving to much choice is a bad thing.

**Young people invariably say, when asked, that they don’t like the negative portrayal of people like them in news items. They’re invariably portrayed as a ‘problem’ of one sort or another. Should news producers be concerned about the cumulative impact of the stories they produce?**

I think probably they should a bit. The question is does that make [young people] any different to any other interest group? People in Scotland, for instance, might feel the same way that they only get mentioned when there’s trouble. I suppose the portrayal is that given that there aren’t that many people of that age group
working in television, whereas there are Scotsmen working in television there aren’t many under 25s, so the portrayal can be that either they’re a problem or it can be patronising. The other thing is, and there’s a history of this really, that when they have interests in various things, whether it’s music or whatever, there’s a condescending attitude in its reporting. If you look at the coverage of rock and roll in the early days…it’s about trying to understand the phenomenon but that reflects the majority audience that is actually older and would like to understand the phenomenon. But it’s certainly pitched that way rather than, hey, here’s an interesting new development’, it’s ‘what can this be about, why would anyone buy these records?’. Anybody doesn’t like being patronised.

Interactivity on radio, for instance on Five Live, seems to have worked in reaching audiences for news programming, could that approach work on TV?

I think the interactivity by text [on Five Live] is really quite striking and really very different from Radio 4 Today programme. They’ve done some experiments with blogging that are really quite interesting. Without being targeted at young people it’s not frightened by things like email. That’s quite a good example. It’s not targeted at young people but they would be comfortable with it.

I think it could [translate to television]. There b been many attempts at television’s text equivalent and they’ve have not be very successful when they tried. I know that the Channel 4 news made a deliberate attempt to try and generate it but simply couldn’t generate enough messages. That might be because it’s a small channel. Channel 5 at the end of Five News had a we say this and you said that kind of thing with messages. But I have to say I’ve always been suspicious of those things. Sky News doesn’t do it as much on air as they used to. Either it’s gone in fashions or…for a time they were bombarding the screen with things like text us and send emails. There seems to me to be less phone votes than there used to be. I think the systems pretty flawed actually. So it seems a good idea but not all attempts at it have been successful.

It gets down to the lean forward-lean back debate. Television news is still by and large being consumed in a lean back environment whereas radio is doing all sorts of things with texting. In the States, where generally they are ahead on these things, there’s nothing that strikes me there. So it’s not as though somebody’s created a holy grail here and Britain is slow on it.

How doe British television compare to what you’ve seen in Europe, in terms of attempting to reach new and younger audiences?

To be honest I see British broadcasters probably trying harder than some. I was involved in one station [in Europe] where they’ve decided to drop sport and replace it with crime to improve their ratings. In some countries crime is such an issue that it really connects with viewers whereas sport really divides viewers between men and women. That partly explains the interest in muggings and murders. In some parts of Eastern Europe it has been quite successful as a
formula because it does seem to engage people across age groups and across gender rather more than some traditional news does.

There may be other areas because we’re all a bit haunted by this traditional news agenda, politics. Certainly in some countries I work with I keep trying to challenge why they keep putting politics at the top of their running order. It’s not just a British obsession, it’s quite common. Somehow politics is the most important thing. Why? In the Czech Republic there’s a wildly sensationalist TV station that gets 70% of the audience with a 20 minute news delivered at absolute machine gun pace which puts politics seriously down the running order and absolutely prioritises kind of user interest stories, more so than I’ve ever seen before. You have to ask, how many countries have ever been offered this before?

What does this sensationalist news actually look like?

First of all it looks like every shot lasts about three second. Every soundbite is never more than a sentence. I was in the Czech Republic last week and on one day on the two other stations the lead story was ‘Prime minister accuses cabinet colleague of corruption’. Not a bad story by anybody’s definition, but their lead story was that people are ringing 999 numbers when it isn’t serious. They had the Prime Minister story at number two, they didn’t dismiss it, but then there are lots of stories about crime, about housing. I did a lot of work in the Ukraine and the stories there are often about survival, just about how to survive. Partly about crime but also, you know, if you’re short of cash…do you remember News You can Use? I’m not saying this is a formula but for a station to get a 70% share with a news that is basically news you can use delivered at an extraordinary pace just suggests that there may be things that have not been attempted in the west. But the traditional idea of trying to make politics more interesting I fear is not the way.

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