Television News, Young People and Politics

Executive Summary

This document summarises the main findings of a three-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research investigated possible causes into the widely reported ‘disconnection’ between young people and television news. Broadcasters know that the age profile for television news is growing older and are concerned that younger generations have only a sporadic interest in news programmes – still the main and most trusted source of news for most people, including young people.

The research involved interviews with more than 30 broadcasters involved in news production. The research team from Brunel University also analyzed a month long sample of television news programmes during May 2006 – this amounted to over 2000 news stories. Finally the team conducted qualitative small group interviews with 65 young people (aged between 16-24) to discover what they thought about television news. The aim of this three pronged methodology was to explore the relationships and points of ‘disconnection’ between broadcasters perceptions of news broadcasting, the product itself, and audience perceptions of that product (i.e. the news). The interviews with broadcasters generated a rich resource and a complex picture of perspectives that cannot be easily summarised here – so this report will focus instead on the quantitative analysis of news programmes and some of the key themes to emerge from the focus groups with young people.

With the quantitative analysis of more than 2000 news stories, we looked at both the representation of young people, politics and the ordinary public of whatever age range. Here are some of the key results from this strand of the research.

- In the sample of over 2000 television news stories, ‘young people’ were found to be a major focus in 13%.
- 69% of stories focusing on young people were about crime and law and order issues and 28% about sport and celebrity themes.

Young people received 3% of speaking time for news sources (excluding news anchors and reporters). They received 1% of speaking time for news sources in stories dealing with British politics.

Our results suggest that young people are overwhelmingly
presented within a dualistic vision as either ‘trouble’/ ‘in trouble’ or in relation to sporting achievement and celebrity mass culture. On the other hand there is a very weak link on television news between young people and politics. Only 3% of stories with young people as a main focus were about politics.

- 41% of stories focusing on regular people or ‘the public’ dealt with crime and law and order issues.
- ‘Regular’ or ‘ordinary’ members of the British public contributed 19% of all speaking time for news sources. This was third overall among groups of story actors behind politicians (29%) and ‘experts’ (20%) such as academics, writers and ‘intellectuals’, doctors and lawyers, journalists and public commentators.
- On average regular people received shorter speaking opportunities than politicians and ‘experts’, by 14 seconds per person per story to 34 seconds (politicians) and 32 seconds (experts).

Our results suggest that there is a strong skew (although less than for young people) towards featuring ordinary people in crime and law and order stories. Ordinary people spoke fairly regularly as news sources, but they had less speaking time on average than many other groups, including public servants (27 seconds on average) and businesspersons (24 seconds on average). Within political stories, the public contributed only 9% of the total speaking time for all news stories.

- British politics was a main theme in 22% of news sources.

- Labour sources received almost 4 times as much speaking time on news programmes as Conservative and almost 7 times as much as Liberal Democrats.

- Cabinet and shadow cabinet MPs were principal actors in news stories more than three times as often as non-cabinet MPs.

- 64% of stories focusing on politics were about the ‘horse race’ of politics (who’s winning and losing), strategy and competence/integrity issues of individual politicians (mostly ministers).

Our results suggest that while political stories have a prominent place on television news, there is strong hierarchy in the coverage, in terms of parties, and prominent individuals. Although our coding period covered only the last four days of a local election out of a month’s sample, horse race and strategy issues, and competence and integrity issues
predominated over news stories with a substantive policy focus.

Our focus groups with young people generated a very rich resource of opinions, views and attitudes, the general tenor of which ought to be worrying for politicians and broadcasters alike. Some of the key themes to emerge were:

- Many young people in their late teens, still watch ‘Newsround’ because it is a news programme they can relate to.

- The gulf between the political class and young people was extremely marked. Across all groups there was a strong sense of politicians and the House of Commons as remote, unresponsive to the public, and irrelevant to their daily lives.

- Among working class groups the level of animosity or indifference towards politicians and Parliament was generally higher than middle class respondents and the sense that democratic institutions were dominated by an upper class who had little connection with them, was particularly vivid.

- Both working class and middle class groups felt that they lacked knowledge about politics and wondered why society had not better equipped them to know how political processes work and why they are important.

- Broadcasters need to do more stories about young people outside the law and order/crime or sports and

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Broadcasters need to do more stories about young people outside the law and order/crime or sports and
celebrity dualism that currently predominates. There are many issues affecting young people beyond that of crime that need to be addressed, such as in health, education, housing and employment areas. There is a young people’s dimension to all of these issues.

- Young people and ordinary members of the public need to have longer speaking opportunities on a more diverse range of subjects than is currently the case.

- Greater opportunity should be available for ordinary people to have editorial input or control within news making, as was done by Channel Five in one instance (albeit on the issue of knife crime).

- Coverage of political stories needs to be less Westminster focused, less dominated by a rigid hierarchy of ‘important’ and ‘powerful’ political actors. The broadcasting assumption that MPs, because they are elected, represent the spectrum of public opinion, is increasingly out of touch.

- With declining differences between political parties, there is less opportunity to debate substantive policy issues: therefore broadcasters must find other ways of generating debate and widening the range of policy options beyond the parameters of the mainstream parties.

- Broadcasters need to develop a wider palette of programme formats that could develop debates and agendas beyond the confines of television news.

- Broadcasters need to use new media technology to provide opportunities to facilitate greater participation, access, feedback, informality, debate and education in conjunction with innovative programming.

*The Television News, Young People and Politics project was conducted by a team of researchers at Brunel University. For further information or feedback on this summary of the project’s research findings, email: Michael.wayne@brunel.ac.uk*

Project website: [www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artsub/filmtv/tvnewsyoungpeople](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artsub/filmtv/tvnewsyoungpeople)