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What is This?



Towards a 'Foxification' of 24-hour news channels in Britain?

An analysis of market-driven and publicly funded news coverage

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on three media content analyses between 2004 and 2007, we examine the differences in news coverage between BBC News 24 (a public service broadcasting channel) and Sky News (a commercial provider). We explore this longitudinal data in the context of recent claims that 24-hour news channels in the UK are succumbing to the kind of decline in news standards exemplified by the Fox network in the USA.

While there are some signs of 'Foxification', the existing public service regulations in UK broadcasting and the presence of a full-blown public service broadcaster like the BBC act as a break on 'Foxification' in commercial providers like Sky. Although Fox and Sky are both Murdoch channels, Sky conforms to some of the expectations of public service broadcasting in a way that Fox does not.

KEY WORDS ■ 24-hour news ■ citizenship and consumerism ■ content analysis
■ due impartiality ■ news values ■ political economy

Introduction

Since CNN started broadcasting 24-hour news in 1980, we have seen a global proliferation of rolling news channels. CNN, CNBC, Fox News and MSNBC now compete for 24-hour American news audiences in addition to the traditional network news bulletins. With the advent of digital and cable technologies, these channels also broadcast alongside a growing number of international rolling news channels such as BBC World and Al Jazeera.

Rolling news channels first attracted scholarly attention for a perceived 'CNN effect' (Robinson, 2002), where US foreign policy-making was – it was claimed – being shaped by real-time images of wars and famines. More recently,

however, debates about 24-hour news have centred on the influence of Fox News. Despite its coy insistence on being 'fair and balanced', studies have repeatedly shown the channel indulging in populist, right-wing partisanship (Ackerman, 2001; *Outfoxed*, 2004). Journalist Bob Woodward witnessed this first hand in his inside account of the White House after 9/11, as the Head of Fox News is heard advising Karl Rove, the chief Republican spin doctor (Woodward, 2004).¹ Indeed, DellaVinga and Kaplan (2006) provide evidence of Fox News influencing up to 8 percent of its viewers to vote Republican in the 2000 Presidential election. Meanwhile, studies which examine people's knowledge about politics and public affairs indicate that viewers who watch Fox News more than other news stations tend to be the most misinformed about issues such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq (Kull, 2002, 2003).

Critics argue that the emphasis on gimmickry, comment and opinion on Fox News rather than on the 'straight' reporting of 'facts' has undermined important journalistic values. The aim of entertaining or politically influencing audiences is seen as inimical to long-established journalistic routines and practices to 'objectively' inform citizens about the world. The instinct, in this sense, is both commercial and ideological – to gain greater audience share and present a partial view of the world – rather than embrace a more public service ethos, which is traditionally associated with promoting audience understanding and democratic participation (Crisell, 2001; Curran and Seaton, 2003; McNair, 2003; Iskander, 2005; DellaVinga and Kaplan, 2006; Conway et al., 2007).

The success – in ratings terms – of Fox during the early period of the 2003 Iraq War led to a suspicion that other US news networks were tempted by its approach, unleashing a chorus of unashamedly patriotic cheer-leading in US news. Or, to put it another way, US news was becoming 'Foxified'. This term has come to encapsulate a series of news values that run counter to public service traditions, with the emphasis on sensationalism, a tabloid style, speculation rather than factual reporting and partisanship rather than balance and objectivity (Schiffers, 2003; Raspberry, 2005). In some respects, the term 'dumbing down' (e.g. Franklin, 1997) is often invoked to characterize these trends. But the term 'Foxification', we would suggest, more explicitly raises questions about the relationship between content, ownership and regulation (partly because it is well known that Rupert Murdoch owns Fox). This article explores whether there is any evidence that 24-hour news channels in the UK have succumbed to any 'Foxification' trends. Since Sky News – once the market leader in the UK – comes from the same stable as Fox we might expect them to share a similar approach.

We do not make any direct comparisons between British and US news networks. Thus while we draw on work in the USA that describes aspects of the 'Foxification' process, our focus is on how elements of this process might – or might not – be applied to UK news channels.

We draw on three media content analyses between 2004 and 2007 to examine the differences between BBC News 24 (a public service broadcasting channel) and Sky News (a commercial provider), as well as any manifestations of a shift away from the kind of public service provision associated with UK news. In our conclusion we discuss the significance of our findings in relation to recent debates about whether the UK impartiality guidelines for television news should be relaxed, as they were in 1987 in the USA.

The 'Fox effect'

Despite the many criticisms Fox News has received, it remains the most watched 24-hour news channel in the USA. This commercial success has left many commentators fearing other news channels will follow its presentational style and partisan nature (Roddick, 2003). Writing in *The Washington Post*, William Raspberry (2005), for example, argues:

The in-your-face right-wing partisanship that marks Fox News Channel's news broadcasts is having two dangerous effects.

The first is that the popularity of the approach – Fox is clobbering its direct competition (CNN, CNBC, MSNBC, etc.) – leads other cable broadcasters to mimic it, which in turn debases the quality of the news available to that segment of the TV audience.

The second, far more dangerous, effect is that it threatens to destroy public confidence in all news. (Raspberry, 2005)

BBC journalist Steve Schiffers (2003) reported that MSNBC increasingly adopted Fox News features during coverage of the Iraq War. More conservative commentators, for example, were prominent without counterbalancing voices. There was, he suggested, little sense of MSNBC playing a 'watchdog role' on military action as they competed on Fox's overtly patriotic terrain. News came branded with patriotic symbols (the US flag was often present on screen) with 'a special section called "America's Bravest" where viewers could send pictures of their loved ones serving in the armed forces in Iraq' (Schiffers, 2003). Andrew Heyward, president of CBS News, warned, following Fox's rating success after the Iraq War:

I certainly think all the news people are watching the success of Fox ... There is a long-standing tradition in the mainstream press of middle-of-the-road journalism that is objective and fair. I would hate to see that fall victim to the Fox effect. (Cited in Schiffers, 2003)

Critics, for example, have suggested that Fox News's (over)reliance on military experts to interpret stories about US international relations too often presents military action as *the* only solution (Sirota, 2004).

Fears about the influence of Fox News have not been limited to the USA. In the UK, journalists and politicians have voiced concerns about the democratic implications of a more market-driven approach to 24-hour news. Speaking in the House of Lords, Chris Patten (2003) warned:

We have only to look at the United States, where market forces rule, to see the 'Foxification' of news ... to see the dangers that lie ahead. In the face of those threats there are many who are willing to fight for the BBC.

Former BBC (and current ITV) Chairman, Michael Grade, has similarly expressed concern about the potential influence of Fox journalism: 'Why not let opinionated broadcasting take root, and leave it to the market to decide which set of opinions will win audiences? In the United States ... Fox News presenters in television make no bones about letting their opinions show on air.' Grade was unequivocal in how the BBC should respond to this: 'Impartiality must remain the cornerstone of the BBC's editorial mission. Remove it and the whole edifice begins to totter' (Grade, 2005).

While there has been much recent scrutiny of increasing deregulation and commercialization of television news in the USA (Entman, 1989; Hoynes, 1994; McChesney, 2000), the advent of Fox News has sparked new concern about the impact it has had on the wider culture and understanding of news and journalism. Scholars have focused on particular aspects of Fox News, such as its coverage about the war in Iraq (Iskandar, 2005) or the role of right-wing presenter Bill O'Reilly (Conway et al., 2007); our interest here is the nature and impact of Fox journalism *more generally*. We focus on four key areas raised by the 'Foxification' discussion – the news agenda, the global range of news coverage, the type of sources and the incidence and style of 'breaking news' items.

Given the strict guidelines for broadcast news in the UK (OFCOM, 2003), impartiality, in party political terms, is not an issue. Nonetheless, we consider some of the more subtle ways bias can enter into news coverage. Scholars have understood for some time that news values, for instance, are not politically neutral (Hall et al., 1978). So, for example, news media featuring a high proportion of crime-related stories have been shown to help cultivate a more punitive response to penal policy-making amongst regular audiences

(Muncie, 1999). We take up this issue in our case study of how the BBC News 24 and Sky News channels reported on the British Crime Survey. This allows us to take a more qualitative look at the coverage and to consider how news values operate in practice.

Samples and methodology

This article develops our first analysis of British 24-hour news channels in 2004 (Lewis et al., 2005). In the 2004 study, BBC News 24 and Sky were taped for three hours a day across a range of time slots over 14 days in July, 2004. Our sample thus consisted of 84 hours of news programming spread equally across both channels. This gave us a total of 1972 separate news items² (see Appendix for details on the accuracy of coding).

We updated the study in 2005/6 and in 2007, using many of the same variables. The 2005/6 sample consisted of 40 hours of BBC News 24 and Sky News (20 hours each) over three weeks in November 2005, December 2005 and January 2006. This generated a total of 816 news items across the two channels (431 on BBC News 24, 385 on Sky News). The 2007 sample consisted of 40 hours of BBC News 24 and Sky News (20 hours each) over a two-week period in February/March 2007. This generated a total of 809 news items across the two channels. All three samples involved a variety of timeslots during the weekday daytime hours. Overall, we have a sample of 3597 news items covering three periods over nearly four years.³

We also draw on some qualitative analysis from the 2004 study, based on coverage of crime statistics, on a day when both the British Crime Survey (BCS) and police statistics gave conflicting accounts of crime trends. This allowed us to explore the kinds of details that might elude a content analysis, such as the use of language, style, objectivity and balance.

News agendas

Traditionally, research has suggested that there has been a high level of agreement amongst broadcasters about what constitutes 'news' (Harcup and O'Neil, 2001). More recently, however, research has indicated that there has been a move on some UK commercial news outlets towards a more tabloid agenda (see Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002).

Our findings suggest that the two channels share broadly similar news agendas, with Sky leaning more towards tabloid stories. As Table 1 indicates, Sky consistently spends around 10 percent more time covering tabloid

stories and, conversely, News 24 spends 10 percent more time on broadsheet topics.

However, Table 2 shows that the nature of tabloid⁴ news coverage on both channels is quite different – and increasingly so.

In the 2004 and 2005/6 samples, the tabloid category consisted mostly of crime stories. This was still the case in 2007 on News 24 (although less so than in previous years), while Sky's tabloid coverage began to be dominated by celebrity and entertainment. In 2004, 19 per cent of Sky's time was taken up with crime, compared to 8 per cent on celebrity and entertainment. In 2007 these percentages were more or less reversed, with 8 per cent of coverage devoted to crime and 20 per cent to celebrity and entertainment.

In terms of broadsheet coverage, News 24 has seen a clear and steady increase in the coverage of social policy issues (from 16% in 2004 to 26% in 2007), and business and economy stories (from 7% in 2004 to 17% in 2007), with a significant decrease in the coverage of domestic politics (from 21% in 2004 to 8% in 2007) and, to a lesser extent, international/foreign policy (from 31% in 2004 to 20% in 2007).

Table 1 Percentage of time spent on tabloid and broadsheet news items on BBC News 24 and Sky News (excluding sports)

	Tabloid			Broadsheet		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
News 24	12.5%	20.0%	18.3%	87.5%	80.0%	81.7%
Sky News	21.3%	30.0%	27.2%	78.7%	70.0%	72.8%

Note: We have recalculated the 2004 data to match the later samples

Table 2 Percentage of general subject matter of news items on BBC News 24 and Sky News (by time and excluding sport)

	News 24			Sky News		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
Celebrity and entertainment	5.3%	3.3%	8.7%	8.3%	9.5%	19.7%
Crime	11.1%	16.6%	11.5%	18.9%	21.2%	8.4%
Business and economy	7.0%	8.4%	17.2%	5.4%	3.3%	8.6%
Social policy and issues	16.0%	16.2%	26.1%	14.5%	13.3%	18.0%
Politics	21.3%	18.2%	7.7%	17.9%	26.2%	11.7%
Disasters/ accidents	5.8%	14.4%	6.6%	2.3%	12.6%	9.3%
International/ foreign policy	31.2%	21.1%	19.7%	28.7%	12.7%	22.4%
Other	2.5%	1.7%	2.4%	4.2%	1.2%	1.9%

We should stress that this does *not* mean that News 24 is doing fewer political stories. Rather, it signifies a shift in emphasis. Closer analysis of our 'politics' category suggests that it tends to involve stories with a specific – and narrow – parliamentary focus. In the 2007 sample, for example, the great majority of politics stories on both channels (27 out of 30 on News 24 and 32 out of 35 on Sky News) were about political personalities and processes rather than policy. What these data suggest is that News 24 may be moving away from a narrow 'party political' focus towards a broader consideration of social policy – thereby covering politics in its broader sense. While some traditionalists may see this as 'dumbing down', we would argue that this approach is more likely to engage audiences and is, arguably, *more* relevant to an understanding of the world than a focus on political processes or personalities.

In the 2007 sample we included a new post-coded category in order to see how many stories were unique to each channel, and what kinds of stories these were. While we still found a fairly high level of agreement in both agendas, this analysis also reveals Sky's more tabloid approach. Table 3 shows that there is general agreement about which stories to cover – with around three-quarters of news time being devoted to stories common to both channels.

Overall, 30 percent of News 24's stories (124 out of 409) are unique, compared to 24 percent on Sky (97 out of 400), and News 24 spends 4 percent more of its time on unique stories than Sky (26% to 22%). The fact that Sky does more stories common to both channels than News 24 – 303 compared to 285 – means that Sky is more likely to repeat stories.

When we examine the *type* of stories unique to one of the channels we see a noticeable difference. Almost half of Sky's unique stories are tabloid in orientation (46 out of 97). By contrast, the great majority – 82 percent – of News 24's unique stories cover broadsheet topics. Indeed, a third of the stories that are unique to Sky are celebrity news, a category that makes up only 2 percent of News 24's unique stories, although News 24 does cover more unique stories in other tabloid areas, such as crime and entertainment. Overall, News 24 has more unique stories in most broadsheet categories, most notably health and the NHS (24 to 4), international diplomacy (12 to 1), consumer news (8 to 0) and corporate or general crime (9 to 1).

Table 3 Percentage of time spent and number of news items unique to BBC News 24 and Sky News (2007 sample)

	News 24	Sky News
Unique to channel	25.8% (124)	21.8% (97)
On both channels	74.2% (285)	78.2% (303)

In short, BBC News 24 has a more 'broadsheet' emphasis than Sky News, although this is in the context of a broadly shared news agenda. While Sky is doing more celebrity news than hitherto, over the four-year period there is no clear, sustained trend towards a more tabloid approach on either channel.⁵ While we have no comparative data, this would seem to be at odds with accounts of the US experience.

With the arrival of CNN in 1982, 24-hour news coverage gained its notoriety with a hard news agenda, such as round the clock coverage of the first Gulf War. Since the introduction of Fox News in 1996, it has been observed that other 24-hour news channels in the USA have increased their emphasis on 'soft news' (Morris, 2005). To Baum, the increase in competition amongst 24-hour news channels has changed the nature of rolling news coverage:

... recent entrants to the 'all news' cable market, like MSNBC and Fox ... have increasingly emulated soft news programming. And, in order to avoid losing viewers to their competitors, CNN has substantially increased the percentage of its broadcasts devoted to soft-news orientated topics and formats. (2003: 179)

In the UK the commercial news channel Sky (1989) began life long before News 24 (1997). But it would appear from our data that the competition between the two is conducted on the generally broadsheet terrain associated with British public service broadcasting. The presence of these public service traditions – and, more specifically, BBC News 24 (with its more broadsheet news values) – fosters certain audience expectations and makes it more difficult for Sky to wholeheartedly embrace a tabloid agenda.

The global range of news coverage

Our findings suggest that between one in three and one in four stories on both channels are international. But while News 24's level of international coverage has been relatively consistent,⁶ Sky has gone from covering 10 percent fewer international stories (than the BBC channel) in 2004 to 10 percent *more* in 2007 (see Table 4).

If we break this down (Table 5), however, we can see that the increase in Sky's international coverage is largely due to stories from the USA: indeed nearly a third of Sky's international stories are from the USA (five times the number of Sky stories from Europe), and well over half come from just two regions: the USA and Asia. So while Sky had more international stories in 2007 overall, the pattern of coverage suggests that News 24's international stories are spread far more evenly – covering the USA, Europe, Asia and Iraq in roughly equal measure. This is partly due to a steady increase across the three samples in News 24's coverage of Europe.

Table 4 Percentage of time spent and number of international and UK news items on BBC News 24 and Sky News

	News 24			Sky News		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
National	64.2% (567)	73% (275)	73% (267)	73.8% (462)	78% (245)	63.2% (217)
International	35.8% (399)	27% (139)	27% (109)	26.2% (230)	22% (105)	36.8% (140)
Total	100% (966)	100% (414)	100% (376)	100% (692)	100% (350)	100% (357)

Note: This table excludes sports and space news items or items with no identifiable location

Table 5 Percentage of time spent and frequency of story location in international news items on BBC News 24 and Sky News

	News 24			Sky News		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
Asia	14.4% (66)	11.0% (14)	19.1% (23)	15.8% (38)	21.0% (20)	26.6% (36)
Africa	7.8% (27)	0.1% (1)	0.3% (1)	5.7% (9)	0.3% (3)	5% (8)
Middle East (not Iraq)	13.4% (54)	16.0% (21)	5.0% (10)	12.0% (26)	20.0% (31)	5.4% (5)
USA	19.8% (62)	11.0% (18)	15.0% (15)	28.6% (56)	6.0% (12)	32.7% (46)
Central S. America	1.8% (6)		0.3% (2)	1.0% (4)		
Australasia	4.6% (16)	20.0% (11)	1.7% (2)	6.7% (15)	4.0% (10)	0.1% (1)
Antarctic/Arctic	0.6% (3)		0.5% (2)			0.5% (3)
Europe country	8.0% (41)	13.5% (21)	20.6% (16)	6.2% (19)	21.0% (31)	8.6% (9)
Europe general	2.0% (1)	3.0% (1)		1.6% (1)	2.5% (5)	
General World	12.3% (37)	7.5% (4)	19.5% (18)	7.0% (14)	0.2% (1)	5.8% (13)
Iraq	14.4% (70)	18.0% (14)	18.1% (20)	14.8% (50)	25.0% (25)	14.4% (18)
Russia	0.9% (6)			1.6% (3)		1.0% (1)
Total	(399)	(105)	(109)	(230)	(139)	(140)

If we break the 2007 sample down still further, we find that the great majority of Sky's US-based stories (40 out of 46) are tabloid rather than broadsheet, covering celebrity (34), human interest (4) or entertainment (2). In other words, while Sky appears to spend a great deal of time reporting international news – over a third of its agenda overall – the nature of this coverage is primarily celebrity driven.

Elsewhere, Sky's international coverage did involve conventional broadsheet issues. So, for example, 30 of the 36 stories from Sky's other big international region – Asia – involved war and conflict (13), international terrorism (13) and disasters (4). Overall, however, Sky's international stories are significantly more tabloid in orientation: 38 percent being tabloid compared with only 17 percent on News 24. Indeed, if we exclude celebrity/human interest stories, even in 2007 News 24 actually covered slightly more international stories than Sky (90 stories compared to 86 on Sky).

If there is a faint whiff of 'Foxification' about Sky's US, tabloid orientation in international news, it is in the context of a commitment to international coverage shared by both channels. This commitment is notable because of the increasingly inward-looking focus of US news. The importance of foreign news was much discussed in the aftermath of 9/11, particularly in the USA where citizens tried to make sense of the terrorists' actions and their government's foreign policy-making. US commercial news outlets have long been accused of not informing citizens about the world beyond US shores (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Entman, 2004). One of the long-standing accusations is that US news is too insular and parochial, with international news always a secondary concern to domestic or regional news items. There are, of course, debates about the nature of foreign news coverage in the UK,⁷ but it undoubtedly has a continuing presence on both News 24 and Sky.

Sources

In our 2004 study we examined a total of 1713 on-screen sources on BBC News 24 and Sky News. We found the sources that dominate news came from a limited set of professions: specifically politics, business, the military, law and order and the media (see Table 6). This was most striking on News 24 where around half of all on-screen sources (54%) were from these spheres – compared to 44 per cent on Sky. In 2007⁸ we found that these professions still dominated. In 2007, politics, business, law and order (including the military) and the news media sources account for, between them, 55 percent of all sources on Sky News and 47 per cent on News 24.

Table 6 Percentage and number of on-screen sources (excluding sports) on BBC News 24 and Sky News

	News 24		Sky News	
	2004	2007	2004	2007
Military	2.0% (16)	2.9% (9)	5.7% (24)	12.1% (18)
Politics	30.6% (243)	18.8% (58)	20.8% (101)	20.1% (30)
Law and order	7.9% (63)	6.2% (19)	11.1% (54)	6.0% (9)
Business	6.7% (53)	15.6% (48)	6.4% (31)	7.4% (11)
Monarchy	0.8% (6)		0.8% (4)	
Religion	1.3% (10)	0.3% (1)	0.6% (3)	1.3% (2)
Academy	3.2% (25)	1.3% (4)	1.0% (5)	2.7% (4)
Media	7.2% (57)	3.2% (10)	4.5% (22)	9.4% (14)
Medical	3.7% (29)	6.8% (21)	1.0% (5)	1.3% (2)
Science/technology	1.8% (14)	1.3% (4)	0.2% (1)	0.7% (1)
Trade union	0.5% (4)	1.3% (4)		1.3% (2)
Think tank		1.3% (4)		0.7% (1)
Public	10.8% (86)	14.9% (46)	16.5% (80)	4.0% (6)
Friend/relative	3.7% (29)	3.2% (10)	5.6% (27)	8.7% (13)
Witness	8.3% (66)	2.9% (9)	8.4% (41)	5.4% (8)
Pressure group	4.8% (38)	7.5% (23)	3.7% (18)	6.7% (10)
Sport				
Showbiz	1.3% (10)	2.9% (9)	6.0% (29)	2.0% (3)
Terrorist group	1.0% (0.1%)			
NGO	0.8% (6)	1.9% (6)	0.8% (4)	3.4% (5)
Intelligence	1.9% (15)		1.0% (5)	2.0% (3)
Government agency	1.4% (11)	4.2% (13)	1.0% (5)	2.7% (4)
Not identified	0.4% (3)		0.6% (3)	0.7% (1)
Film/music clip	0.4% (3)		3.3% (16)	
Environment	0.5% (4)		0.4% (2)	
Other	0.1% (1)	3.2% (10)	1.2% (6)	1.3% (2)
Total	100% (793)	100% (308)	100% (486)	100% (149)

We can see, once again, a consistency of coverage with both channels regularly sourcing similar groups of elite professions, a dependence on 'primary definers' that has long been part of news gathering (Hall et al., 1978; Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1980) and which continues to be a feature across most news (Cushion et al., 2006). This point is conceded by a former head of BBC News, who acknowledged that: 'BBC journalism is magnificent in its range, carefulness, and resources, but it does tend towards an establishment view of the world' (Hargreaves, 2003: 27). Our findings show how this establishment focus is on powerful or 'newsworthy' professions, rather than on a wider range of expertise. In short, the emphasis is on those whose comments might

make the news rather than on those that might inform it. If we take the five knowledge-based professions (from the academy, medicine, science and technology, think tanks and government or public agencies), they make up, between them, a fairly small proportion of sources, especially on Sky (combined, these five areas on News 24 made up 10% of sources in 2004 and 15% in 2007, and on Sky 3% in 2004 and 8% in 2007).

However, since the trend (from 2004 to 2007) is towards a greater use of these information-rich sources, this cannot be linked to any notion of 'dumbing down'. For better or worse, knowledge-based professions have never been regarded as particularly newsworthy, regardless of John Birt's famous 'mission to explain' or John Lloyd's stress on the importance of 'having complexities explained: debates supported by information and analysis; and the problems, contradictions and disguises of public life made less opaque' (Lloyd, 2004:193).

It is worth noting one aspect of Sky's coverage: namely, the disparity in the use of military sources between the channels. Sky has a noticeably greater reliance on military sources: in 2004, 5.7 percent of all its sources were military, rising to 12.1 percent in 2007. This compares with News 24's 2 percent and 2.9 percent respectively (about the same time given to academics on News 24). Only politicians – at 20.1 percent – are sourced more on Sky News.

Even though military sources should not be assumed to be 'gung-ho', their very presence is likely to shape the boundaries of how international diplomacy stories are scrutinized and interpreted. Indeed, during the Iraq War in 2003, viewers of Sky News were much more likely to support the war than viewers of BBC, ITV or Channel 4 news (Lewis et al., 2006: 168), suggesting a perception that Sky was a more comfortable environment for war supporters. Moreover, interviews with military personnel and journalists suggest that Sky News is the military's broadcaster of choice (p. 90). What our figures suggest is that there may be a degree of reciprocation here. While there is no evidence that Sky's coverage of international conflict is as straightforwardly partisan as the Fox network, our data do perhaps suggest that the two channels share a sympathy with a pro-military view of the world.

We should, however, be careful not to overstate this. So, for example, while Fox's agenda combines a pro-military with a pro-business outlook, it is worth noting that in the 2007 sample it is the BBC who are much more dependent on business sources than Sky – and increasingly so (and while we might have once expected to see more attempt to balance these with trade union sources, neither channel does any more). In sum, while the focus on established 'primary definers' is very much business as usual, our findings indicate that News 24 increasingly looks to business while Sky favours the military.

Breaking news

We have suggested previously that, from the citizen's point of the view, it matters little who is actually 'first' to break news. The quality of information, analysis and context provided are far more useful and significant in the communication of information (Lewis et al., 2005; Lewis and Cushion, 2009). We also found that both channels often diverge in their treatment of 'breaking news' and suggested that the moniker 'breaking news' was overused, especially by Sky (Lewis et al., 2005). There is little in the two more recent samples to contradict this. Indeed, since 2004 both channels have significantly increased both the number of stories billed as 'breaking news' and the time they devote to them (Table 7). Given the scale of the increase it seems likely that this is, at least in part, due to the orientation of the channels and the branding of stories.

While the time devoted to such stories has increased on both channels, it is on News 24 that this is most marked, with an increase from 2.4 percent of news time in 2004 to 11 percent in 2007. By contrast, the proportion of breaking news stories on Sky reached its peak in 2005/6, although this may be because Sky is now using the moniker 'news alerts' (such as during a live press conference) for some stories which it used to designate as 'breaking news'. While there was a high number of breaking news stories on Sky News in the 2005/6 sample, this was partially inflated by its lengthy coverage of a few 'live' events.

Over the three samples, there remains little agreement about what constitutes a 'breaking news' story. This compares with otherwise fairly high levels of agreement about which stories to cover, as Table 1 indicated. In other words, when it comes to breaking news, there is much less sense of the channels having shared notions of 'news value'. This is, in part, because most stories branded as breaking news are simply developments in routine news reporting – such as a police statement or the latest development in a trial – rather than a genuine 'scoop' or a channel being the first on the scene of a major new story. Where the two channels go 'head to head', our sample suggests that the boast of being 'first' in breaking news means, in many cases, being the

Table 7 Percentage of time spent on breaking news items as a proportion of news time (including sport) overall on BBC News 24 and Sky News

	News 24			Sky News		
	2004	2005/6	2007	2004	2005/6	2007
Percentage of stories billed as breaking news	3.0%	11.0%	11.2%	4.5%	13.0%	11.0%
Percentage time on breaking news	2.4%	8.3%	11.0%	7.3%	21.4%	13.0%

first to process the press releases and news agency copy that come into the newsroom. We found very few instances of breaking news stories that were newsworthy enough to be reported on both channels but that were broken by the channel's own reporters. Most of the breaking news items we looked at were routine items that typically come from press agency or news releases (for a further analysis of breaking news, see Lewis and Cushion, 2009).

Even though both channels indulge in this practice, Sky News pays particular importance to marketing itself as being 'first with breaking news'.⁹ The moniker 'news alert' – a self-conscious attempt to inject a sense of excitement into news coverage – has more recently been adopted from Fox News. According to Morris, 'Fox News was first to develop more dynamic audio and visual presentations of the news' (2005: 60), and rivals CNN and MSNBC quickly followed suit. It does not require a great deal of cynicism to see both the 'breaking news' and 'news alert' tags partly as a branding exercise, designed to create the impression of pace and immediacy. This is not to say that journalists are not genuinely caught up in the desire 'to be first', but there is little evidence that this imperative is widely shared outside the profession.

In practical terms, since most people do not watch news channels waiting for news to break, the stress on breaking news or news alerts is far more about *perception* than a serious attempt to be informative. On the contrary, news channels are more likely to be used by audiences as a bulletin on tap – a way to 'catch up' on the news rather than to monitor breaking stories, making the race to be first irrelevant to most audiences most of the time. And since a focus on speed makes it much more difficult to put thought and effort into understanding a story's significance and explaining it well, the growth of breaking news might well be seen as a triumph of style at the expense of substance.

Language and style

Our case study of crime coverage of crime statistics, on a day when both the British Crime Survey and police statistics gave conflicting accounts of crime trends, tends to confirm the general impression that Sky News is more inclined to focus on drama, while BBC News 24 tends to be less inclined towards sensationalism.

This difference in emphasis can be seen in the coverage of the crime figures on 22 July 2004. Two sets of figures were released: one by the British Crime Survey (of 40,000 people) which showed crime levels continuing to *decrease*, and one from the police suggesting an *increase* in reported crime, and violent crime in particular. The Home Office explains the disparity by referring to

changes in the way police record crime, noting the increase in the reporting of crimes such as domestic violence. So how well did both channels explain the disparity between the two sets of figures, and how did they balance their reporting of them?

While BBC News 24 opens the story with the police figures, their introductions give roughly equal weight to both figures, with the caveat that the Home Office prefer the BCS figures:

Violent crime increased by 12% last year and offences overall went up by 1%. That's according to new figures recorded by the police. But the BCS which the Home Office regards as a more accurate measure suggests that both violent crime and crime in general has fallen, continuing a downward trend that started 9 years ago. (BBC News 24, 22 July 2004, 1pm)

BBC News 24 then gives roughly equal time to both sets of figures (30 seconds to the BCS and 32 seconds to the police), quoting one source favouring the police statistics. Sky also leads by giving both figures equal weight (although it gives incorrect details about the size of the British Crime Survey):

New crime figures out today suggest that crime could be going up, or down, depending on which set of statistics you choose to believe. Now one of them is from the BCS which asks some 10,000 adults about their experiences of crime whether they reported them or not. Now these are the statistics that the Government likes to use but then there's the actual number of crimes recorded by the police. (Sky News, 22 July 2004, 1pm)

However, in its subsequent reports, Sky gives *ten times* as much coverage to the police statistics (510 seconds, compared to the 50 seconds on the BCS), quotes six sources favouring the police figures and only one favouring the BCS. The disparities in coverage are detailed in Table 8, and show that BBC News 24 is much more balanced – and, as a consequence, less sensationalist – in its approach to the story. Sky, on the other hand, focuses on the more 'dramatic' story of crime increasing.

This might also have been a perfect opportunity to explain how the disparities between the two sets of figures was possible. However, little is done to enlighten the viewer, who is left with the impression that there are

Table 8 Amount of time spent (in seconds) and sources devoted to British Crime Survey vs police statistics on BBC News 24 and Sky News

	News 24		Sky News	
	Time	Sources	Time	Sources
BCS	30	0	50	1
Police	32	1	510	6

simply two conflicting sets of figures. Briefly, if News 24 viewers were left feeling confused, for Sky News viewers, the UK would appear to have become a more dangerous place. This, in turn, pushes public policy debates about crime towards frameworks that might encourage a more punitive response of (disproportionate) fear and punishment (cf. Muncie, 1999).

Keeping the Fox on the leash

Although there are strict impartiality laws in the UK, politicians and media commentators have expressed concern that news channels could, if regulation was relaxed, become more tabloid and sensationalist, and abandon public service values and a mission to explain and inform (Patten, 2003; Grade, 2005).

The data presented here suggest that, in many respects, BBC News 24 remains committed to the ideals of a public service news channel. It has a news agenda that is significantly more 'broadsheet' than 'tabloid', it covers a significant proportion of serious international stories, and it is capable of resisting the temptations of sensationalism in favour of a more balanced approach. While its preferred sources tend to be the usual suspects (politicians, business, law and order and the media themselves), this has long been the case with most news outlets – indeed, our data show signs that News 24 gave more time to 'information rich' sources in 2007 than in 2004. The one area where News 24 might be said to be falling under the spell of 'Foxification' is its increasing emphasis on 'breaking news'. The BBC channel appears to have followed Sky's lead in the liberal use of the 'breaking news' tag, caught between the journalistic high ground (which favours accuracy and analysis over speed) and the pressure to compete on Sky's terms.

By contrast, Sky News is more tabloid and sensationalist in orientation, does fewer serious international stories outside the USA, favours military sources, under-uses 'information rich' sources and has led the way in 'hyping' news with 'breaking news' and 'news alert' tags. We should not, however, overestimate the differences between Sky News and News 24. Sky is still more broadsheet than tabloid, and the differences between the channels are, in most cases, matters of degree. Indeed, it could be argued that our findings suggest that while there are echoes of the Fox style in Sky's coverage, the fact that its main competitor is a popular public service news provider acts as a restraint on 'Foxification'. In the USA, by contrast, all the main news providers are highly commercial enterprises where public service ideals are much weaker.

Moreover, the regulatory structures and traditions in the UK put clear limits on how far news channels can move in the Fox direction. While the US Federal Communications Commission in 1987 decided to suspend the 'Fairness Doctrine' – which required 'balanced' television news coverage – the UK has kept a tighter grip of its 'due impartiality' guidelines (OFCOM, 2003). The USA's decision was premised on the notion that regulatory freedom would mean greater freedom of speech, delivering investigative journalism. But, in truth, the suspension laid the foundation for more opinionated journalism, including right-wing radio hosts and, more recently, partisan presenters on rolling news channels (Conway et al., 2007). Broadcasters in the UK operate under much stricter guidelines: they must ensure that fact and opinion are clearly distinguishable with editorializing prohibited.¹⁰ How far this is achieved is a matter of debate (as we have seen, impartiality tends to be fairly narrowly applied to more traditional party political issues, and there is a long literature about various forms of institutional bias), but there is at least a regulatory standard with a corresponding journalistic tradition.

Nonetheless, in recent years, several reports into news coverage and audiences have suggested that the impartiality law should, in different ways, be lifted or at least relaxed (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002; Tambini and Cowling, 2002). Such recommendations are well intentioned: lifting the restrictions of impartiality, it is argued, could re-engage declining news audiences, particularly amongst young and ethnic minority audiences. It has been suggested that citizens are increasingly following 'politics' beyond mainstream party politics, whilst broadcasters, bound by law, remain glued to the actions of the big three political parties. In short, there appears to be a public service ethos behind the notion of relaxing impartiality, as news attempts to reflect and engage with the interests, concerns and anxieties of its viewers.

But there is also a fear that any relaxation of the law could trigger the beginning of the end for British journalism as we know it. This is certainly the view taken by Julian Petley, who has suggested that broadcast news – through shameless cross-promotion of other Murdoch-owned media – could quickly pursue news values similar to that of the popular right-wing newspaper, *The Sun*. He writes:

Consider the following scenario. Murdoch persuades Ofcom to relax the impartiality rules for a 'minority' news channel ... The 'minority' channel, greatly aided by ruthless cross-promotion in the other Murdoch media (including, perhaps, Channel 5) starts to grow ... Other channels decide that there's profit in populism, and follow suit ... Soon the terrestrial broadcasters find themselves under attack for being overly 'liberal', not only by the right-wing press but now

by right-wing television channels as well. They become increasingly defensive – and thus, ineluctably, broadcasting in the UK falls prey to exactly the same process of ‘Foxification’ that Murdoch has so successfully initiated in the States. (Petley, 2004)

In 2007, regulators in the UK (OFCOM) published a report, *New News, Future News*, which resisted recommending any relaxation of impartiality guidelines. But in a digital environment, they warned, this might be ‘less enforceable’ as ‘regulated and unregulated services exist side by side on the same platform’ (2007: 71). The report found that public support for impartiality remained high although trust in news had declined in recent years. An ITC study found that 71 percent of the British public supported the principle that impartiality in news was very important, and 91 percent agreed impartiality regulations are a good thing (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002). This is demonstrated at newsworthy times, such as the war in Iraq in 2003, when viewers tuned to the BBC because they trusted the long-established history of its public service remit. Even during the Hutton debacle, the BBC remained the most trusted news source in the UK (Lewis et al., 2004: 33).

To gain a greater market share, Rupert Murdoch has recently suggested that Sky News should become more like Fox News to provide a ‘proper alternative to the BBC’ (cited in Gibson, 2007). Indeed, the former head of Sky News, Nick Pollard, has often been credited with resisting any Fox-like conversion (Wells and O’Carroll, 2006). As part of a multi-million re-launch on 24 October 2005, Sky launched a new feature – *World News Tonight* with James Rubin (a former Democrat assistant chief spokesman for the State department) – which was billed as an ‘hour of analysis and context’ broadcast weeknights between 8pm and 9pm (Graff, 2005). Just three months after the re-launch, however, Sky was reviewing its programming because of low ratings (Timnings, 2006). It was announced in May 2006 that Nick Pollard, who was in charge for over 10 years, would step down four months later. The drive to increase ratings had failed, with Sky News’s weekly reach falling from 4.6m in 2005 to 4m in 2006. BBC News 24, by contrast, increased its average reach from 5m to 6m (Wells and O’Carroll, 2006). Assessing exactly *why* viewers have, in the last couple of years, shifted from Sky to BBC News 24 is beyond the scope of this article. What we can refer to is the historic importance – perhaps stretching back from Second World War coverage to the more recent war in Iraq – placed by the British public in trustworthy television news (a relationship the BBC has cultivated over many years). A recent survey revealed that 85 percent of the public trust television news, compared to just a third in the USA (cited in Wells, 2004). We would argue this is very much informed by the strict impartiality laws that prohibit news outlets from significantly breaching viewers’ trust. Indeed, a poll in 2008 indicated that Americans would favour

more balanced television news, leading to speculation that the new American president, Barack Obama, might reintroduce the Fairness Act (Preston, 2008).

In sum, there are certainly some signs of 'Foxification' in our findings – moments when sensationalism can create misunderstanding and style trumps substance – as well as trends that run counter to 'Foxification' (such as the increased use of information-rich sources). But, overall, we would argue against the notion that Sky News is the British version of Fox News, or that there is a general 'Foxification' on British news channels. The presence of a public service broadcaster and an overarching PSB regulatory framework appears to provide a benchmark that has helped maintain journalistic standards. In this context, any relaxation of the UK's impartiality guidelines *may* simply be irrelevant in the face of public preferences. But weakening the regulatory framework is, nonetheless, a risk, and the freedom to embrace a 'Foxification' agenda might be too much for a Murdoch channel to resist. The differences between Fox and Sky, we would argue, are a product of the different broadcasting ecologies in the USA and the UK, and any shift towards the US regulatory structure will have negative consequences on the quality of British broadcast journalism.

Notes

- 1 In *Plan of Attack* (2004), Woodward writes: 'Roger Ailes, former media guru for Bush's father, had a message, Rove told the president. It had to be confidential because Ailes, a flamboyant and irreverent media executive, was currently the head of Fox News, the conservative leaning television cable network that was enjoying high ratings. In that position, Ailes was not supposed to be giving political advice. His back-channel message: The American public would tolerate waiting and would be patient, but only as long as they were convinced that Bush was using the harshest measures possible. Support would dissipate if the public did not see Bush acting harshly.'
- 2 Our unit of analysis was a news item or segment, such as a report on location, a two-way or a studio interview. While news items often constitute a whole news story, a story might include several news items.
- 3 In some of our analysis, where indicated, we exclude sports packages.
- 4 This involves stories about celebrity, crime (individual), entertainment, human interest, monarchy and sport (when sport is not excluded).
- 5 While we do see a small drop in the percentage of broadsheet stories after 2004, this is not sustained over the period.
- 6 Our 2004 sample involved a period with a high proportion of international stories. The subsequent levels of coverage may be more typical.
- 7 See, for example, Philo and Berry, 2004; Lewis et al., 2006.
- 8 The 2005/6 content analysis did not include counting sources.
- 9 Sky's coverage, unlike News 24, features a 'First with breaking news' graphic regularly and can be seen in front of the desk where the anchors sit.

- 10 See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/undue> for OFCOM's broadcasting code relating to 'Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions'.

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Appendix

Intercoder reliability test

	Percentage of inter-coder reliability
Type of report	98.0%
Story subject	98.7%
Story/location	96.7%
Breaking news	97.7%

Note: We re-coded 12 hours of television news (over 300 news items) to ensure that each coder had interpreted the data in the same way. This table indicates a high level of agreement in *all* categories.