

Assessing the Delivery of BBC Radio 5 Live's Public Service Commitments

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Executive Summary

- BBC Radio 5 Live does not meet its licensing requirement that 75% of its annual broadcast output should consist of news and current affairs programming.
- The BBC's assertion that it does comply depends on the categorisation as news/current affairs of substantial quantities of output that cannot properly be so described.
- The BBC's freedom to miscategorise material relies on the absence of an agreed formal definition of what constitutes news.
- The BBC appears to define as news content including: promotional trails for future output; promotional trails for Radio 5 Live podcasts; repetition of recorded items; infotainment, sports coverage and interviews extended beyond the duration required to examine any news/current affairs topic.
- The blending of news and sport content in programmes scheduled as news output blurs a critical distinction and erects a barrier to precise measurement of performance against commitments.
- Senior BBC News editors and correspondents are largely absent from Radio 5 Live broadcasts.
- Ofcom licensing requirements for BBC Radio 5 Live are less prescriptive than were the regulatory requirements imposed on the station by the BBC Trust.
- BBC Radio 5 Live's commitment to breaking news, investigative journalism and high-quality journalism has diminished since it became subject to Ofcom licensing requirements.

Introduction

At launch, on Monday, 28 March 1994, Radio 5 Live became the British Broadcasting Corporation's first and only rolling news service. Encouraged by factors including the launch in 1989 of the 24-hour Sky News channel, the success during the 1991 Gulf War of Radio 4's News FM service and the achievements of overseas stations including CNN and France Info,ⁱ the BBC had concluded that it must have a dedicated news channel of its own. As Hugh Chignell explains: 'The argument for a rolling news service, at least one that could respond immediately and at length to breaking news stories, had been pursued within the BBC since the arrival of commercial radio in 1973.'ⁱⁱ The Corporation's initial plans were based on the experiment it had conducted during the 1991 Gulf War. During this conflict, it launched a rolling news service on Radio 4's FM frequency, filling the schedule between that channel's established news programmes (Today, World at One, PM and The World Tonight) with reports from the conflict zone and analysis of the six-week-long campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. 'Scud FM', as the service was affectionately known, was deemed to have been a success and the tactic of splitting Radio 4's frequencies appeared straightforward. Indeed, in July 1992, the BBC announced that it would create a rolling news channel on Radio 4's long-wave frequency. However, Radio 4 listeners were instantly incensed by this threat to their cherished channel and protested vehemently. The BBC bowed to this most vocal and influential body of public opinion and devised a different solution: it would close BBC Radio 5 and use its medium-wave frequencies. Internally, this was not an unpopular decision. The original Radio 5 was, in Hugh Chignell's words,

‘something of an anomaly among the BBC radio networks [which] featured an odd variety of programming: sport, schools broadcasts, the Open University and some World Service’.ⁱⁱⁱ David Hendy, Professor of Media and Cultural History at the University of Sussex has described the hybrid station as ‘a warehouse for storing all the material that had fallen out of the other networks’.^{iv} Its listeners certainly lacked the political influence of their counterparts at Radio 4.

The accident of its birth would ensure that Radio 5 Live was a news channel with a difference. From launch, it maintained the commitment to sports journalism it had inherited – together with its AM transmission frequencies – from the original BBC Radio 5. ‘The genius of this solution,’ explains Hugh Chignell, ‘was that it would create an audience different from the audience for Radio 4 both in age (on average 5 Live listeners were much younger) and in social class (towards the lower end of the socio-economic scale).’^v In its first manifestation, there was, however, a gap between Radio 5 Live’s demotic ambitions and the real nature of its output. Jenny Abramsky, the launch controller, had built her career at Radio 4 as editor of programmes, including the flagship *Today*, and she was not prepared to abandon her editorial ideals. One former colleague recalls ‘her noisy despair about a programme in the early days of the network that had not given enough attention to the election results of a former Soviet republic’.^{vi} Abramsky ensured that 5 Live enjoyed privileged access to the BBC’s newsgathering resources and, at the Sony Radio Awards in April 1995, her dedication to hard news was rewarded. The station won Gold in the ‘Response to a News Event’ category for its coverage of the IRA ceasefire announcement on 31 August 1994. Thus, within a year of launch, a reputation for fast, accurate coverage of breaking news was secured.

But the BBC’s desire for a different audience soon reasserted itself. Radio 5 Live had originally been conceived as a ‘populist news and sport network’^{vii} and its second controller (1997-99), Roger Mosey, like Abramsky a former editor of BBC Radio 4’s *Today*, took the helm with a clear view of what this meant: ‘even though 5 Live had its commitment to news, it was sport that defined it and won the biggest audiences’.^{viii} Mosey chose

to increase the station's emphasis on sport and, to confirm that he had the Director General's support, he raised the issue directly with John Birt (DG 1992-2000). Mosey explains: 'There had been a small and relatively dull development in the Northern Ireland peace process, and England had won a key World Cup qualifier. 5 Live's news had dutifully led on Ireland, but I suggested to John that a coherent news and sport network might put the football first as a way of attracting people into the station's news programming while still paying Northern Ireland due attention a little lower down the running order.'^{ix} Mosey revised the station's schedule to reflect this rebalancing of output. Nevertheless, 5 Live retained full access to the Corporation's senior correspondents in the UK and abroad and a team of dedicated reporters of its own based in BBC bureaux throughout the UK. These resources helped it to maintain a comprehensive news service. However, criticism of the station's tone and content began to emerge.

Even before launch, its declared commitment to sport and populism had earned for 5 Live the nickname 'Radio Bloke'.^x Later, as the BBC concentrated greater resources around its television news channel, BBC News 24 (launched in 1997, now BBC News Channel), and its website, senior BBC journalists briefed media correspondents that 5 Live's commitment to hard news was being diluted. They explained that BBC managers were determined to reformulate the station as a sport and chat station capable of winning listeners from commercial talk radio. In 2007, a BBC journalist told *The Independent on Sunday*: '5 Live has undergone an internal revolution. It is no longer a news station. Managers define it as "sport and talk".' Another senior BBC employee explained: 'I can list correspondents who have not appeared on 5 Live for a year. It is not on their radar. Many programmes have abandoned serious news.'^{xi} The BBC responded to this criticism in a blog on its website. It argued that Radio 5 Live had indeed changed since launch, but 'still has at its heart a wish to reach an audience that much of the BBC finds it hard to reach – a non-metropolitan, diverse, working-class audience; not so much middle England as ordinary Britain. How do we try to do that? It's always been about accessible journalism, and about tone and style.'^{xii}

Radio 5 Live's current controller, Jonathan Wall, differs from the station's earliest leaders in one respect: his experience is predominantly in sports journalism, not hard news or current affairs. Wall began his career at Radio Humberside before transferring to BBC Sport. He later moved to the post of Editor, 5 Live Sport where he supervised output including the Olympic Games, Wimbledon, and World Cup finals in Germany and Japan/South Korea.^{xiii} He became Deputy Controller and Commissioning Editor, Radio 5 Live, in 2008 and Controller in February 2013 when he replaced Adrian Van Klaveren, a former Head of BBC Newsgathering and Deputy Head of BBC News.^{xiv} Wall has made clear his determination to secure 5 Live's market share.^{xv}

From BBC Trust to Ofcom

Twenty-four years since the launch of Radio 5 Live, the BBC describes as its primary public purpose the duty to ‘provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them’.^{xvi} It explains that: ‘The BBC has no more important purpose than to inform. All citizens have a stake in the news. In a democracy, it is an essential public service. Every member of the public needs access to reliable information in order to understand the world around them and to make decisions for themselves, their communities, their countries and their shared future.’^{xvii} The Corporation presents 5 Live’s broadcast output as an important contribution towards its fulfilment of this duty.

Under the BBC Trust Service Licence Conditions, against which the Corporation assessed its own performance, until Ofcom’s operating licence came into effect on 1 January 2018,^{xviii} the BBC promised that around 75% of 5 Live’s output would be news coverage.^{xix} Radio 5 Live’s Service Licence also explained that:

The remit of BBC Radio 5 Live is to provide live news and sports coverage. It should be BBC Radio’s main outlet for breaking news by bringing its audience major news stories as they happen. It should provide context to its news and sports coverage through wide-ranging analysis and discussion.^{xx}

The BBC Trust gave additional guidance concerning the tone, style and reach it expected 5 Live to achieve. The service should be ‘accessible’ and it should ‘encourage listeners to interact ...

via phone-ins, text-messages and email'.^{xxi} The Trust was clear about the range of news it expected to hear:

Much of BBC Radio 5 Live should be broadcast live and the station should respond to events as they happen. It should seek to blend its news and sports programming in ways that help to draw in a broad range of listeners.

BBC Radio 5 Live should cover UK and international news and should regularly offer news from across the UK. The service should give a broader perspective on current affairs through original and investigative journalism.^{xxii}

The BBC Trust also required that news and current affairs should be dominant during 5 Live's peak listening hours:

The weekday peak hours at breakfast and evening drivetime should comprise high-quality news programming covering the main news agenda of the day.^{xxiii}

Finally, under the regime imposed by the Trust, 5 Live was required to ensure that:

All 5 Live news programmes should clearly reflect the BBC's mission to provide the best journalism in the world.

It should make use of its flexible live schedule to offer instant access to breaking news and become a rolling news service whenever appropriate. It should analyse news stories, provide context and give listeners a broad range of perspectives.

It should cover all aspects of UK politics and aim to make politics and the political process engaging and understandable to a diverse audience. There should be extensive coverage of local, general, and European elections, and of elections to the UK's devolved chambers, as well as regular coverage of European and international politics. It should also report business news in an accessible and engaging manner.

Regular in-depth analysis, documentaries and specials should be used to bring original stories to air and provide

This final version of the BBC Trust's Service Licence contained several clauses that were carefully constructed not just to describe what 5 Live should do, but also to recognise explicitly what it in fact did. Hence, the blending of news and sport content was specifically encouraged. We note, however, that no explanation was offered as to how regulators or listeners were expected to distinguish between news content and sport content. Indeed, it appears that listeners were not expected to make such a distinction. Radio 5 Live's substantial audience of sports enthusiasts – most notable among them the football supporters – were to be offered an enticing and rewarding diet. This absence of clear and emphatic definition reduced the capacity for proper and effective oversight. By permitting blending of news and sport, the BBC Trust deviated from a common-sense understanding of what a 75% news station should transmit. In so doing, it left a legacy challenge for any independent regulator determined to hold 5 Live to its commitment to dedicate a defined proportion of its output to news and current affairs.

Of course, the BBC preferred to retain power to regulate its own services, but on 1 January 2018, when Ofcom assumed responsibility for enforcing regulatory compliance at the Corporation, the BBC Trust's regulatory requirements were replaced by less extensive formal Operating Licence Conditions. On issuing to the BBC its first licence to operate UK public services, the national communications regulator enshrined the BBC's pledge to provide reliable, impartial news as a requirement against which it would gauge the BBC's compliance. It also imposed two specific standards relating to Radio 5 Live. These are that:

- a) at least 75% of 5 Live's output in each financial year must be news and current affairs programming; and
- b) 5 Live must offer extensive coverage of local and general elections, and of elections to the United Kingdom's devolved chambers as well as regular coverage of European and international politics.^{xxv}

We note that these requirements are less stringent than those previously imposed on 5 Live by the BBC Trust. They do not require live coverage of breaking news. They make no explicit demand for international news. They do not mention original or investigative journalism. Finally, they omit the ‘blending of news and sport’. This omission is significant. It may reflect a convenient absence of interpretative detail negotiated to make the 75% commitment less exacting and judgement of adherence to it a topic reserved for discussion between the BBC and its regulator. That would suggest a regrettable lack of transparency. We take it to imply an emphatic distinction between news and current affairs and sport, in which news must make up 75% of Radio 5 Live’s output, leaving the remaining 25% for sport. A composite 5 Live daily schedule roughly reflects this split, with sports bulletins and summaries broadcast on the hour and half hour throughout the news schedule and between 12.5% (three hours) and 20.83% (five hours) allocated to 5 Live Sport on weekdays, 41.66% (ten hours) on Saturdays and 33.33% (eight hours) on Sundays.

The BBC says it is exceeding its licensing requirements. The Corporation’s Annual Report for 2017/18 records that 76% of 5 Live’s output in the latest financial year was news coverage and that the station fulfilled its obligation to cover local and general elections.^{xxvi} It does not explain how it calculated the 76% figure. In its first Annual Report on the BBC, Ofcom offers a different analysis, noting that ‘in a typical week, 86% of weekday output on 5 Live was news and current affairs programming’.^{xxvii} So, the BBC continues to present 5 Live as a key source of news, but it is not clear that 5 Live listeners agree with this assessment. In its annual survey of news consumption, Ofcom offers detailed quantitative and qualitative assessment of the sources from which Britons obtain news. The Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2018 identifies the top twenty news sources used by British adults. In a list dominated by television and online news providers, the highest ranking radio station, BBC Radio 2, appears in twelfth place with 12% of respondents identifying it as their favourite source of news. BBC Radio 4 ranks fourteenth with 10% and BBC Radio 1 secures eighteenth place in the list with 9% identifying it as their preferred source of news. BBC Radio 5 Live does not

feature in the top twenty.^{xxviii} Indeed, in a list led by BBC One television news (first) and ITV News (second), it appears to be less widely used as a source of news than Facebook (third), Twitter (ninth), the *Metro* newspaper (seventeenth) and *The Sun* (nineteenth). This reinforces an impression that was clearly identified in Ofcom's survey of news consumption in the UK in 2016: listeners do not regard 5 Live primarily as a news station. Asked by the regulator to identify which radio stations 'you use for news nowadays': 26% identified BBC Radio 2; 26%, BBC Radio 4; 16% said BBC Radio 1; 10%, Heart; 9%, Capital; and 8%, BBC Radio 5 Live.^{xxix} In a list dominated by BBC network radio stations, 5 Live's status as a source of news was ranked behind BBC and commercial stations which do not describe themselves as dedicated news stations.

Defining News

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether Radio 5 Live is really meeting the requirement to make 75% of its output news and current affairs. Despite the BBC's confident assertion that it is, this is not a straightforward task. The BBC offers no explanation of the methodology by which it concludes that 76% of 5 Live's output is news and current affairs. Responses to Ofcom's survey of news consumption at least suggest that many 5 Live listeners tune to the station in order to hear speech output that they do not categorise as news. However, the listeners' perceptions alone do not mean that 5 Live is failing to broadcast news. In order to test that conclusion, one must first define precisely what news is. To this the BBC offers a clear and direct answer in a short video for school children hosted on the BBC Academy's website. Presented by BBC Newsreader Huw Edwards, it explains that news is 'something that is new'; it is something that 'people want to know about

or need to know about'. Edwards explains that the BBC offers a variety of types of news 'depending on the particular type of audience'. He advises that the diversity of possible audiences means that 'almost everything could be a news story', and that final choices are made by journalists who meet daily 'to decide what is news'.^{xxx} As a description of the process by which news programmes are made, this is valuable. For a listener, regulator or competitor seeking to determine whether the BBC is delivering on its promises, it is less helpful.

The BBC News Style Guide offers precision on accuracy, fairness and impartiality.^{xxxi} It is equally emphatic about grammar, punctuation and spelling.^{xxxii} It explains that reporters should not use 'good news' or 'bad news' as blanket terms and advises that 'the safest approach is simply to say what has happened'.^{xxxiii} It explores fake news and advises how to identify it.^{xxxiv} In common with other news providers, it does not define exactly what constitutes news beyond the convenient argument that news is what journalists choose to report. The circularity of this definition, and the fact that the Corporation and its competitors routinely deploy 'news' and 'current affairs' as if they are common-sense terms and universally understood raises obvious difficulties for those who wish to measure news provision against commitments: how can we assess whether the BBC is delivering the supply of news it has promised to deliver if we cannot distinguish news from other types of factual or speech-based programming? Fortunately, the language the BBC uses to describe its dedication to news offers additional guidance.

Since the emergence of representative democracy in economically liberal nation states, liberal fourth estate theory has recognised journalism as a servant of the public sphere, the realm in which citizens engage in critical debate about the practices of government and the state. It has rejected the Marxist-inspired notion that news is nothing more than a commodity to be sold for profit and has instead celebrated journalism's ability to expose wrongdoing and to keep power honest by performing 'a watchdog function, investigating public officials to be sure that they are not betraying the

public trust'.^{xxxv} It has pledged to defend democracy and civil rights. News journalism as a crucial asset, intrinsic to the efficient functioning of orderly democratic societies, is surely the version to which the BBC refers when it identifies its primary public purpose as providing 'impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them'.^{xxxvi} The Corporation's commitment to news provision as a service essential to democracy has been central to its mission since the General Strike of 1926, when, as Michael Tracey describes, the fledgling BBC 'became overnight the single most important source of national news'.^{xxxvii} Its distinctive funding system has been designed to give it unique power to inform citizens without fear or favour. It has neither shareholders to demand profits, nor advertisers to urge caution. So, we suggest that the BBC regards news as a social good which, by bringing new information to light, can bring about virtuous consequences.

Academics recognise this version of news and, crucially, we have criteria against which we can assess whether it is being delivered. Our basic definition of news is taken from the work of Professors Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan. Zelizer is Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. Allan is Head of the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. They define news as 'new information about an event or issue'^{xxxviii} and current affairs as 'issue-centred, and thereby less events-driven in its approach to covering public life than hard news journalism'.^{xxxix} Further detailed criteria have been best identified by Michael Schudson, Professor of Journalism in the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. Schudson identifies seven 'primary functions that news has served or can serve in a democracy'.^{xl} These include:

1. information: the news media can provide fair and full information so citizens can make sound political choices;
2. investigation: the news media can investigate concentrated sources of power, particularly governmental power;

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3. analysis: the news media can provide coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world;
 4. social empathy: journalism can tell people about others in their society and their world so that they can come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves;
 5. public forum: journalism can provide a forum for dialogue among citizens and serve as a common carrier of the perspectives of varied groups in society;
 6. mobilisation: the news media can serve as advocates for particular political programmes and perspectives and mobilise people to act in support of these programs; and
 7. publicising representative democracy.

The only one of these criteria to which the BBC might reasonably object is mobilisation. At first sight this might appear to contradict Ofcom's requirement that British broadcasters maintain strict political impartiality and balance. However, it is plainly the case that the BBC, in common with other British broadcasters, does frequently draw attention to political ideas and perspectives. Equally clearly, it does not endorse them. Additionally, given the BBC's core values to 'inform, educate and entertain', it should be acknowledged that the endeavour of informing the public frequently involves packaging and presenting content in entertaining or humorous ways. Whilst this is not made explicit in Schudson's criteria, the processes of presenting news content in entertaining or light-hearted ways have been widely understood by academics as essential ingredients in the production of news. Thus, in acknowledging the BBC's commitment to entertaining its audiences, we shall add an eighth criterion. This we take from the work of Tony Harcup, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Sheffield, and Deirdre O'Neill, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Huddersfield. It is 'human interest' – news that might constitute an 'unfolding drama' or offer 'opportunities for humorous treatment'.^{xli} In so doing, though, we seek to follow their distinction between stories

that conform to the notion of informing the public whilst being presented in an entertaining way and content which is entertaining but has no informative basis. So, it is possible to monitor the BBC's performance against these criteria while recognising the distinctive requirements of Britain's regulatory system.

Methodology

To test Radio 5 Live's news output against these criteria, we applied a well-established methodology: content analysis involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches.^{xlii} Senior members of our research team have used these techniques extensively in their published work for peer-reviewed journals.^{xliii} We listened to 115 hours and two minutes of 5 Live journalism broadcast between February and October 2018. We listened in teams of two, regularly swapping partners to avoid shared assumptions and confirmation bias. Using our tailored research form (Annex A), each team logged every item broadcast (e.g., news bulletin, summary, correspondent/reporter two-way, interview, clip sequence, programme trail etc.) by date and time of transmission, title of the programme during which it was broadcast and item duration. Applying our definitions of news and current affairs, our researchers classified each item according to whether it did or did not qualify as news. Every initial decision was recorded using a code in which 'N' stood for 'News', 'A' for 'Anomalous', i.e., not news, and 'A/N' for items which began as news but morphed into anomalies during transmission. Items classified A/N were further analysed and allocated to the binary categories in appropriate proportions, e.g., 50%/50%, 60%/40% or 70%/30%. All initial classifications were discussed and analysed by the entire research team before final categorisation was agreed. Our approach was

designed to generate sufficient data to permit the creation of a representative composite weekday of 5 Live news output and a representative composite weekend of such coverage. These composites permit calculation of the proportion of news and current affairs output transmitted by 5 Live during a typical week and thus allow us to measure 5 Live's actual performance against the requirements of its Operating Licence Conditions during financial year 2018. We note that in its first annual report on the BBC, published on 25 October 2018, the regulator concluded that Radio 5 Live met its obligation to provide extensive coverage of elections.^{xliv} Ofcom offered no conclusion about the 75% quota. We hope that our research can assist future deliberations on this topic.

Phase One

Our listening was conducted in four phases. In phase one we listened to three complete days of non-sport output broadcast on BBC Radio 5 Live between 26 February and 2 March 2018. Our objectives during this initial phase were:

- to identify anomalous items according to our methodology;
- to conduct preliminary analysis of the proportion of news to anomalous material in a range of 5 Live's news output;
- to assess 5 Live's news values across a representative sample of output; and
- to refine our methodology in preparation for subsequent phases of our investigation.

Findings in Phase One

Our quantitative findings in phase one appear below:

Date	Total duration of output	Duration anomalous content	Percentage anomalous content
26 February 2018	75,600 secs	15,799 secs	20.89%
28 February 2018	72,000 secs	16,866 secs	23.42%
2 March 2018	72,000 secs	13,471 secs	18.71%

In phase one we studied 5 Live's news values and news content. It quickly became apparent that the BBC no longer considers 5 Live to be its primary radio news outlet or even a primary news outlet. The channel's daytime news agenda was narrow and primetime programmes such as Breakfast and Drive focused on a limited range of stories that were repeated frequently. News coverage was punctuated by frequent extended trails for future news and sports programmes, promotions for BBC podcasts and extensive padding by presenters. Original content was stretched to extended durations and frequently punctuated by presenter chat, including personal anecdotes. Such content was repeated within programmes and throughout the schedule.

No emphatic distinction was drawn between news/current affairs stories and sports stories. Radio 5 Live's news programmes contained news bulletins or summaries and sports bulletins or summaries every half hour. However, this segregation of news from sport was not sustained outside these fixed slots. Sports personalities, such as footballers, Olympic athletes and former footballers working as commentators and analysts for the BBC, appeared frequently as interviewees in prime slots within news programmes. To this extent, 5 Live treated sports interviews, stories and controversies as news items when they appeared in scheduled news programmes. However, given that the station treats sport as a separate category of content in its published schedules, we noted that this approach to sports stories – the BBC refers to it as *blending*^{xlv} – creates a risk of double counting against commitments.

Ofcom requires BBC Radio 5 Live to provide ‘extensive coverage of local and general elections, and of elections to the United Kingdom’s devolved chambers as well as regular coverage of European and international politics’. Radio 5 Live appeared determined to fulfil this commitment, perhaps even at the expense of listener interest. During this phase of our research, it broadcast, in full, speeches describing Brexit policy by both Jeremy Corbyn in Coventry (10.48 until 11.36 on 26 February) and Theresa May at the Mansion House in London (13.42 until 14.30 on 2 March). Such unmediated transmission of political speeches was abandoned by British newspapers in the late nineteenth century,^{xlvi} and it seemed unlikely that many of 5 Live’s audience listened to the entirety of either speech. Subsequent analysis for 5 Live by BBC political correspondents was livelier and more succinct. We questioned whether such commitment to unmediated transmission reflected concern about fulfilling the 75% news commitment.

Beyond politics, the remaining news agenda was dominated by consumer, sport, entertainment and human interest stories. High-profile BBC editors, such as the Corporation’s political, economics and world affairs editors, rarely contributed to the channel. When their voices were heard, it was often via clips recycled from BBC television or BBC Radio 4. Original news reporting for 5 Live was carried out by a small team of dedicated reporters reinforced on occasion by junior BBC correspondents. The limited number of dedicated reporters led to frequent repetition which became additionally apparent during extended listening.

Use of Presenters

We noted that 5 Live’s news schedule appeared to depend heavily on the ability of presenters, deployed as personalities, to fill airtime with entertaining chat including personal anecdotes (e.g., 26 February 2018, Nicky Campbell describing an accident which befell him in Aberdeen when he was an undergraduate student). Presenters of primetime 5 Live shows such as Breakfast and Drive took responsibility for summarising and commenting on news. This requirement

to interpret and comment on news stories helps to project key 5 Live presenters as characters, not simply as journalists. The impression is reinforced when the male/female presenter pairings on Breakfast and Drive collaborate to interview guests jointly. This collaborative approach turns an interview into a broader conversation. Sometimes it moves extended interviews away from the news/current affairs story to which they were initially pegged. When such drift occurs, it can turn an item that was initially identifiable as a news/current affairs story into something more anomalous. Our initial listening suggests that, on Radio 5 Live, such anomalous items take two broad forms:

- items which are conceived for purposes other than conveying ‘new information about an event or issue’^{xlvi} and are intended only to entertain or amuse (infotainment);^{xlvii} and
- items which are conceived as news but presented in such a way as to rapidly obscure the original intention and to focus primarily on entertaining or amusing.

Phase Two

In phase two we conducted intense analysis of shows identified in 5 Live’s schedule as news output in which we had identified significant proportions of content that was not, in fact, news. These included editions of Up All Night, Afternoon Edition, Phil Williams, Breakfast and Drive broadcast on Tuesday, 22 May and Thursday, 24 May 2018. Radio 5 Live offered a conventional schedule of news output on these dates. However, the programmes broadcast on 22 May were dominated by intensive coverage of the first anniversary of the terrorist bombing of the Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena on 22 May 2017. This focus afforded an

opportunity to explore in detail 5 Live's news priorities and to identify explicit examples of the anomalous phenomena identified above. It raised questions about the endurance of 5 Live's historic commitments that its 'weekday peak hours at breakfast and evening drivetime should comprise high-quality news programming covering the main news agenda of the day' and that the station should be 'BBC Radio's main outlet for breaking news'.^{xlix}

As in phase one we divided into two teams of researchers. To guard against shared assumptions and confirmation bias, we swapped research partners. Each research team tested each item transmitted in fifteen hours and 32 minutes of live broadcasting according to our methodology and against Ofcom's requirements. Our analysis deepened our understanding and produced valuable qualitative and quantitative findings. To our initial findings, we added: the replacement of news on 5 Live by infotainment; a narrow news agenda which ignores significant stories and issues in order to focus on human interest at the expense of evidence-based reporting and analysis; absence of high-level sources, and unchallenging interviews which appeared to be designed to explore the interviewee's emotional experience rather than their knowledge or understanding.

Findings in Phase Two

We identified the following percentages of non-news content per programme:

Programme	TX date	Programme duration	Duration non-news	Percentage non-news
Up All Night	22/5/18	14,400 secs	5,393.25 secs	37.45%
Breakfast	22/5/18	10,800 secs	3,628.50 secs	33.59%
Afternoon Edition	22/5/18	10,800 secs	2,675.50 secs	24.77%
Drive	24/5/18	10,800 secs	3,211.75 secs	29.74%
Phil Williams	22/5/18	9,120 secs	6,297.00 secs	69.04%

Our listening in this phase suggested that 5 Live has narrowed its news agenda and adopted a diet of sport and talk that

may be only loosely linked to news events. The absence from its output of the BBC's senior editors and correspondents reinforced our impression that the BBC no longer treats 5 Live as one of its principal outlets for breaking news and news analysis. In all of our listening in phase two, we heard no original contributions to 5 Live from any of the following: John Simpson, World Affairs Editor; Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent; Katya Adler, Europe Correspondent; Hugh Schofield, Paris Correspondent; Sarah Smith, Scotland Correspondent; Laura Kuenssberg, Political Editor; Hugh Pym, Health Editor; Clive Coleman, Legal Affairs Editor; Mark Easton, Home Affairs Editor; Frank Gardner, Security Editor; Jonathan Beale, Defence Editor; Kamal Ahmed, Economics Editor; or Gavin Hewitt, Chief News Correspondent.

Similarly, the absence from 5 Live's output of senior political sources was starkly apparent. Only two political figures of any stature appeared as live sources throughout our listening. One was Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, the other, Dr Sarah Wollaston, chair of the House of Commons Health Select Committee. The elected mayor of Liverpool also appeared on a clip courtesy of BBC Radio Merseyside. No cabinet ministers, or indeed any government ministers, appeared. Nor did any members of the shadow cabinet or any members of frontbench teams for other significant political parties.

Such guests and senior correspondents appear frequently on BBC Radio 4, which Ofcom demonstrates attracts 25% of listeners who use radio stations as a source of news.ⁱ Ofcom's analysis demonstrates that 5 Live attracts only 8% of listeners who use radio for news, a substantially smaller proportion of news listeners than BBC Radio 2 (26%), BBC Radio 1 (16%) Heart (10%) and Capital (9%).ⁱⁱ Our research in this phase suggests that 5 Live's schedule is designed on the assumption that the majority of listeners are not primarily attracted to the station by news content. This was consistently reinforced through the choice of call-in topics which were dominated by sport (e.g., 24 May 2018, Liverpool fans stranded in Kiev by

cancelled flights) or, as was confirmed in a subsequent phase of our listening, novelty items (e.g., 15 September 2018, are red peppers the ripened version of green peppers?). When presenters offered their listeners a choice of call-in topics – e.g., 19 September 2018, when Anna Foster asked for reaction to **either** Theresa May’s social housing plans **or** Vince Cable’s misspoken “exotic spresm” comment^{lii} at the Liberal Democrat conference – the result was invariably a flood of calls on the soft subject and none on the hard news item.

Phase Three

Given its founding and ongoing commitment to sports coverage, our objective in phase three was to understand, analyse and describe Radio 5 Live’s weekday news content during a special sporting event. We sought to identify any change in the proportion of news journalism broadcast on 5 Live during a period of atypically intense sports coverage. We also sought to assess the extent to which the station blends news and sports coverage in these circumstances. By Friday, 6 July, the England football team had progressed in World Cup 2018 to play a quarter-final match against Sweden. This would take place the following day, Saturday, 7 July, in Samara, Russia. Meanwhile, the Wimbledon Finals were progressing with both men’s and women’s singles entering the round of 32. On 6 July, two of the four World Cup quarter finals, Uruguay versus France and Brazil versus Belgium, took place in Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, respectively. Beyond the world of sport, 6 July saw Prime Minister Theresa May working to forestall a revolt as her cabinet gathered for the Chequers summit, a Thai diver lost his life while working to rescue members of the Wild Boars football club trapped in Thailand’s Tham Luang cave, and Downing Street released details of President Donald Trump’s visit to the UK, revealing

that the President would avoid London during his four-day visit the following week.

Our listening revealed that, even in flagship news slots such as Breakfast, 5 Live's output was dominated by sport. News took second place, and significant stories were ignored entirely or covered in a cursory manner. Chat about football and football fans and live links between presenters at the World Cup and at Wimbledon suggested that 5 Live editors believe their listeners choose the channel primarily for its sport coverage. News presenters were deployed to preview football matches and to discuss the experience of attending the World Cup with fans who had travelled to Russia. During peak listening hours, blending was complete and clear distinctions between sport and news survived in bulletins and summaries only. Radio 5 Live promoted its own sports coverage relentlessly in trails for future live coverage and sports podcasts. We noted that the only part of its schedule in which 5 Live dedicated more than 50% of airtime to news stories was in the low audience hours between 01.00 and 06.00, and that even here non-news content was dominant.

Findings in Phase Three

Programme	TX date	Programme duration	Duration non-news	Percentage non-news
Up All Night	6/7/18	14,400 secs	6,132.5 secs	42.59%
Morning Reports	6/7/18	900 secs	0 secs	0%
Wake Up to Money	6/7/18	2,700 secs	454 secs	16.8%
World Cup Breakfast	6/7/18	9,000 secs	5,905 secs	65.61%
Your Call	6/7/18	3,600 secs	2,901 secs	80.5%
Chiles on Friday	6/7/18	7,200 secs	5,499 secs	76.4%
Kermode and Mayo's Film Review	6/7/18	1,800 secs	1,503 secs	83.5%
Phil Williams ^{liii}	6/7/18	5,400 secs	3,034 secs	56.2%
Total	6/7/18	45,000 secs	24,428.5 secs	56.5%

A Composite Weekday

A core purpose of our listening in the first three phases of our research was to analyse three or more editions of each scheduled news programme. Each set of samples included programmes from each phase of our listening. This sampling provided sufficient data to generate a representative composite weekday of 5 Live news and current affairs output. Only by creating such a composite could we accurately test 5 Live's actual output against its commitments. We have designed our typical weekday to include only three hours of 5 Live sport, thus employing a template that offers the best prospect of delivering a full supply of news and current affairs. We also chose to omit programmes only broadcast on Friday, e.g., Kermode and Mayo's Film Review, which our sampling had identified as containing an atypically high percentage of non-news content. Our objective was to represent a truly typical example of weekday output. Our composite weekday consists of a news schedule containing the following programmes:

01.00-05.00: Up All Night

05.00-05.15: Morning Reports

05.15-06.00: Wake Up to Money

06.00-10.00: Breakfast

10.00-13.00: Anna Foster

13.00-16.00: Afternoon Edition

16.00-19.00: Drive

22.00-01.00: Phil Williams

We calculated average levels of anomalous (i.e., non-news) content in each of these programmes by combining data from the many individual editions we analysed. Our findings appear below:

Programme	Programme duration	Duration non-news	Percentage non-news
Up All Night	14,400 secs	5,479 secs	38.05%
Morning Reports	900 secs	0 secs	0%
Wake Up to Money	2,700 secs	454 secs	16.8%
Breakfast	14,400 secs	6,630 secs	46.04%
Anna Foster	10,800 secs	4,837 secs	44.79%
Afternoon Edition	10,800 secs	4,091 secs	37.88%
Drive	10,800 secs	3,412 secs	31.59%
Phil Williams	10,800 secs	6,011 secs	55.66%

This data for representative samples of each weekday news and current affairs programme in the 5 Live schedule allowed us to calculate average weekday performance in 2018 and to compare it to Ofcom's requirement that 75% of 5 Live's output should consist of news and current affairs. Our typical weekday schedule is 75,600 seconds long (twenty-one hours = 1,260 minutes = 75,600 seconds). We identified an average of 30,914 seconds of anomalous (i.e., non-news) material in this schedule. **Thus, our typical weekday of 5 Live news and current affairs output consists of 40.89% non-news and current affairs output. We conclude that on a typical weekday in 2018 only 59.11% of 5 Live's news and current affairs schedule really consisted of news and current affairs. If we apply the calculation to the full 24-hour schedule by including the three hours formally dedicated to sports coverage, the percentage of news and current affairs output falls to 48.28% (41,714 seconds of non-news material in 86,400 seconds of output).**

Phase Four

Our purpose during this final phase of our project was to analyse a representative sample of 5 Live's weekend output in order to add to our composite weekday typical examples of material broadcast on Saturday and Sunday. Completion of this work would allow us to calculate the proportion of news content broadcast by 5 Live during a complete weekend. From this, we could construct a representative, complete composite week of news output and thus calculate whether, in financial year 2018, 5 Live met its commitment that 75% of its output would be news and current affairs. We chose our samples from weekends that were not atypically busy with live sports coverage, taking one set of samples from a weekend when premier league football was not scheduled. On Saturday, 15 September 2018, Radio 5 Live scheduled eleven hours of news and thirteen hours of sport/entertainment (the BBC itself describes Danny Baker's show broadcast between 09.00 and 10.00 as sport and entertainment).^{liv} On Sunday, 14 October 2018, it scheduled fifteen hours of news and nine hours of sport. We analysed all twenty-six hours of scheduled news programming. One finding struck us immediately: 5 Live schedules as news several examples of weekend output that are plainly not new, they are repeats of programmes or podcasts transmitted or uploaded days earlier. Examples of such repeats in our sample included the edition of Film Review broadcast on Saturday, 15 September, which was a repeat of the edition aired the preceding Friday, and the editions of Brexitcast, Consumer Team and 5 Live Science broadcast on Sunday, 14 October 2018. None of these programmes met the basic criterion that news should be new or current affairs current. We noted that some were several days old, e.g., the edition of Brexitcast broadcast between 00.05 and 00.30 was first made available as a podcast three days earlier on 11 October.

Another striking feature of 5 Live's weekend schedules is that they routinely include examples of high-quality news reporting and analysis broadcast outside primetime. We noted, in particular, the detailed treatment in the Stephen Nolan show (22.00-01.00) on Sunday, 14 October of Boris Johnson's criticism of Theresa May in his column for the

Daily Telegraph and John Pienaar's incisive interview with the Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, Barry Gardiner in Pienaar on Politics. John Pienaar, the BBC's Deputy Political Editor, is one of the few truly heavyweight BBC journalists to contribute to 5 Live. His encounter with Barry Gardiner offered a rare example of an in-depth interview with a senior politician. Another example of fine journalism appeared in 5 Live Investigates (11.00-12.00), which on Sunday, 14 October explored fraudulent abuse of charitable donations and included several valuable interviews and case studies. Peter Allen and Chloe Tilley's intelligent panel discussions in Peter Allen and Caroline Barker (20.00-22.00) featured analysis of news stories including Brexit, the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling that a Belfast bakery run by evangelical Christians was not obliged to ice a cake with the message 'Support Gay Marriage'^{lv} and the introduction of universal credit payments. Saturday Breakfast displayed sustained interest in news, covering fierce storms in the US and the Philippines, the case of Chikayzea Flanders, the boy banned from school for wearing his hair in dreadlocks,^{lvi} the Liberal Democrat Party conference and health risks associated with the use of computer/mobile technology in the home. Our researchers noted substantial evidence of stretching and repetition. Listener discussions and debates were often circuitous. For example, a 16.25-minute interview with the headteacher of Fulham Boys School (the school that banned Chikayzea Flanders) was followed by 17.40 minutes of discussion with listeners on this issue. Whereas the interview with the headteacher was reasonably focused and rigorous, the discussion with listeners lacked focus, it was not marshalled in a way that developed debate, rather it was wandering and circuitous. Consequently, what started off on a news peg quickly drifted, becoming repetitive and stretched. Indeed, the majority of listener discussions tended to drift in this way and became very stretched. As a result, the substantial segments of listener discussion in shows like Nolan's do not function effectively as 'forum[s] for dialogue among citizens', rather the lack of development of debates in these segments means that their most effective function is filling time.

Other weekend coverage displayed greater commitment to infotainment. Sunday Breakfast (06.00-09.00) opened with extended chat – and singing – between presenters Chris Warburton and Sam Walker. It included news interviews with authoritative guests such as an expert on Saudi Arabian politics (07.46) who provided insight regarding the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. However, the programme was dominated by items which allowed cross-promotion of BBC television programmes including BBC One’s *Strictly Come Dancing*, CBBC’s *Blue Peter* and BBC 4’s *Sky at Night*. These promotions were pegged to news stories, e.g., the UK Space Agency’s planned launch of rockets and satellites from the A’Mhoine peninsula in Sutherland^{lvii} allowed an extended interview at 08.03 with Dr Maggie Adair, a genuine expert on space but also the presenter of *Sky at Night*. However, news pegs were also used as opportunities to stimulate informal reminiscence and conversation, e.g., an appeal for calls and texts from former winners of *Blue Peter* badges.

Programme	TX date	Programme duration	Duration non-news	Percentage non-news
Up All Night ^{lviii}	15/9/18	14,400 secs	5,479 secs	38.05%
Saturday Breakfast	15/9/18	10,800 secs	2,617 secs	24.23%
Stephen Nolan	15/9/18	10,800 secs	2,537.5 secs	23.5%
Film Review	15/9/18	3,600 secs	3,338 secs	92.72%
Brexitcast	14/10/18	1,800 secs	1,512 secs	84.0%
Consumer Team	14/10/18	1,800 secs	1,540 secs	85.55%
Up All Night	14/10/18	14,400 secs	5,479 secs	38.05%
Breakfast	14/10/18	10,800 secs	5,166.3 secs	47.84%
5 Live Investigates	14/10/18	3,600 secs	72 secs	2.0%
Pienaar on Politics	14/10/18	3,600 secs	30 secs	0.83%
Allen and Barker	14/10/18	7,200 secs	1,883.5 secs	26.16%
5 Live Science	14/10/18	3,600 secs	3,320 secs	92.22%
Stephen Nolan	14/10/18	7,200 secs	660 secs	9.17%

Our analysis shows that on Saturday, 15 September 2018, 5 Live's scheduled news programmes contained 13,971.5 non-news seconds in a total of 39,600 seconds (eleven hours) of news output. Thus, 35.28% of the news programmes themselves consisted of anomalous material that did not qualify as news. When the thirteen hours (46,800 seconds) of sport and sports entertainment are included in the calculation, the total non-news content in twenty-four hours (86,400 seconds) increases to 60,771 seconds or 70.34%. **The total news content of 5 Live's Saturday output was 29.66%.** On Sunday, 14 October 2018, 5 Live's scheduled news programmes contained 16,342.8 non-news seconds in a total of 54,000 seconds (fifteen hours) of news output. Thus, 30.26% of the total duration of the news programmes themselves was not news. When the nine hours (32,400 seconds) of scheduled sport is included in the calculation, the total non-news content in twenty-four hours (86,400 seconds) increases to 48,742 seconds or 56.41%. **The total news content of 5 Live's Sunday output was 43.59%.** We combined the calculations for our representative Saturday and Sunday to calculate weekend averages for news and non-news output. We conclude that **5 Live's weekend output consists of 63.38% non-news content and 36.62% news.**

Conclusions

In financial year 2018, BBC Radio 5 Live will not meet Ofcom's requirement that 75% of its broadcast output should consist of news and current affairs. Our research suggests that the news component of its output, i.e., the percentage of output that meets the criteria for news defined in our methodology, is in fact 48.28% on weekdays and 36.62% at weekends. We combined these figures in the ratio 5/7 weekdays to 2/7 weekends (i.e., $5x + 2y$ divided by 7 where x = weekday average and y = weekend average) to calculate

5 Live's news and non-news content in a typical week in 2018. This calculation shows that **5 Live's output in 2018 was 55.05% non-news and 44.95% news**. BBC Radio 5 Live allocates less than half of its schedule to information, investigation and analysis. Its primary purposes do not include promoting social empathy or providing a public forum for dialogue. Instead, the Corporation's assertion that it meets the regulator's requirement relies on the depiction of every moment scheduled as news programming as being filled by actual news. This is plainly untrue.

Our analysis confirms what common sense alone suggests to listeners: 5 Live has ceased to be a news and sport station. It is a sport and talk station with a fierce commitment to sport and a lesser, legacy commitment to news. Its news coverage reveals an appetite for entertainment, celebrity and music stories in preference to public affairs. Above all, its news programmes retain a commitment to sport that is reflected in extensive blending of news and sport and the dedication of much time to interviews with and conversation about sport and sports people. Although it fulfils its obligation to cover politics, its listeners do not regard it as a hard news station and it has largely abandoned its historic commitment to react first to breaking news. Listeners tune-in primarily for coverage of and conversation about sport, primarily, football. Senior BBC journalists do not treat it as a priority outlet for their work and senior sources only occasionally appear on its news programmes. Primetime shows such as *Breakfast* and *Drive* seek to sound convivial; they exude the atmosphere of a friendly conversation in a pub or café. Much of the station's best news output is transmitted outside peak audience hours.

Radio 5 Live is used relentlessly as a platform to promote other BBC channels and services. It is particularly committed to the promotion of podcasts hosted by sports personalities. Radio 5 Live itself has expanded its use of personality/celebrity presenters in news programmes.

Questions for Further Research

The absence from 5 Live's output of senior BBC journalists raises questions about the priority placed on 5 Live by strategic leaders in BBC News and Current Affairs. It also suggests that 5 Live's relocation in 2011 from Broadcasting House in London to Salford Quays may have had unintended consequences. Further research might investigate the editorial consequences of removing a news service from the nerve centre of BBC News. Such research might also ask whether this move has reduced 5 Live's capacity to attract senior sources as interviewees.

The low proportion of hard news, not least in key primetime shows, suggest that 5 Live may feel less constrained by its new regulator than when it was subject to scrutiny by the BBC Trust. Further research might explore whether Ofcom has the resources, methods and expertise it requires to scrutinise Radio 5 Live effectively. Does the regulator require additional investment to fulfil its new responsibilities?

Radio 5 Live's emergence as a sport and talk station raises the possibility of market distortion in a competitive sector already served by several independent radio broadcasters. We believe the potential risk is sufficient to justify formal investigation. We note that the BBC's description of 5 Live's core purposes has remained constant since 1994 while the station itself has been thoroughly transformed. We further note that the BBC has promised to report to Ofcom in 2019 'on its compliance with its conditions for news and current affairs and sports coverage on 5 Live' and that Ofcom has committed to 'look closely at these specific areas'.^{lix} We welcome this commitment.

The BBC's reluctance to define what it considers news is rendered additionally confusing by its recognition of an ostensibly separate category of output: 'factual programmes'. The Corporation includes under this category programmes about several topics that feature prominently on 5 Live. These include arts, culture, health and wellbeing, life stories and consumer affairs.^{lx} A further specific categorisation identifies factual radio programmes,^{lxi} and we note that several 5 Live

shows, including Wake Up to Money and Up All Night are listed under this category. Further research might explore whether the BBC categorises as non-news on its other radio, television and online outlets material which it counts as news on 5 Live. It might also question whether programmes which are scheduled as news output when broadcast on 5 Live are described differently elsewhere.

Notes on Contributors

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Annex A : our tailored research form

Five Live Research Project

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