

Identifying Informational Opportunities in Political Responsibility Reporting: A Study of Television News Coverage During the Coronavirus Pandemic in the UK's Devolved System

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Abstract

How the news media report who's responsible for political decisions is fundamental to an informed citizenry. Our study develops a new way of examining political responsibility coverage by drawing on the concept of informational opportunities in order to explore how television news could enhance audience understanding. We examine how television news reported who was responsible for making policies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland during the coronavirus pandemic. Drawing on a content analysis study of five UK television news bulletins (N = 181), we found that reporting did not regularly attribute political responsibility to all four governments of the UK at the start of the pandemic. Once the nations began to adopt different lockdown measures the clarity of reporting legislative decisions improved, but there were still missed opportunities to clarify which government was responsible for specific policies. By way of conclusion, we argue that scholars examining how the media report political responsibility need to find creative ways of theorising and empirically studying informational opportunities in order to enhance public understanding.

Keywords

Content analysis, Coronavirus pandemic, Television news, Informational opportunities, Reporting political responsibility, Political journalism

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During the coronavirus pandemic, governments around the world implemented different policies to protect citizens from the risks of contracting and spreading COVID-19. In doing so, they relied extensively not only on their own communication platforms, but the news media to convey their policies and health guidance. In this study, our focus is on assessing how television news reported *who was responsible for the decisions made by political bodies in the United Kingdom (UK)* during the pandemic. More broadly, the study contributes to debates about how the media report during a major health crisis, and whether journalists reference who was responsible for political choices in ways that gave audiences what we call *informational opportunities* to learn about the political responsibilities of different governments in the UK.

Since political systems vary in their scope and power, normatively speaking the news media play an important role in informing the public about which government is responsible for making different rules and regulations (Christians et al. 2009). In the UK, there are four nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – with different governments that have responsibilities over huge swathes of social and economic policymaking, including in health and education. During the pandemic, the four nations of the UK took coordinated action in dealing with the coronavirus, but over time they made divergent decisions in areas such as implementing lockdowns, the wearing of face masks and rules about self-isolating after returning home from particular countries. Our study examines whether UK broadcasters attributed responsibility to different governments at the start of the pandemic.

While there has been a gradual devolution of political power in the UK since 1999, people's media consumption of UK news has not dramatically changed. BBC and ITV broadcasters produce daily news bulletins nationally in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but many people in these nations continue to rely on UK-wide network news and current affairs programming (BBC Trust 2016). In other words, while audiences might watch national news in the devolved nations, they continue to *also* watch UK network news. In the first week of the pandemic – a period of time analysed in this study – 79% of the adult population in Wales tuned into BBC network news (Culture, Welsh language and Communications Committee 2020). Beyond broadcasting, many people also consume news produced in England which is primarily focussed on politics and public affairs at Westminster (in England), rather than reporting what is happening in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (Cushion and Scully 2016). Unlike other media, the main UK broadcasters have regulatory obligations to report politics and public affairs accurately and impartially. The BBC's charter, for example, expects its journalism to "provide duly accurate and impartial news, current affairs and factual programming to build people's understanding of all parts of the United Kingdom".¹ Our study examines BBC journalism, which is the UK's main public service broadcaster, and compares its coverage with three commercial public service broadcasters – ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – and Sky News, which does not have any public service licence obligations.

Since it is not just normatively but legally necessary for all UK broadcasters to report *accurately* about UK political decision making then we might expect policy decisions to be attributed to the correct political powers across all four nations.

Our research design defines accuracy by the inclusion of geographical signposting – references to England, say, or one of the devolved nations – when reporting in UK wide network television news. Overall, this makes our wider contribution to debates about how the media report political responsibility unique because the network broadcasters we examine all – to different degrees – have regulatory rules and editorial guidelines that require them to accurately inform audiences about UK politics (Cushion et al. 2012). As we explain, our study explores if media coverage of political responsibilities is different across media systems. In doing so, we consider the role played by media ownership in supplying *informational opportunities* for audiences to understand which political institutions are responsible for making policy choices (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). On the face of it, the concept of informational opportunities might appear simple in practice when reporting the relevance of political decision making. But given the challenging environments journalists face producing news, not least during a global crisis, they may not always consider the consequences of not attributing the complexity of political responsibility in routine coverage. The aim of this study is to encourage critical reflection about when journalists should take up informational opportunities to help public understanding of political issues.

Academics have long debated the power and influence of how the media report who is responsible for political decisions (Kim 2015; Matthes 2012). From attributing blame to individuals or institutions, and to specific events or wider social contexts, interpreting who is responsible for political, social and economic changes is vitally important to democratic accountability and informed citizenship (Iyengar 1991). We assess how the coronavirus pandemic was reported by the media as a *governing responsibility for all four nations within the UK or whether there was a lack of clarity in attributing power generally or to specific political institutions*.

Overall, by engaging with debates about informational opportunities and political responsibility reporting, our content analysis study found network reporting did not regularly attribute political responsibility to all four governments of the UK at the start of the pandemic. However, when lockdown measures began to more clearly diverge across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (in May 2020 especially), broadcasters began to more precisely label which nation was politically responsible for the decisions. More broadly, we argue that by developing nuanced empirical studies that assess the informative value of political responsibility reporting, scholars can help identify effective informational opportunities that can potentially enhance public knowledge of politics and public affairs.

Understanding Informational Opportunities in Political Reporting

Across the world, there are many types of political systems that distribute policy responsibilities in complex ways at a local, regional, national and international level. As a consequence, it can be challenging for journalists to communicate which political institutions are responsible for legislating different policies. But we found little

academic attention has been paid to understanding how the news media report different political institutions at a local, state or regional level, compared to a more federalised system. While comparative studies have theorised how political dimensions influence national media systems (Cook 1998), there is a lack of research examining how different layers of governmental responsibility have been reported by journalists. In studies where political systems have been compared – in say, majoritarian versus proportional political systems (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008) – the focus has been generally about the reporting of processes and policies of political parties, rather than attributions of power and responsibility to institutional decision making. When political institutions operate with distinct local, regional or national media, policymaking can be explained to the public or decisions held accountable. But when a government operates in more centralised and fragmented media systems, with competing layers of governments taking decisions at different levels, it becomes more difficult to communicate who is responsible for policy decisions.

So, for example, Delli Carpini et al.'s (1994) study examined public knowledge of federal and state systems, and considered the role played by the media environment. They examined how knowledgeable people were in different parts of the state of Virginia, which – they argued – was shaped by specific media and their editorial priorities. They identified how much citizens knew about state politics and government in the capital of Virginia – Richmond, where the local media pay a lot of attention to politics – and in Washington, a metropolitan area, where government decisions are not routinely reported. They concluded, in their words, that:

citizens living outside of state capitals, and especially those living in areas that border other states, are less informed about state politics than they would otherwise be. Despite the increasing importance of state politics, news coverage of state government and politics varies widely in amount and quality, and is generally less extensive and detailed than coverage of local and national government (Delli Carpini et al. 1994: 453).

Put more broadly, the study showed that the media environment plays an important role for citizens to learn about their political systems. Moreover, it revealed the different informational opportunities citizens can access across different media systems to learn about politics.

Academic debates about the role different media systems play in shaping public understanding of politics have intensified over recent years. Studies have systematically compared the amount and nature of news output supplied by different media systems such as public service media, commercial public service media, market-driven media and state broadcasters (Aalberg et al. 2010; Castro-Herrero et al. 2018; Curran et al. 2009; Curran et al. 2010; Cushion 2012, 2021; Esser et al. 2012; Stromback 2017). Esser et al. (2012), for example, compared and contrasted television news schedules in 13 European countries operating under different media systems. Taken together, they discovered that over time there were more informative political news programmes on public service media rather than market-driven media. They drew on the concept of the political information environment to interpret their findings,

which was defined as “as the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources” (Esser et al. 2012: 250). Their unit of measurement was the provision of news in television scheduling over a thirty-year period, assessing the amount of political programming available to viewers. In doing so, Esser et al. (2012: 249) suggested these regular television slots offered “opportunity structures as access points in the political information environment that provide incentives for people to enter the news discourse”. But they acknowledged that their study could not make judgements about the *informative value* of political programming between media systems.

This article builds on this study by drawing on the concept of informational opportunities to analyse the informative value of news between media systems. Specifically, we *interpret the comparative value of different types of informational opportunities in political responsibility reporting*. We did so by examining quantitatively and longitudinally coverage over the opening few months of the coronavirus pandemic when the public needed vital health guidance and governments needed to be held accountable for different policy decisions. As explained in the next section, we designed the study in order to assess at a micro level the *informative value* of reporting that attributed political responsibility to either the UK government, or devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In other words, the study was designed to comparatively assess not just the amount of informational opportunities different media systems provided to viewers to learn about political responsibilities (e.g. the number of political programmes in a TV schedule – see Esser et al. 2012) but to evaluate the *informative value* of these opportunities.

The theoretical roots of the information opportunities concept relate to two main characteristics. First, it offers regular access points for the public to be exposed to news – not necessarily out of a deliberate choice; exposure could include inadvertent ‘chance’ meetings because of the frequency in which information was available. This chimes with theories around incidental learning, where scholars have explored how people come into contact with different media and the possible impact of these interactions (Wieland and Königslöw, 2020). At the heart of debates about informational opportunities is exploring a normative transaction: whether the public are better informed about politics and public affairs than if they had not been exposed to media coverage. The focus of this study is at the news media level in comparing how different broadcasters provide informational opportunities. A second theoretical consideration of informational opportunities relates to understanding media systems in terms of their organisational structure. The concept of informational opportunities explores the extent to which characteristics of media ownership, such as how an organisation is regulated, their editorial standards and economic power, influences the content of news output. Within our study, we consider these factors in the context of UK broadcasters, and whether they influence the information opportunities supplied to viewers and the informative value of responsibility reporting.

We add to debates about informational opportunities by moving beyond painting a macro picture about the amount of news programming supplied by different types of media system. We develop a research study that *empirically evaluates the informative*

value of news at a micro level. For example, Esser et al. (2012) relied on news schedules to determine the degree of informational opportunities supplied by different news outlets and media systems over time. But our conceptualisation of informational opportunities is at a more micro level because we analyse and compare the nuances of journalistic language between different broadcasters. We now more specifically explain how we assess informational opportunities in political responsibility reporting.

Towards More Informational Opportunities in Political Responsibility Reporting

According to Weiner (1995), attribution can be theorised by two contradictory forces. On the one hand, responsibility can be attributed to individual behaviour that needs to change in order to resolve problems. On the other hand, the attribution of responsibility is largely a product of societal issues, which are resolved not by individuals but by governments, businesses and other social forces. Iyengar (1991) empirically tested these conflicting positions by examining how broadcast news reported politics in the US according to two frames. First, episodic framing, which attributes responsibility to a specific event or individual, marginalising any discussion of societal influences, such as governmental decision-making. Second, thematic framing, which includes reporting that focuses on wider social problems, attributing cause and effect in reporting. Overall, he found far more episodic than thematic framing in coverage over time. After showing audiences both type of frames, he found that more regularly watching episodic framing led to people attributing blame to individuals rather than wider social factors.

However, since Iyengar (1991) published *Is Anyone Responsible?* many scholars have replicated his study and identified significant divergences in framing choices across different media and political systems, and competing issues or events (Kim 2015). In other words, studies about how the media report political responsibility and theorise the attribution of power remain fertile ground for academic debate. So, for example, in a 1997 study of newspaper and television news coverage of EU leaders in the Netherlands, the attribution of responsibility reporting was relatively high in coverage generally (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). But they found sensationalist commercial news outlets focussing on human interest rather than wider social forces. They concluded by challenging Iyengar's (1991) argument because, in their words, "the consequences of the episodic nature of TV news is actually culture bound and not generalizable beyond television news in the U.S." (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 106). This perspective is reinforced by empirical studies comparing US political news coverage with other nations. For instance, Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006) compared American and Swedish election news coverage and found the former had a far higher frequency of episodic framing, with horse-race and political strategy framing in greater supply than wider debates about society and governance. As a result of these empirical studies, it has been broadly theorised that media frames about the attribution of political responsibility are shaped by media ownership (Semetko and

Valkenburg 2000; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006). Our study contributes to this body of literature by exploring how commercial and public service media attributed political power to UK political institutions during a major health crisis. For example, we explore whether the UK's main public service broadcaster, the BBC, provided more clarity about political decisions across the four nations of the UK than Sky News, a market-led broadcaster, or ITV, Channel 4 or Channel 5, which are broadcasters with both commercial and public service commitments.

But it is not only media systems that can influence reporting the attribution of political responsibilities. The type of issue being reported has also been shown to be important in coverage of political responsibilities. Kensicki (2004), for instance, found newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration included many references to the government's role or to industry influence when covering these issues. Similarly, Kim et al. (2010) discovered that poverty was regularly analysed at a societal rather than individual level in media coverage. Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2015) analysed coverage of depression in Chinese newspapers and identified social factors not specific actors were the focus of many articles. Since our study's focus is on reporting institutional politics, we contribute to wider debates about how effectively public and commercial media attribute governmental responsibility about decisions made by different institutions.

Since Iyengar's (1991) study, media frames have sought to measure how political power is defined and attributed by journalists. But in order to understand how different issues are reported in a more nuanced way, in our view we need to theoretically and empirically develop specific variables that go beyond the generalities of episodic and thematic framing. For instance, since we are examining the reporting of political responsibility for UK *network* audiences coverage should reflect politics in all four nations, we would argue that journalists need to be precise and accurate with any geographical signposting. Thematic framing is theorised more generally, potentially referring to a singular institution rather than reflecting different power dynamics in complex political systems. Our research design measures the accuracy of geographical signposting by quantifying the inclusion of all nations (or any location identifier like a capital city) and, importantly, the *exclusion* of any references to nations. Or, put more generally for any study examining the information environments of devolved or federal systems of governance (Deli Carpini et al. 1994), we identify what informational opportunities news media supply to audiences about the relevance or irrelevance of a government policy, and which government is responsible for it. This could be as straightforward as supplying no geographical identification, or spelling out in detail the system of powers across England and the devolved nations. But political responsibility reporting can be subtle and nuanced when covering specific policy issues. In the case of the UK's devolved political system, it could be that there are what we label implicit and explicit references to political responsibility. By implicit we refer to news items that mention England but do not directly state that they do not apply to the devolved nations. In other words, audiences may not know that what is decided in England may not be relevant to the rest of the UK. By explicit we refer to news items that include a geographical reference to a specific nation (Scotland, Wales or

Northern Ireland) or generally to the devolved nations. Normatively speaking, explicit references offer the clearest informational opportunity for audiences to learn about who has responsibility of a policy because they directly state where a policy choice does – and does not – apply to specific nations of the UK.

Research Question and Context

Drawing on a content analysis study in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic during 2020, we ask:

- What informational opportunities did UK television news bulletins provide about political responsibilities immediately after major UK government announcements relating to England in the opening few months of the coronavirus pandemic?

Our study develops new lines of inquiry by exploring how attributions of political responsibility can be empirically examined by the use of geographical signposting, as well as assessing whether the degree of attributions of power are different between media systems (e.g. public service broadcasting, commercial public service media or market-led media). In doing so, we explore whether broadcasters provide informational opportunities for audiences to learn about which government was responsible for making political decisions at a critical moment at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. To date, there has been limited academic study about how media report political affairs in devolved and federal political systems let alone if that differs between news programming operating under different ownership obligations and editorial aims. We address this research gap by examining informational opportunities different media systems supply about how political responsibility is attributed across complex layers of government.

Method

In order to explore how well the decisions made by all four governments of the UK were communicated during the health crisis, we carried out a content analysis of television news bulletins at key moments at the start of the pandemic. In doing so, we identified whether the reporting of government responsibilities could be communicated in ways that enhanced opportunities to learn about devolved decision making. We included five major evening bulletins in the content analysis sample – the BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Sky News at Ten, Channel 4 at 7pm and Channel 5 at 5pm – and analysed coverage on March 23, April 16, May 11, May 28 and June 10 in 2020. These five dates were selected because they fell immediately after the Prime Minister announced major changes to health measures which related to either the whole of the UK or England only.

Our unit of analysis was every item about the pandemic that was primarily relevant to the UK. We analysed news according to each convention (a stand-alone anchor only item, edited package, live two-way and studio interview/discussion) rather than the

Table 1. Number of Items with Devolved Focus About the Lockdown Measures Across Different UK Evening News.

Media	Number of Items
BBC	35
ITV	30
Sky	40
Channel 4	44
Channel 5	32
Total	181

story topic over the course of each day selected. In doing so, we analysed 181 items in total across the five broadcasters. As Table 1 shows, these were distributed relatively evenly across UK wide bulletins.

The content analysis variables focussed on whether broadcasters had attributed political power to one or more of the UK nations. This included assessing if a news item included a geographical reference to either the UK, England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or to more than one geographical reference. We also recorded every item where a statement related only to the impact on the UK (or Britain). Finally, we examined each item to assess if it had an explicit, implicit or no reference to a geographical location in the UK. This geographical reference could include naming a nation (“in Wales”) or referencing a body (“NHS England”) or any visual or verbal identifier (stating “Westminster” or images of a political leader such as Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland). By explicit reference, we refer to naming one or more of the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland), whereas an implicit reference refers to mentioning England (because it suggests there are differences with other nations, but does not explicitly state this). No geographical reference means no location was communicated. We did not include references to regional or local councils or mayors in addition to the nations.

Taken together, the variables were designed to convey how television news attributed policy responsibilities during the pandemic. One researcher carried out the content analysis study but approximately 10% of the sample was recoded and subject to an intercoder reliability test by another researcher. All variables achieved a high level of agreement and Cohen’s Kappa scores (see Appendix).

Reporting Which *National* Government is Responsible for Policy Decisions

In order to convey how regularly the UK generally or specific nations of the UK were referenced, we quantified all geographical references in television news coverage of major UK government announcements about the lockdown. Table 2 shows the proportion of conventions that included a reference to the UK, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, or did not. Above all, there were fewer references to the four nations

Table 2. The Percentage of Geographical References in UK Television News Coverage of the major Lockdown Announcements.

Dates	Without UK		With England		Without England		With Scotland		Without Scotland		With Wales		Without Wales		With NI		Without NI		Total
	With UK	Total	With England	Total	Without England	Total	With Scotland	Total	Without Scotland	Total	With Wales	Total	Without Wales	Total	With NI	Total	Without NI	Total	
March 23	58.6% (34)	41.4% (24)	100% (58)	12.1% (7)	87.9% (51)	100% (58)	13.8% (8)	86.2% (50)	100% (58)	13.8% (8)	86.2% (50)	100% (58)	5.2% (3)	94.8% (55)	100% (58)	5.2% (3)	94.8% (55)	100% (58)	100% (58)
April 16	37.5% (9)	62.5% (15)	100% (24)	8.3% (2)	91.7% (22)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)	4.2% (1)	95.8% (23)	100% (24)	100% (24)
May 11	44.8% (26)	55.2% (32)	100% (58)	67.2% (39)	32.8% (19)	100% (58)	37.9% (22)	62.1% (36)	100% (58)	37.9% (22)	62.1% (36)	100% (58)	25.9% (15)	74.1% (43)	100% (58)	25.9% (15)	74.1% (43)	100% (58)	100% (58)
May 28	30.8% (8)	69.2% (18)	100% (26)	80.8% (21)	19.2% (5)	100% (26)	30.8% (8)	69.2% (18)	100% (26)	15.4% (4)	84.6% (22)	100% (26)	11.5% (3)	88.5% (23)	100% (26)	11.5% (3)	88.5% (23)	100% (26)	100% (26)
June 10	46.7% (7)	53.3% (8)	100% (15)	80% (12)	20% (3)	100% (15)	/	100% (15)	100% (15)	13.3% (2)	86.7% (13)	100% (15)	/	100% (15)	100% (15)	/	100% (15)	100% (15)	100% (15)
Total	46.4% (84)	53.6% (97)	100% (181)	44.8% (81)	55.2% (100)	100% (181)	21.5% (39)	78.5% (142)	100% (181)	20.4% (37)	79.6% (144)	100% (181)	12.2% (22)	87.8% (159)	100% (181)	12.2% (22)	87.8% (159)	100% (181)	100% (181)

– England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – throughout March and April than in May and June combined. During March and April, of the 74 references to either the UK or one of the four nations in it, just four focussed on Northern Ireland, compared to nine in England, Scotland and Wales. In March alone 58.6% of all items included a reference to the UK generally, while in April items including England made up just 8.3% and under 5% for the other nations. It is, of course, difficult to interpret the proportion of coverage without a baseline figure from previous comparative studies. But this was a unique moment in time. While the devolved nations have had the power to implement policies in areas such as health and education differently to England since 1999, managing a major health pandemic represented the most high profile policy making moment in the twenty of years of devolution. But despite having these power responsibilities, the largely UK-centric reporting of coverage and infrequent references to specific nations meant that, at this point in time, there were little informational opportunities for audiences to learn about the involvement of all four governments during the initial response to the pandemic.

However, while the changes related to the nations of the UK, this focus did not acknowledge the agreement between the four governments in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland *to adopt the same lockdown measures*. For example, the headlines on March 23 largely focused on the Prime Minister’s statement. On the BBC News at Ten, for instance, a March 23 headline read: “The Prime Minister announces the toughest restrictions on our way of life in living memory”. The decision was reported as being a *singular* governmental decision: “Boris Johnson and his advisors... felt they had no choice but to have a much more drastic approach’. Similarly, Channel 5 reported *the* “Government will be ready to go further”, while a Channel 4 anchor asked a guest on the programme: “The population, citizens of the UK, want *the* Government to go further; do you agree with that?”. On April 16 – three weeks later – the four-nation lockdown agreement was extended, but once again the focus was on it being a singular UK government decision. Of course, journalists and editors were based in London, England and Westminster, meaning their perspective of normalising UK government decisions was perhaps on display during a highly challenging period of time of journalism. But given they are UK network programmes, which have editorial aims of reflecting audiences right across the UK - not exclusively English audiences – then the marginalisation of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represents a significant oversight. More generally, from the point of view of enhancing public understanding of how the media accurately attribute responsibility for political decisions, our specifically designed variables assessing geographical references revealed a lack of informational opportunities for audiences to learn about devolved politics.

By May and June, the four national governments of the UK had begun to adopt different lockdown measures. As Table 2 shows, on the day when the UK government announced up to six people could meet in a public place in England, over two thirds of all items included a reference to England. Likewise, when new rules on support bubbles and schools opening applied to England-only, over eight in 10 items referenced England after the UK government’s statement. However, while the relevance to England was reported, it was not

stated that the changes were irrelevant to the other nations of the UK. For example, on 10 June two items referenced Wales, while Scotland and Northern Ireland received none. Put another way, the responsibility of the devolved nations was not regularly signposted when UK government decisions about England were announced.

Table 3 shows there were some differences between broadcasters in how often they mentioned all four UK nations. With the exception of Scotland, the BBC included the most references to the other nations. For example, it included England in 51.4% of items, 25.7% in Scotland, 28.6% in Wales and 18.2% in Northern Ireland. Sky News, by contrast, referenced England in 32.5% of items, 17.5% in Scotland, while Wales and Northern Ireland featured just twice each (5.0% of all items). Between March and June 2020, while the nations were more regularly namechecked, conversely references to the UK generally reduced (see Table 2). This suggests the broadcaster with the most public service obligations – the BBC – most regularly attributed governmental responsibility to one of the devolved nations. Or, put more generally, journalism informed by broadcasters most committed to public service values supplied the most informational opportunities for audiences to understand political responsibilities. This reinforces theories that media ownership helps explain the content of media (Shoemaker and Reese 1996), supports empirical evidence that the presence of public service media enhance the access people have to high quality news and analysis (Curran et al. 2009) and, in the specific case of our focus, shows public service media promote audience understanding about political governance in complex systems.

In order to assess the focus on the UK generally rather than reflect news across the four nations, we quantified every item that included a reference to the impact just on the UK (or Britain), such as references to the death toll (see Table 4).

In March, 55.2% of items had statements about the impact on the UK, but these fell to 25.0% in April, 15.5% and 11.5% in mid and late May respectively, with 26.7% in June. There was often nothing misleading or inaccurate about these geographical references. On May 11, for instance, an ITV live two-way reported a “plan to quarantine people arriving in the UK for 14 days” in the context of an imminent UK government announcement without acknowledging the agreement of the other nations. Just a few weeks later, however, the Welsh government introduced legislation about travelling to and from Wales that explicitly stated laws in Wales may differ to the law applicable in other parts of the UK. In other words, the conflation of factual information (e.g. death counts) and policy decisions (e.g. quarantine) with reference to the UK did not always capture the governmental responsibilities of the four nations during the pandemic. In order to examine the degree of clarity about geographical references, we quantified each item according to whether they included either no geographic or governmental reference, or an implicit or explicit reference to the devolved nations (see Table 5). We quantified these according to if a news item *just* had an implicit reference, or if they had an explicit reference to devolution (which may also have included an implicit reference, but we do not include that in Table 5).

In March and April 75.9% and 95.8% of UK television news bulletins respectively had no references to one of the four nations, to devolved politics or any governmental

Table 3. The Percentage of Geographical References in UK Television News Coverage of the major Lockdown Announcements.

Channel	UK		England		Scotland		Wales		Total		Without NI		Total
	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without	With	Without	With NI	Without NI	
BBC	62.9% (22)	37.1% (13)	51.4% (35)	48.6% (17)	100% (35)	25.7% (9)	74.3% (26)	28.6% (10)	71.4% (25)	100% (35)	25.7% (9)	74.3% (26)	100% (35)
ITV	26.7% (8)	73.3% (22)	100% (30)	60% (18)	100% (30)	20% (6)	80% (24)	20% (6)	80% (24)	100% (30)	6.7% (2)	93.3% (28)	100% (30)
Sky	45% (18)	55% (22)	100% (40)	32.5% (13)	100% (40)	17.5% (7)	82.5% (33)	5% (2)	95% (38)	100% (40)	5% (2)	95% (38)	100% (40)
Channel 4	50% (22)	50% (22)	100% (44)	47.7% (21)	100% (44)	25% (11)	75% (33)	22.7% (10)	77.3% (34)	100% (44)	9.1% (4)	90.9% (40)	100% (44)
Channel 5	43.8% (14)	56.3% (18)	100.1% (32)	53.1% (17)	100% (32)	18.8% (6)	81.3% (26)	28.1% (9)	71.9% (23)	100% (32)	15.7% (5)	84.4% (27)	100.1% (32)
Total	46.4% (84)	53.6% (97)	100% (181)	44.8% (81)	100% (181)	21.5% (39)	78.5% (142)	20.4% (37)	79.6% (144)	100% (181)	12.2% (22)	87.8% (159)	100% (181)

Table 4. The Percentage of UK Only References in UK Television News Coverage of the major Lockdown Announcements.

Dates	UK only label	Without UK only label	Total
March 23	55.2% (32)	44.8% (26)	100% (58)
April 16	25% (6)	75% (18)	100% (24)
May 11	15.5% (9)	84.5% (49)	100% (58)
May 28	11.5% (3)	88.5% (23)	100% (26)
June 10	26.7% (4)	73.3% (11)	100% (15)
Total	29.8% (54)	70.2% (127)	100% (181)

Table 5. The Percentage of Implicit, Explicit or no References to Devolution in UK Television News Coverage of the major Lockdown Announcements.

Dates	Percentage of items with <i>just</i> an implicit reference to devolution	Percentage of items with an explicit reference to devolution	Percentage of items with no reference to devolution	Total
March 23	8.6% (5)	15.5% (9)	75.9% (44)	100% (58)
April 16	4.2% (1)	/	95.8% (23)	100% (24)
May 11	25.9% (15)	37.9% (22)	36.2% (21)	100% (58)
May 28	46.2% (12)	34.6% (9)	19.2% (5)	100% (26)
June 10	66.7% (10)	13.3% (2)	20% (3)	100% (15)
Total	23.8% (43)	23.2% (42)	53% (96)	100% (181)

responsibilities. Take, for example, the following news coverage in April 2020 which referred to a singular governmental decision about lengthening the lockdown measures:

Life under lockdown will continue for at least another three weeks as the government detailed the five things that will need to change before measures can be relaxed. (Channel 4, 16 April 2020)

But by late May and June, no references to devolution fell to a fifth of all news items. In May 37.9% and 34.6% included items with an explicit reference to devolution. On May 28 an ITV News package not only conveyed that the rules about meeting up to six people applied to England, it explicitly pointed out the relevance to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

But while broadcasters explicitly spelt out the different lockdown measures across the UK in roughly three in 10 items during May, in June it roughly fell to three in 20 items. Instead, broadcasters relied to a greater extent on implicit references – with two thirds of items making an implicit reference to devolution – such as stating that a UK’s government policy related to England only without mentioning the other nations. For example, a

Channel 5 headline on 10 June read: “The Prime Minister defends the schools u-turn in England, zoos and safari parks will open on Monday, but plans to reopen schools are on hold. The Labour leader says the government needs to get a grip.” While an accurate statement, it does rely on audiences picking up the reference to England in order to be aware that schools, zoos and safaris opening *will not apply* to either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Overall, Channel 4 had the highest proportion of items with an explicit reference – 31.8% - followed by the BBC at 28.6%, Channel 5 at 25.0%, ITV at 16.7% and Sky News at 12.5%. Put it more general terms, this shows that the most market-led media system – Sky News – supplied the least informational opportunities for audiences to understand the devolved relevance of coverage. Once again, this supports longstanding theories about ownership shaping content (Shoemaker and Reese 1996) because it suggests a more market-driven outlet offered a more limited window on the UK’s political system than broadcasters operating with public service obligations (Curran et al. 2009).

Towards More Informational Opportunities to Understand Political Responsibility

This study examined the informational opportunities television news bulletins supplied to audiences about the decisions made by different political bodies in the UK. The content analysis discovered the UK nations were not regularly referenced because the focus was on decisions made by the UK government or the Prime Minister, rather than explaining policies were part of a four-nation agreement. Once the nations begin to diverge with their lockdown measures, coverage began to reference the devolved nations more and explain different political responsibilities. But even while coverage improved, there were still missed opportunities to make explicit references to the nations or devolved powers.

Since there has been limited academic study about how media report political affairs in devolved and federal political systems, our study has offered new ways for scholars to identify informational opportunities for media audiences to learn about politics and public affairs. More specifically, our UK focussed study builds on and develops wider empirical and theoretical inquiries about the media reporting of government responsibilities (Kim 2015; Kensicki 2004; Kim et al. 2010; Zhang et al. 2015). Over recent decades, the literature has found significant divergences in editorial choices about how political responsibilities are reported across different media and political systems, and competing issues or events (Kim 2015). Scholars have found new and increasingly sophisticated ways of exploring media content and influence (D’Angelo 2018). Within this body of literature, there are now many competing ways scholars examine the attribution of responsibility in news reporting beyond just episodic and thematic framing, particularly in media coverage of health issues (Kim 2015).

Our content analysis quantified the comparative use of geographical references across television news as a way to examine if political responsibilities were being

accurately attributed. It identified informational opportunities the media could take up in future to help reduce gaps in public knowledge about political affairs. Of course, we need audience research to assess whether these opportunities are picked up by audiences across different types of media platforms and formats (on television, radio, newspapers, online and social media), but it would be hard to imagine they hinder rather than help understanding. In short, we would argue future studies about the reporting of government responsibilities should focus more on understanding gaps in public knowledge, before theorising how signifiers of power can be empirically measured. We argued that journalists needed to be more precise and accurate with any geographical signposting, including nuanced references, such as implicit and explicit attributions of power. But our study found broadcasters often provided implicit references, which accurately signalled the relevance to England-only in an item. But this meant because the item did not state the legislative *irrelevance* to people either in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Put another way, the more explicit references to government responsibility – spelling out which nation holds power over political decisions – offers audiences, in our view, the best opportunity to learn about the UK's devolved political system.

We would argue that offering more informative informational opportunities in political responsibility reporting is beneficial to the public. But, of course, we need to weigh up different kinds of informational opportunities against one another in order to assess their *informative value*. For example, we have suggested that while implicit devolved references (e.g. stating in England in coverage) provide a window of opportunity to learn about the relevance to England, reporting could be potentially more informative if explicit references were added (where journalists namecheck political responsibilities to either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or a combination of the nations). Similarly, we would argue it would be better if news media spelled out explicitly and accurately who has what kind of responsibility for each of their covid related policies. If an announcement was made from the UK government that covered a devolved issue and related to political responsibilities of governments across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it would be not be accurateto describe this as a UK reserved issue.

The four nations have increasingly diverged in their political choices over the course of the pandemic so it is vital the news media report these differences to in order to ensure the public understand the policy they're supposed to follow within the nation they live. Adding devolved context would not detract from that goal, but could enhance public knowledge about different political choices and where responsibility lies. Where all four nations operated under UK government reserved powers – for example when the Furlough scheme was reported, which funded jobs in industries that were closed due to the lockdown – adding devolved context may not have been essential. But even in these stories making the public aware of the boundaries between UK government reserved powers (which are largely economic) and devolved decisions about Covid restrictions (such as wearing face masks and limiting the numbers people can mix indoors) in coverage can help them understand political responsibility and accountability for different government decisions. Once policy differences

between nations emerged, our findings showed more geographical signposting was supplied by broadcasters but it also revealed there were plenty of missed chances to provide more informational opportunities about political responsibilities. In other words, from the point of view of advancing public knowledge about UK politics, network television news coverage was problematic because there were more informational opportunities that broadcasters could have taken to better inform audiences about who was taking political responsibility for key decisions.

We also contributed to wider debates about how broadcasters operating under different media systems and editorial aims reported political responsibilities differently. While ownership is theorised as shaping the media content of news (Shoemaker and Reece 1996), our study empirically established that public service media attributed power to specific nations while commercial media provided more limited informational opportunities (Curran et al. 2009). The BBC, the UK's main public service broadcaster, most regularly signposted the nations across the UK, while Sky News – the only channel without public service obligations – provided the least references to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All UK broadcasters are required to be accurate in their coverage, but in our view reporting political responsibilities is not only about being accurate. For example, it is not necessarily inaccurate reporting if there is only a reference to England in the context of a UK government announcement that relates to residents in England only. But, in our view, it is potentially more informative for viewers to add explicit references to differences in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The BBC took up this informational opportunity most often followed by commercial public service broadcasters. This suggests that public service broadcasters provided more informational opportunities to learn about government responsibility, supplying more background and context to political powers than market-led news media. At the same time, there remained missed opportunities for the main UK public service broadcaster, the BBC, to provide explicit references to political responsibilities during the opening months of the pandemic. This demonstrates the highly challenging environment journalists were operating in during a momentous period when the coronavirus health crisis began. Despite being a well-resourced broadcaster, with journalists across the UK and specialist political correspondents, the BBC missed informational opportunities to help viewers learn about government responsibilities of the devolved nations and make them accountable for their decision making.

Moving forward, we would argue our study highlights the need for scholars to find creative ways of theorising and empirically identifying how political responsibility is reported and held to account by the news media. Put another way, when examining news reporting empirical studies need to develop nuanced research designs that make judgements about what is informative coverage and identify what informational opportunities journalists can supply for viewers to better learn about politics and public affairs. Needless to say, there are many political issues where journalists could add more context and explanation in order to help public understanding. When assessing informational opportunities future studies should not just reflect on information excluded in political coverage, but consider what is included and whether they are alternative ways of better informing audiences. For example, when covering devolved issues replacing phrases such as UK or British with England would more accurately

attribute political responsibility and accountability. Or when reporting education or health care issues within the UK, rather than focussing on one nation – typically England – an informational opportunity might be taken up to develop a compare and contrast approach about the policies across all four nations. In other words, including more informational opportunities about devolved issues should not automatically mean other topics receive less air time. It is about exploring alternative ways of explaining political responsibility. The concept of informational opportunities should encourage critical and creative ways journalistic can practically raise public knowledge while acknowledging the challenges they face in producing news at speed and often with limited resources.

In our view, more research is also needed to identify how audiences respond to the attribution of political responsibilities across different layers of government. In doing so, it can inform debates about how well the media not only inform the public about who is responsible for making legislative choices, but how effectively journalists hold power to account for the decisions that impact on people's lives.

Appendix: Intercoder reliability results

Variable	Percent agreement	Cohen's Kappa
United Kingdom reference	100.0	1.00
England reference	94.4	0.88
Scotland reference	100.0	1.00
Wales reference	100.0	1.00
Northern Ireland reference	100.0	1.00
More than one reference	100.0	1.00
UK only label	94.4	0.77
Implicit/Explicit reference to devolution	94.4	0.89

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Note

1. The BBC's Charter can be found on its website: <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>

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