

## The Public Appetite for Foreign News on TV and Online

Richard Sambrook, Simon Terrington, and  
David A. L. Levy

April 2013



A man stands on a Libyan army tank manned by soldiers opposed to leader Muammar Gaddafi, holding a sign reading in Arabic "Our demand: freedom" in the city of Zawiyah February 27, 2011. REUTERS/Ahmed Jadallah

## **Contents**

Introduction  
Haiti Earthquake  
Japan Earthquake  
New Zealand Earthquake  
Pakistan Floods  
Australian Floods  
Tunisia  
Egypt  
Libya  
Chilean Miners  
Conclusions

Annexe 1. Research on Audience Interest in the Arab Spring  
Annexe 2. Dates of Major News Events Covered by Pulse Surveys in 2010/11

About the Authors  
Acknowledgements

## Introduction

2010–2011 was an extraordinary year for international news. It heralded an unusual number of major international events of high public interest – and of interest to the public, which of course is not necessarily the same thing. These ranged from natural disasters like the Japanese tsunami, Haiti and New Zealand earthquakes, Pakistan floods, to political upheaval across the Middle East with the Arab Spring, and one-off extraordinary events like the rescue of the Chilean mineworkers. As such, audiences to TV and internet news services were more engaged in international news than in most other years; more engaged both because of the volume of international events and because of the nature of them and the prolonged news coverage they received.

This is against a background of research showing overall levels of interest in foreign news in the UK is lower than in other European countries – and more akin to levels of interest in the US<sup>1</sup>.

Last year, the 2012 *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* showed that foreign news scores quite low when people in the UK are asked to name the five types of news that are most important to them. Overall, international news comes third in the list, with 48% choosing it, after domestic and local news (70 and 50% respectively).<sup>2</sup>

But the overall picture conceals striking differences between men and women. British men place domestic news first, with international news second and sports news third. British women by contrast put international news in fourth place, behind domestic, local, and regional news.

This study builds on the *Digital News Report* by looking at audience behaviour and declared interest in international news in 2010/2011 across BBC TV and online news output.

BBC research shows respondents' declared interest in foreign news stories and then this study compares that with two different forms of news consumption; first, audiences for the BBC 6pm and 10pm TV news bulletins in weeks when foreign stories predominated; second, patterns of UK consumption online in the same periods.

The aim is to assess how interested in or resistant to foreign news audiences were, and whether levels of consumption differed noticeably either according to the different kinds of story or by platform.

This is important because there is very little research which compares declared interest with levels of provision and actual consumption of foreign news. It also allows us to see, in the case of the BBC, the extent to which editorial choices about the most significant stories have any impact on audience size when those stories are foreign.

A BBC Pulse Survey<sup>3</sup> conducted in December 2010 (i.e. before the Arab Spring) asked viewers how closely they followed UK news, news from their

---

<sup>1</sup> However, the Pew Research Center demonstrated the unusual nature of 2011 for US audiences. Their news interest index showed that several foreign stories made it to their list of the top 20 stories followed 'very closely' in 2011, with the Japan Earthquake topping the list, followed by the killing of Osama Bin Laden, and then Egyptian and Libyan protests in 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> place respectively. See <http://www.people-press.org/2011/12/21/2011-a-year-of-big-stories-both-foreign-and-domestic/?src=prc-newsletter>

<sup>2</sup> <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/risj-digital-report.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The Pulse Survey is described by the BBC as being based on 'an online panel of 19,000 adults aged 16+ (representative of the UK) run by an independent research agency GfK. The panel enables the BBC to collect over 5,000 responses a day on TV and Radio programmes'. See BBC Audience Information, January–March 2011, pp. 9 and 25:

area, and international news, from any source and found that 50% of people followed UK news and news from their area *fairly closely*, with 44% following international news *fairly closely*. Those who said they followed *very closely* broke down as 19% for UK news, 15% for news from their area, and 9% for international news.

The hard core of around 10% who follow international news *very closely* are relatively resilient to the kind of story. But according to BBC research looking at the period 2008–early 2011, for most people there is a wide variation between the kinds of foreign stories that attract interest.

The BBC Pulse Surveys asked people both whether they had followed certain foreign stories closely and whether they wanted to know more. For example, there were relatively low levels of declared interest in the coverage of events in Tunisia in early 2011. This had fairly extensive coverage on the BBC, but the low interest may have been because it was the first Arab revolution and Tunisia is not that familiar to most British people. But as the Arab Revolutions spread beyond Tunisia, the number of people saying that they were following the events closely and wanted to know more increased dramatically for the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. In each case the level of BBC coverage also increased, as did the number of familiar correspondents reporting from these countries. Annexe 1 provides some more detailed analysis of people's declared levels of interest in and motivations for following the uprising in Egypt and events in Libya in the first quarter of 2011.

From this representation it is clear too that human interest and disaster stories such as the Chilean miners rescue attempts and the Haiti earthquake attracted very high levels of interest. But not all disasters attract equal interest. The Pakistan floods of 2010, whose human toll was huge and which had extensive coverage on the BBC, attracted much less interest than either the Haiti earthquake or the far smaller floods in Australia.

Our research also examines weeks where there was intense coverage of foreign news on the BBC main TV bulletins to see what impact if any that had on TV audience numbers and use online.

We have examined coverage and audiences for foreign stories over 2010/11. For each foreign story we have, where possible, coded the 6pm and 10pm BBC News bulletins for the relevant period (normally for the duration of the story, except for stories such as Libya for which coverage was very extensive) to see the numbers of minutes devoted to the story and its position in each day's bulletins.

We then examined BARB<sup>4</sup> audience figures minute by minute for the relevant bulletins and compared those with the average audience for each bulletin. With online we have examined the traffic to the relevant online stories on the same topic in the same week, and measured both the absolute amount of traffic (from within the UK) to each story, and how that traffic compares to that attracted by other stories on BBC online either about the region or across the whole of BBC online.

---

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/audience\\_0711.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/audience_0711.pdf). The material used here is an additional survey run on this independently organised audience reaction panel.

<sup>4</sup> BARB is a not for profit company, set up in 1981 and owned by BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, BSkyB and the IPA (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising). It provides official viewing figures for UK television audiences. Minute by minute viewing behaviour is measured from a representative sample of just over 5,000 homes. This is then aggregated to produce programme, time band and advertising spot data.

## *Conclusions*

- Most foreign stories get more coverage on the BBC 10pm compared to the 6pm Bulletin. This reflects the different agenda of the two bulletins – 6pm has a more domestic remit, 10pm a more international one.
- While, as we've seen, levels of declared interest in foreign news are generally below those for domestic stories, and vary greatly by topic, audiences to TV news bulletins dominated by foreign stories hold up relatively well. The most attractive foreign stories can draw up to 20% more than the average, with less attractive ones very rarely depressing the figures to below 10–20% of average. This suggests that, in spite of the challenges facing linear TV, BBC TV news editors can still play an important part in setting the news agenda according to their editorial values; a focus on major foreign stories does not have to come at the price of audience numbers.
- However, extended coverage of some foreign stories can lead to audiences dropping off during the bulletin even where the audience level has started at a high level. This may simply reflect the fact that the audience appetite for highly extended coverage of the story may be less than that of the programme editors. In contrast, Annexe 1 shows that interest in the uprisings in Egypt and Libya held up over several months in the first quarter of 2011 – and the uprisings seemed to attract far more interest than general coverage of the long-running Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
- Online audiences for individual stories are on average lower than those for the two main BBC TV news bulletins, and with levels generally ranging from 500k to 4m (compared to average figures of over 4m for the 6pm and 10pm news bulletins) are much more volatile than for TV, according to the story<sup>5</sup>. That is not surprising given the active nature of online news use as opposed to that for TV.
- Stories that peaked online included the Japan earthquake, the rescue of the Chilean miners, Egypt, and the New Zealand earthquake. Online audiences for the 2010 Pakistan floods were, in keeping with the Pulse figures, relatively low.

## *Analysis by Story*

We have grouped the major stories<sup>6</sup> (not a complete list) by theme – natural disasters, political events, human interest – and looked at the declared audience interest and TV and online audience performance for each story, drawing provisional conclusions from each one.

---

<sup>5</sup> In the analysis that follows we have provided figures for page views in the cases of the major international stories examined here. Since the BBC website usually offers multiple pages on different angles of major stories absolute numbers of page views should not be read as fully reflecting the overall impact of the story; lower numbers for each page can occur simply because of a greater choice of pages being offered on a particular story. However we feel that the charts included here, which focus on how many stories from the region made it into the BBC online top 500 that day, provide a useful proxy for levels of interest overall.

<sup>6</sup> For dates of the Pulse Surveys for the events mapped below see Annexe 2.

## Haiti Earthquake

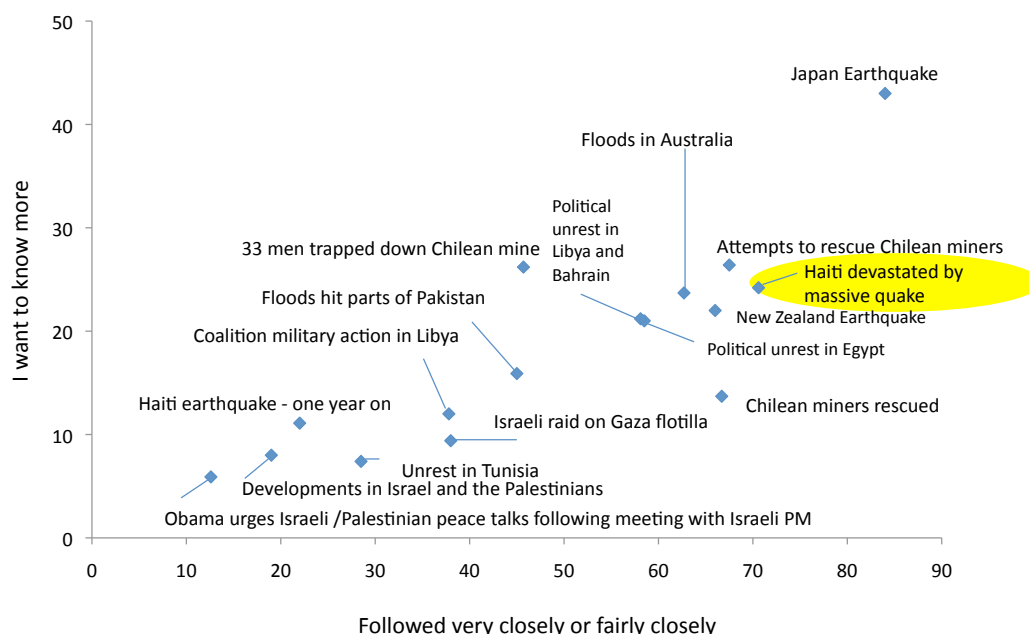
On 12 January 2010 an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 struck just outside Port-au-Prince. At least 3,500,000 people were estimated to have been affected by the quake, with 220,000 killed and more than 300,000 injured. Over 100,000 homes were destroyed and nearly 200,000 were damaged. At its peak, one and a half million people were living in camps, including over 100,000 at critical risk from storms and flooding. Haiti is among the poorest nations on earth coming 145th out of 169 in the UN development index.<sup>7</sup>

TV coverage had graphic images of the impact of the earthquake and many stories of those affected and from rescue teams. There was a major international humanitarian appeal linked to the TV coverage to raise relief funding.

### *Audience Interest*

The Haiti earthquake was the second most closely followed of the stories analysed and third only to the rescue of the Chilean miners and the Japan earthquake in a declared wish to know more by audiences.

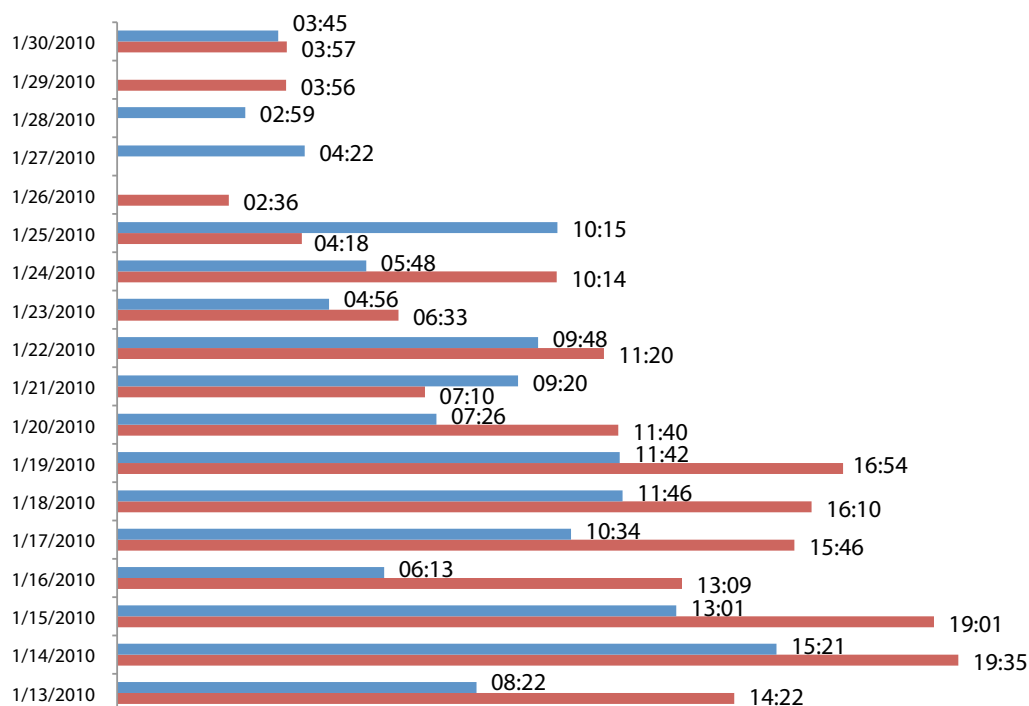
### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More



TV: The BBC's TV bulletins devoted significant resources to the disaster and provided extended coverage which continued for two weeks after the event. The 10pm gave greater time to Haiti than the 6pm – perhaps reflecting its international remit. At its peak the 10pm was broadcasting over 19 minutes a night – out of a 27 minute programme. The 6pm broadcast more than 10 minutes on Haiti on six evenings across the two weeks following the earthquake. This scale of TV coverage seems to match the declared audience interest.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.dec.org.uk/haiti-earthquake-facts-and-figures>.

## Ten O'Clock News (red) vs Six (blue), Time Devoted to Haiti



ONLINE: It was also an event of strong interest to the UK online audience. However, the range of reporting of Haiti was spread across multiple pages, fragmenting the online audience. Cumulatively, it was among the highest audiences of the year, although individual pages did not necessarily perform strongly individually. The main page for reporting the quake only came 8th on BBC online on 13 January, yet the cumulative audience across all Haiti stories would have placed it much higher and possibly in first place.

### American Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 13 Jan. 2010

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
8	Haiti devastated by massive earthquake	574,399
16	Haiti earthquake: Thousands feared dead	349,726
29	BBC Americas	169,731
63	As it happened: Haiti earthquake 13 Jan	82,107
79	Haiti earthquake maps	60,945
99	Haiti country profile	43,220
115	Many feared dead in Haiti quake	36,590
127	Haiti quake aftermath caught on amateur mobile footage	33,772
165	Haiti quake witnesses speak of devastation	24,177
174	Eyewitness account from Haiti	22,846
178	Haiti resident describes aftershocks	22,424
281	Power cuts loom for Venezuelans as dam runs dry	12,481
303	Haiti resident: 'I can't believe what I saw'	11,642
310	International aid efforts for Haiti gather pace	11,518
348	Sarah Palin signs on as a commentator with Fox News	10,294
349	Haiti earthquake: Thousands feared dead	10,287
352	Chile apologises over treatment of indigenous people	10,193
386	Guatemala President Alvaro Colom cleared over murder	8,925
405	Haiti's history of misery	8,449
408	Survivors pulled from UN headquarters in Haiti	8,416
460	Building evacuates during quake in Dominican Republic	7,011
478	Haiti: How to help	6,479
498	Anger in Mexico at jail move for Mel Gibson film shoot	6,011

The strong interest continued for more than a week after the event.

### Top Haiti Story on BBC Online 13 Jan. 2010-20 Jan. 2010

<u>Date</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
13 <sup>th</sup> Jan	8	Haiti devastated by massive earthquake	574,399
14 <sup>th</sup> Jan	27	US rushes troops to Haiti earthquake zone	220,334
15 <sup>th</sup> Jan	13	Haiti quake aid effort hampered by blockages	331,185
16 <sup>th</sup> Jan	17	Security fears stalk Haiti as quake survivors await aid	191,982
17 <sup>th</sup> Jan	7	Destruction at epicentre of Haiti quake is extreme	255,313
18 <sup>th</sup> Jan	21	Haiti quake: Death toll may be 200,000, US general says	219,489
19 <sup>th</sup> Jan	41	US begins airdrops of food and water into Haiti	114,002
20 <sup>th</sup> Jan	15	Strong aftershock shakes Haiti, week after earthquake	351,463

### *Analysis*

We do not have qualitative research into why people responded so strongly to the Haiti earthquake. However, it seems probable that reasons may include human interest (sympathy for one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere); strong and compelling pictures which engaged TV audiences in the event and its aftermath; proximity to Christmas and the New Year holiday with heightened levels of empathy and the DEC Emergency Appeal which provided audiences with a sense there was something they could do to help. What is clear is that, in addition to these high levels of interest on TV, the Haiti earthquake marked a new record in the mobilisation of interest and

donations through social media. Glenda Cooper has reported<sup>8</sup> how according to research conducted jointly by Nielsen and Facebook later in the month, 39% of Facebook users in the US, UK, and Australia said they had donated to the Haiti appeal, with 13% doing this by SMS texts.

---

<sup>8</sup> Glenda Cooper, *From their own Correspondent? New Media and the Changes in Disaster Coverage; Lessons to be Learnt* (RISJ Report, May 2011), p. 20; available at [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working\\_Papers/From\\_Their\\_Own\\_Correspondent.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working_Papers/From_Their_Own_Correspondent.pdf).

## Japan Earthquake

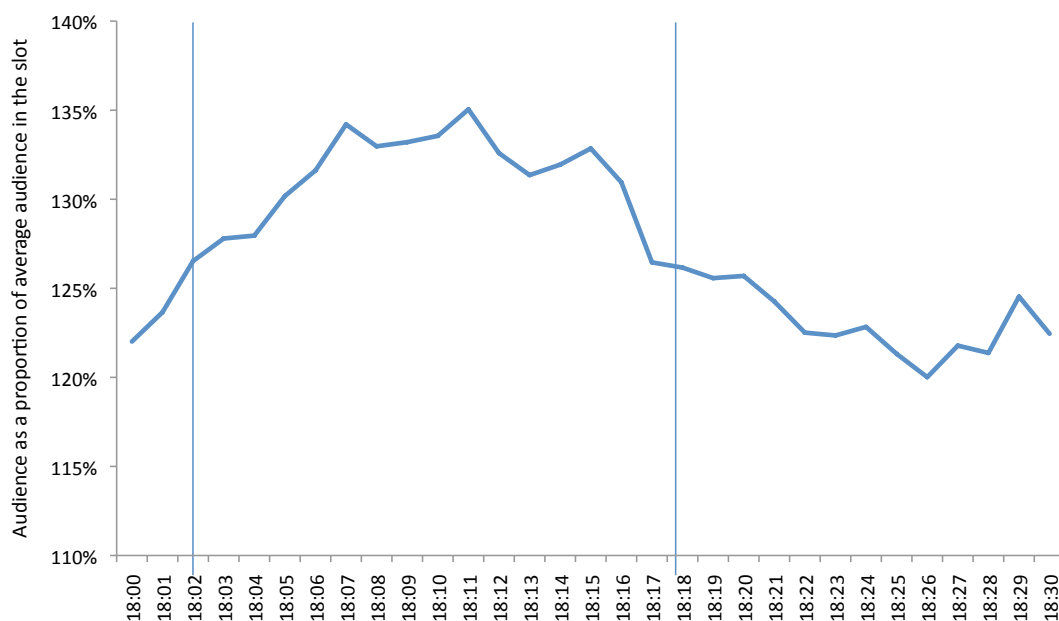
On 11 March 2011 a huge earthquake with a magnitude of 9.03 took place under the sea off the north-east coast of Japan. It was the biggest earthquake ever to hit the country and estimated to be the fifth biggest earthquake ever registered. It triggered tsunami waves of more than 40 metres, some of which travelled more than 10 kilometres inland devastating towns and villages and causing meltdown in three reactors at the Fukushima nuclear power plant.<sup>9</sup>

### *Audiences*

There were high levels of interest in the earthquake and tsunami from the moment the story broke. According to Pulse Survey 84% of respondents followed the story closely and 43% said they wanted to know more. TV audiences were high and online usage was amongst the highest of the year. This was sustained over several days as the impact of the disaster became clear.

TV: The audience for the 6pm was higher than average and grew through the programme. The growth is not unusual as it is a time of day when people return home and switch on during the half hour. However, the audience levels were more than 20% higher than average.

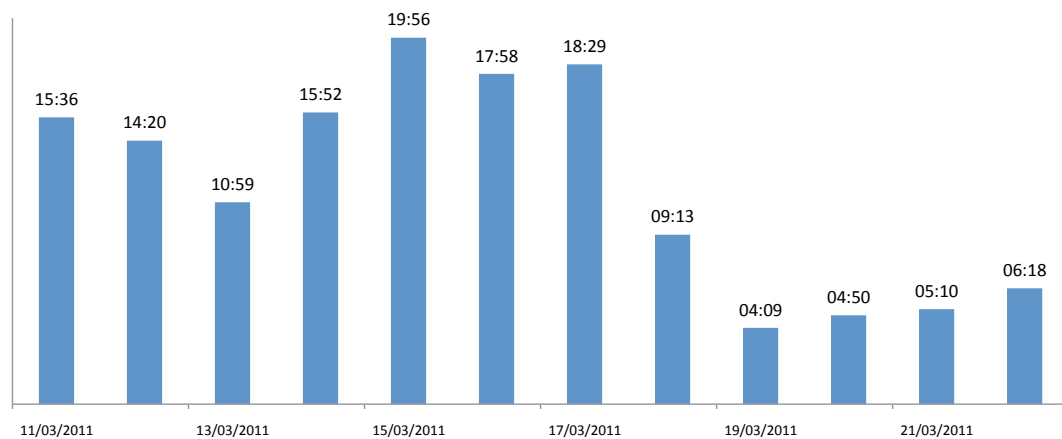
### **Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 11<sup>th</sup> Mar. 2011**



Dramatic pictures and accounts of the tsunami and subsequent crisis provided compelling TV reporting for several days. Coverage of the earthquake accounted for half the 6pm bulletin for a week, with multiple reports and background analysis. After a week, it dropped to five minutes a night and moved from lead story to lower in the bulletin – still a significant level of coverage but a steep drop in comparison to the previous week.

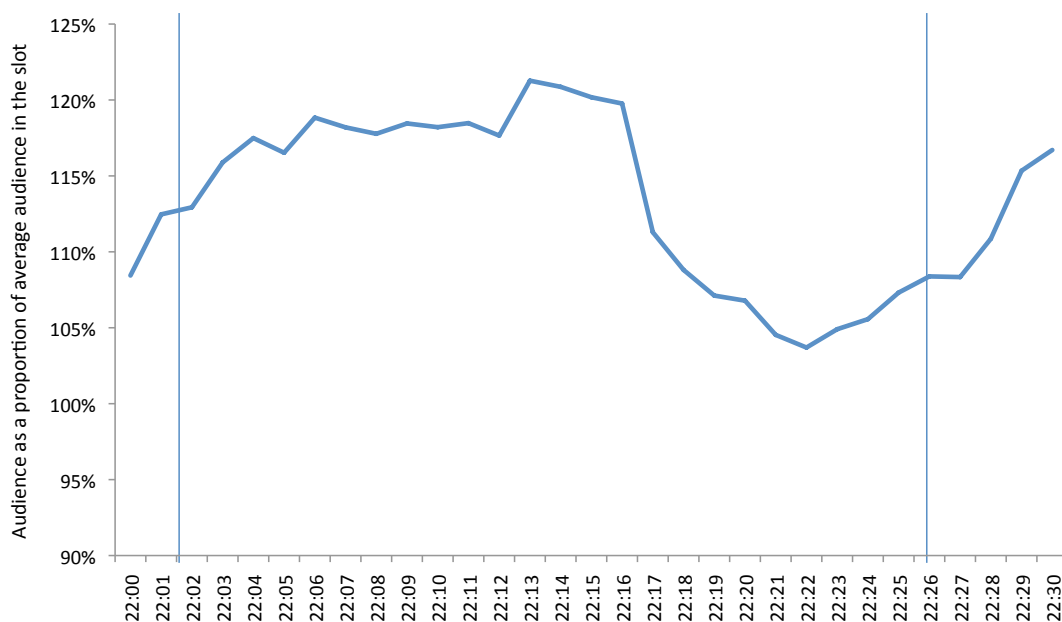
<sup>9</sup> <http://www.webcitation.org/5xgjBRle0>.

## Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Japan Earthquake



The 10pm bulletin also provided high levels of coverage – almost the entire programme on the day of the earthquake – and saw its audience boosted by 20%. However, there was a clear drop in audience after about 16 minutes – although a further ten minutes of coverage and analysis was provided on the story.

## Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 11<sup>th</sup> Mar. 2011



ONLINE: Understandably, reporting of the earthquake dominated news online on 11 March. Although, as with Haiti, online provided multiple angles and story pages, the principal ones all registered very high volumes of usage. This may have been driven by the scale of the event and the unique drama of the video provided. Japanese earthquake stories accounted for six of the top ten stories on BBC online on that day.

## Asian Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 11 Mar. 2011

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
2	Japan earthquake: Tsunami hits north-east	3,822,795
4	In pictures: Japan earthquake and tsunami	1,403,091
5	Huge whirlpool created after Japan quake	989,351
7	Japan hit by tsunami after massive earthquake	742,961
8	Japan quake: 'High rise buildings were swaying'	737,251
9	Japan earthquake: Wave forecast map	541,007
14	Quake was big even for Japan	415,416
15	Japan Earthquake	413,171
16	Asia Pacific	407,984
18	Tsunami hits Japan after large earthquake	385,544
24	Japan earthquake: video reports	247,420
27	Japan earthquake: Narrow escape for office workers	237,621
30	Japan earthquake sparks major fires	224,250
32	Japan earthquake: How the Japan tsunami unfolded	191,463
37	Japan earthquake triggers nuclear shutdown	175,111
39	The moment when the powerful earthquake struck Japan	169,182
40	How Japan tackles its quake challenge	168,981

### *Analysis*

The unprecedented scale of the tsunami and – for the first time – highly dramatic helicopter video of it sweeping inland was clearly a big draw for audiences both on TV and online. Again there were multiple human interest stories of people escaping from the waters – and of those who didn't – and in subsequent days pictures of towns and villages devastated by the event. The developing narrative of potential nuclear disaster which extended over several days will also have captured prolonged interest. Recollection of the Indonesian tsunami in 2006, in which many Western holiday-makers were caught, may also have raised audience interest. In addition, Japan is a developed economy with which audiences could easily identify, rather than a less developed 'more foreign' location. However, for the audience at 10pm – a programme with a remit to more fully report international events – there was a clear drop off after 16 minutes in spite of the programme continuing to run further dramatic coverage. This suggests a limit to audience appetite for multiple angles on a single event. Editors, particularly with a remit for specialist analysis and international coverage, may wish to mark an event of such scale with extended coverage and multiple reports as an indication of seriousness of treatment. There may be public interest arguments for doing so – but the 10pm's audience drop suggests there may be limits to audience interest in extended reporting.

## New Zealand Earthquake

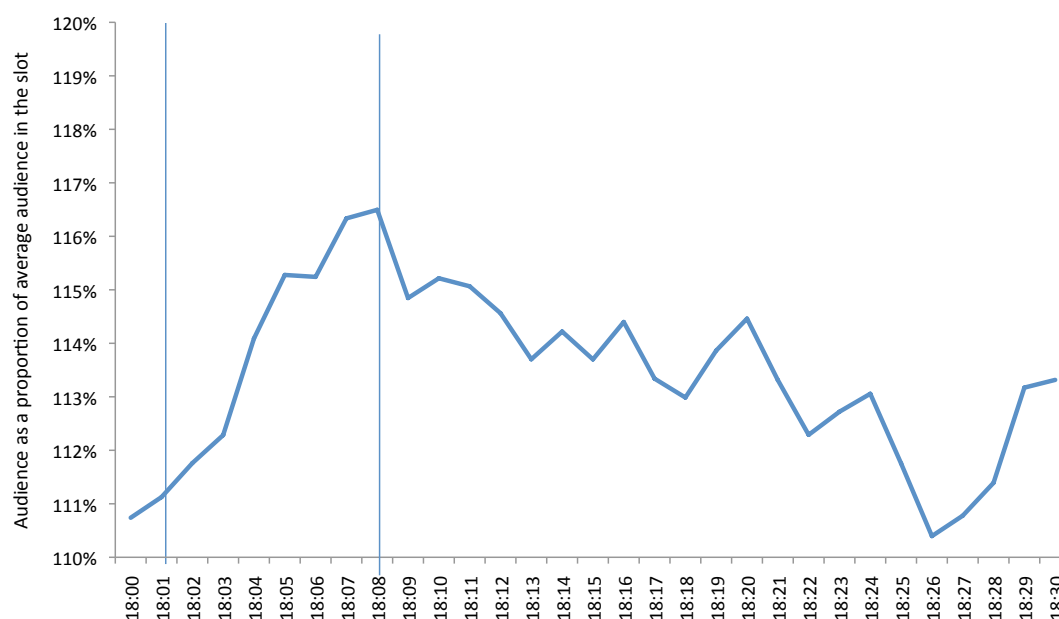
On 22 February 2011 an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale struck the Canterbury region in New Zealand's South Island. The city of Christchurch was worst affected. It came less than six months after a similar earthquake in the same region. More than 180 people were killed and it caused high levels of structural damage.<sup>10</sup>

### *Audience Interest*

Although by the standards of global natural disasters the loss of life was low, initial audience interest in the earthquake was high. Audiences for both the 6pm and the 10pm bulletins were above average, apparently boosted by interest in the event. Online interest was also above average. According to the Pulse Survey 66% said they had followed it closely but only 21% said they wanted to know more.

TV: The 6pm gave slightly more time and prominence to the New Zealand earthquake than the 10pm, leading with it on the day of the event. The story grew the audience at 6pm to above average levels which then tailed off through the rest of the programme. This indicates a particular interest in the lead story.

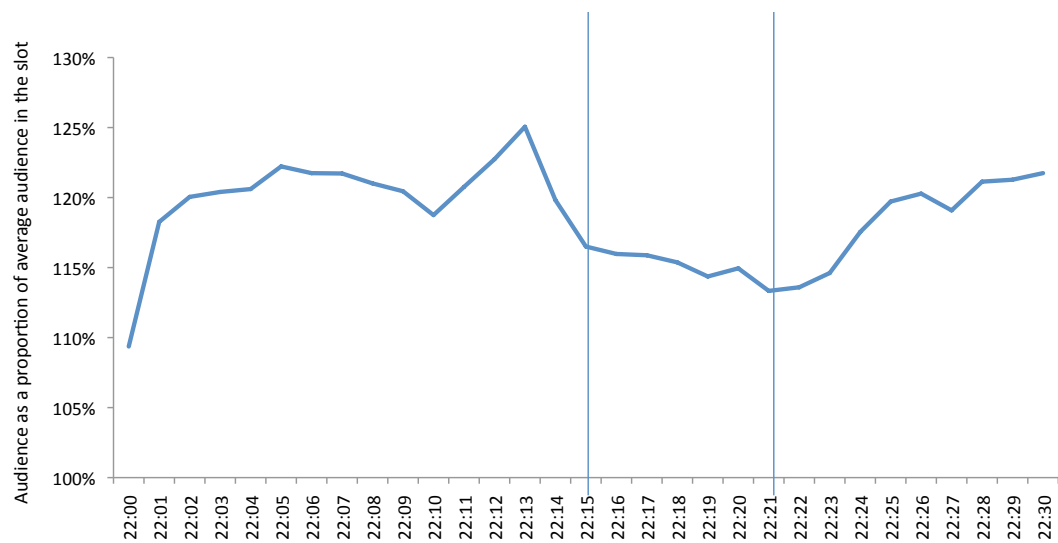
### **Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 2011**



The 10pm didn't lead with the story, placing it second – where it delivered an above average audience for that point in the programme, but not for the programme overall.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1759509/Christchurch-earthquakes-of-2010-11>.

### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 2011



ONLINE: There is a similar story online – strong but not outstanding interest, with just under a million page views for the story pushing it into the top 20 items that day and the fourth most popular story analysed when cumulative figures are taken into account.

### Asia Pacific Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 22 Feb. 2011-28 Feb. 2011

Position	Story	Page Views
14	New Zealand earthquake: 65 dead in Christchurch	948,060
19	In pictures: Earthquake rocks Christchurch	723,207
26	New Zealand earthquake: Christchurch deaths rise to 75	603,314
53	New Zealand earthquake: Rescuers work through night	401,231
90	New Zealand quake: The epicentre town	284,110
102	Third of Christchurch buildings 'could face demolition'	251,604
121	New Zealand: Hundreds missing after Christchurch quake	200,473
124	No survivors as New Zealand quake search goes on	198,312
150	Robovie PC robot wins marathon in Osaka, Japan	167,079
157	In pictures: New Zealand rescues earthquake victims	155,412
165	New Zealand earthquake: Hopes fade for 200 missing	147,056
192	New Zealand earthquake kills 65 and injures many more	125,962
211	New Zealand earthquake: Depth and location key	109,432
215	Christchurch in ruins after earthquake	107,030
238	Earthquake felt in towns around Christchurch	97,022
266	New Zealand earthquake: Christchurch cathedral before and after	82,823
275	First New Zealand earthquake victims named	80,187
282	Christchurch quake: New Zealand holds church services	75,883
292	Image: Christchurch devastation	70,391
295	Shanghai announces 'one-dog policy'	67,966
306	New Zealand earthquake eye-witnesses describe tremor	65,754
307	etc	

### *Analysis*

Given the drama of natural disasters, and that this took place in an English-speaking country with strong historical and cultural ties, it is not surprising there was raised audience interest. However, again perhaps unsurprisingly given low fatality rates, this was not prolonged.

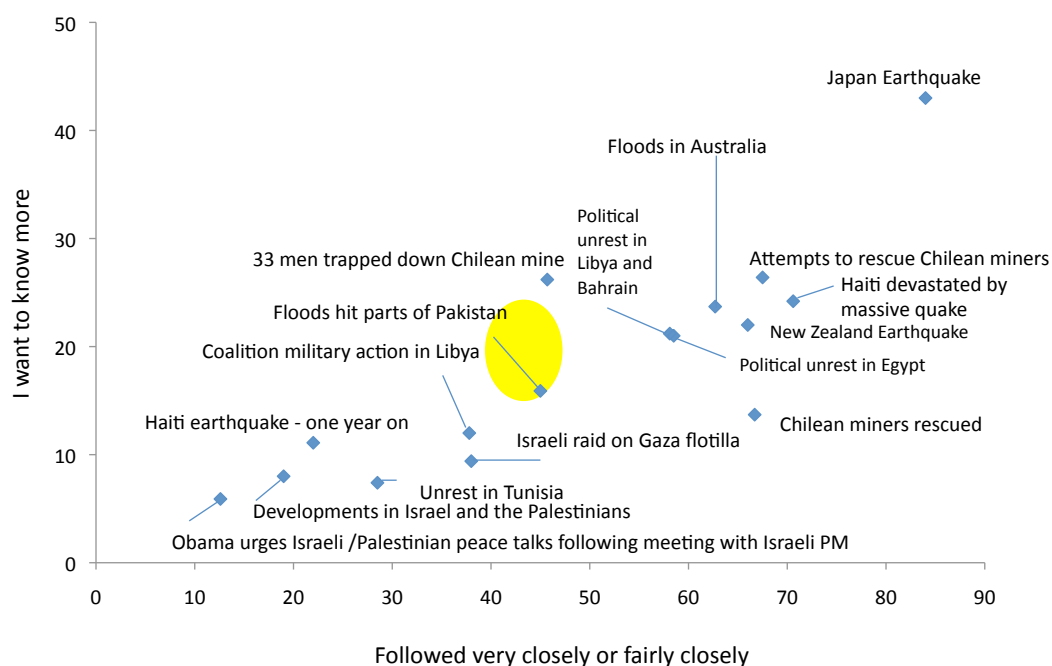
## Pakistan Floods

In August and September 2011 above average monsoon rains produced heavy flooding in the Sindh region of Pakistan. According to the relief agency Action Aid, at least 4.5 million acres of arable land was affected – together with more than 6 million people and 1.5 million homes.<sup>11</sup> The Disasters Emergency Committee said that 18m people had been affected by the flooding.<sup>12</sup>

### *Audience Interest*

The floods in Pakistan show a marked contrast with audience interest in other natural disasters like the Haiti or Japan earthquakes. There were significantly lower levels of interest in the events or appetite to closely follow the story. This is in spite of high levels of TV coverage and concern from humanitarian aid organisations who described the situation as ‘devastating’ and ‘a catastrophe’.

### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More

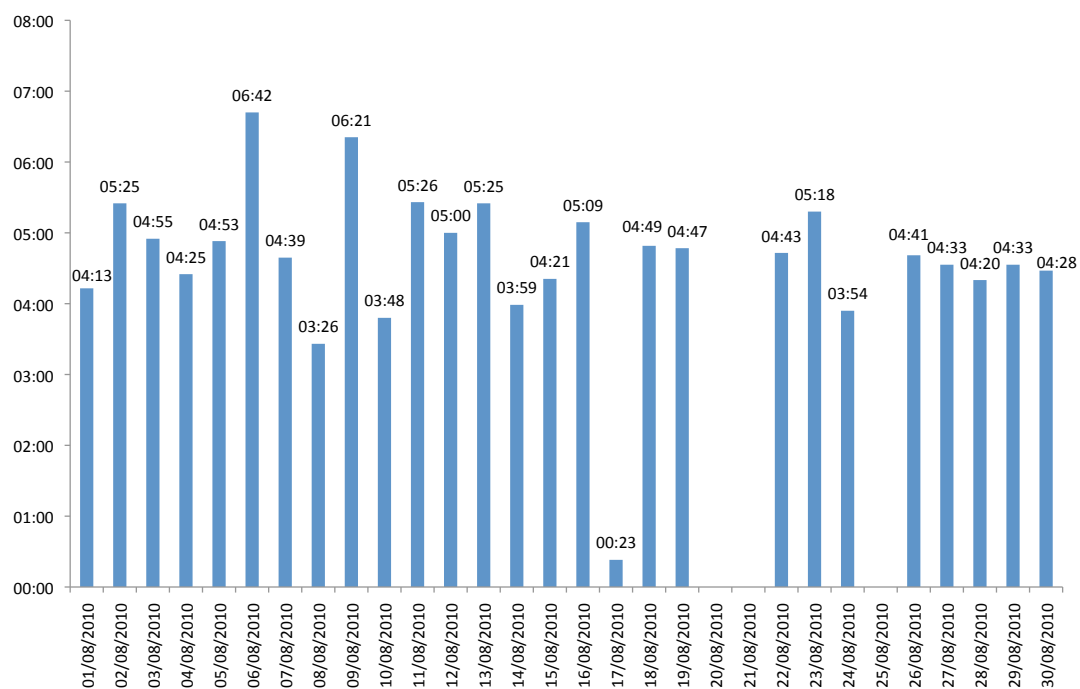


TV: The 10pm in particular gave a high priority to the story, providing nightly coverage through the month of August, and leading with the story five times during the month. This reflected its remit to report the world – but was in the face of low levels of audience engagement.

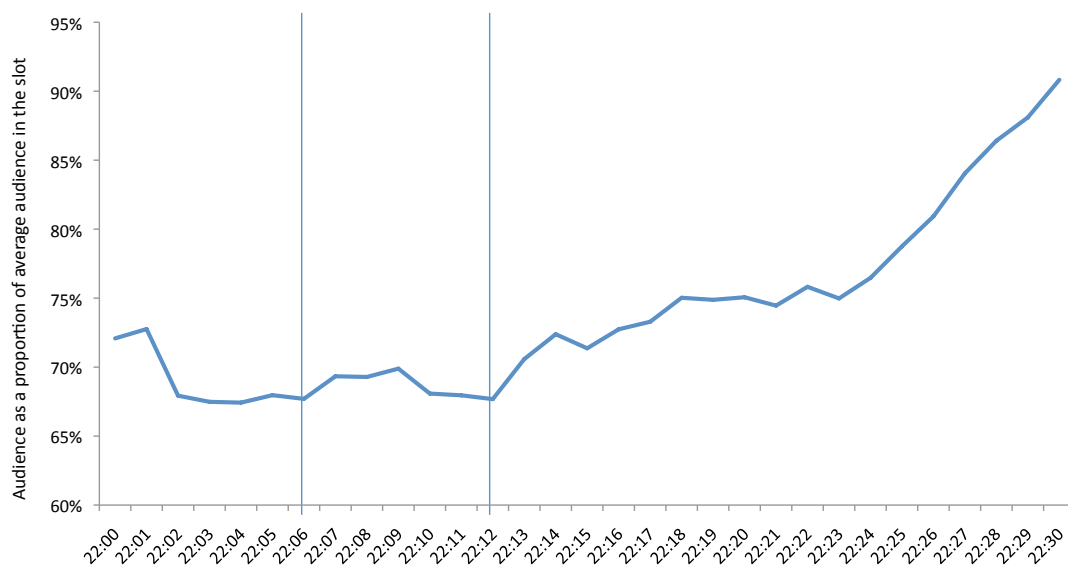
<sup>11</sup> <http://www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/emergencies-conflict/pakistan-floods/pakistan-floods-2011>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.dec.org.uk/appeals>.

## Ten O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Pakistan Floods



## Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 6<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2010



In spite of this commitment to fully reporting the crisis through several weeks, it had little impact on the audience – if anything being audience negative.

ONLINE: The online audience responded in a similarly neutral way – in spite of the scale of the story it never reached the BBC’s online top 20 stories.

#### Asian stories in the BBC Online Top 500 06 Aug. 2010

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
12	Japan tanker was damaged in a terror attack, UAE says	235,620
25	US attends first Hiroshima atomic bomb anniversary	125,662
27	Pakistan floods 'hit 14m people'	113,810
52	Pakistan's flooding sweeps south	57,463
65	NZ judge orders 'odd' name change	44,088
76	South Asia	36,871
78	Asia Pacific	36,456
146	Pakistan floods 'a catastrophe, that's no overstatement'	15,746
147	Hiroshima marks 65th anniversary of atomic bomb attack	15,689
192	NZ couple to name child Superman	9,803
225	India cabinet minister breaks his parliamentary silence	8,088
249	'Not just a monsoon crisis, but a food crisis'	6,997
255	In pictures: Devastating Pakistan floods	6,775
263	Tata Group seeks head of business to replace Ratan Tata	6,570
297	Mutilated Afghan girl Aisha in US for new nose	5,600
307	Surviving Hiroshima: Keiko Ogura	5,178
334	Chinese minister blasts 'vulgar' media	4,498
339	China Foxconn factory confirms another worker death	4,440
348	Flash floods kill dozens in India	4,272

#### *Analysis*

There are two striking features about coverage of the Pakistan floods. First, the audience was not moved in numbers by the reporting – in spite of the scale of the natural disaster, the response of aid agencies, or the UK’s historic and community ties to Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> Further research would be needed to identify the reason for such a markedly different response to that given to other natural disasters. However, the context was prolonged reporting of Pakistan’s ambiguous relationship to the Taliban and Al Qaeda and speculation about alleged ‘harbouring of terrorism’ – which may have undermined public sympathy. Qualitative research for the BBC shows a hostile response to a news story about art in Afghanistan for similar reasons.

The second striking feature is the BBC’s continued pursuit of the story through more than a month and in the face of a clear lack of audience enthusiasm. The 10pm provided almost nightly coverage of often more than five minutes a night. This illustrates the programme’s commitment to fulfilling its remit by reporting an international event of significance despite audience reaction – reporting in the public interest, even if it’s not of immediate interest to the public.

<sup>13</sup> The DEC figures on funds raised for Haiti (£107m) and Pakistan (£71m) seem to reflect the differences in levels of interest and engagement between these two disasters. <http://www.dec.org.uk/appeals>. The ONS based on the 2011 census, reports that 2% of the population of England and Wales identify as ethnically Pakistani, up 0.5% from the 2001 figures and 482,000 Pakistani migrants were reported. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-ethnicity.html#tab-Ethnicity-in-England-and-Wales>.

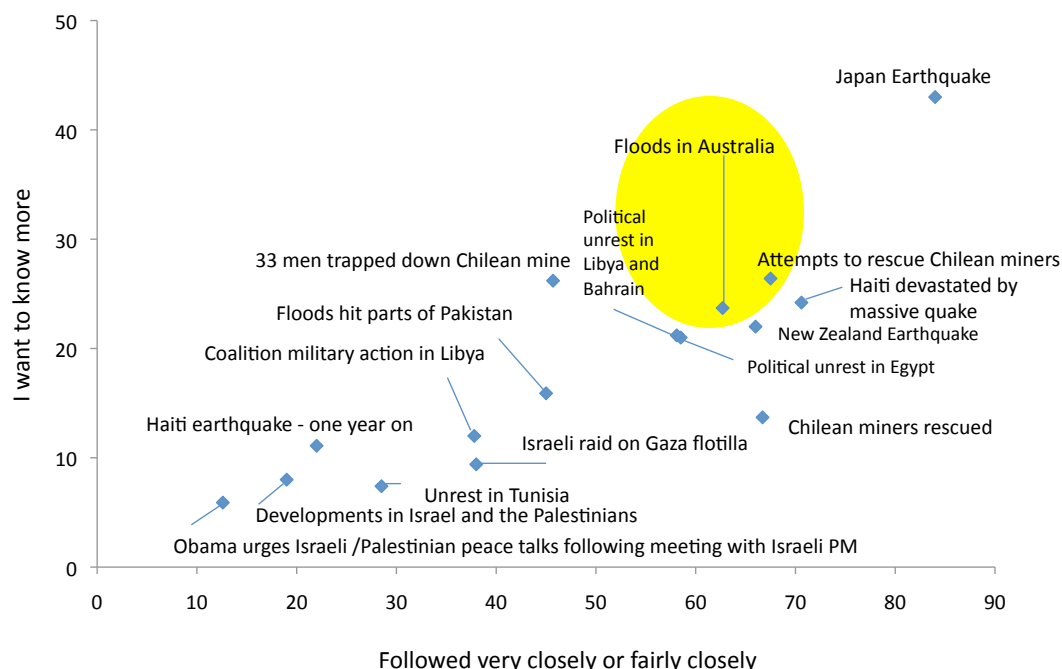
## Australian Floods

In December 2010 and January 2011 a series of flash floods hit the Australian state of Queensland including its capital city, Brisbane. Seventy towns and some 200,000 people were affected and three-quarters of the state was declared a disaster zone. Thirty-five people were killed.

### *Audience Interest*

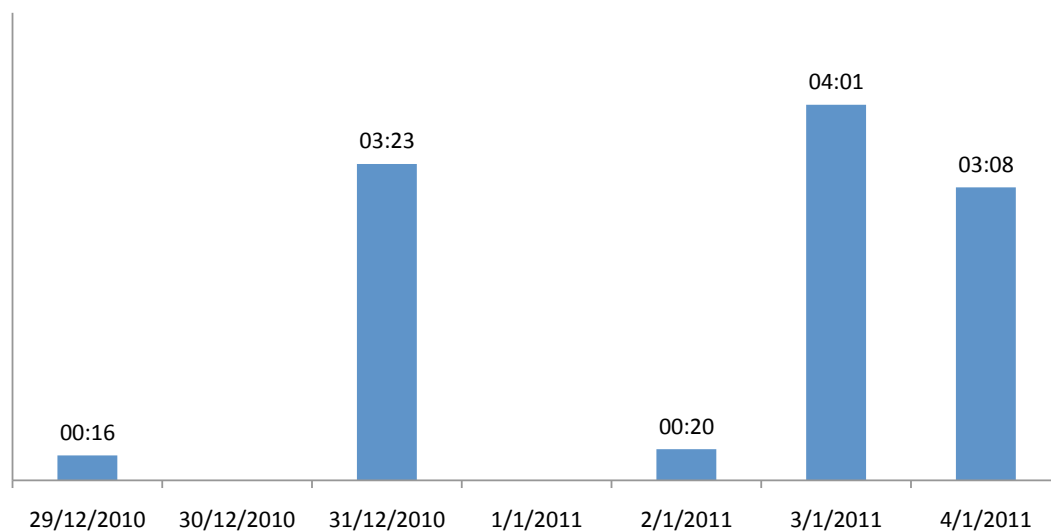
The Pulse Survey shows high levels of interest, above the later events in the Middle East and below only the Japan earthquake, Haiti and the Chilean miners of the stories covered in this report. However, there is the opposite reaction to the one seen for Pakistan's floods, with this high audience interest being served by relatively low levels of coverage.

### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More



TV: The Queensland floods were the lead story once on the 6pm but had little impact on audience figures. The same pattern was seen at 10pm – also the lead item once but with little discernible impact on audience.

## Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Queensland Floods



ONLINE: Conversely, there were high levels of online interest and usage – with similar numbers of page views to some of the higher scoring pages for Haiti, but the overall picture was less dramatic than for Haiti.

## Asia Pacific Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 31 Dec. 2010-6 Jan. 2011

Position	Story	Page Views
18	Philippines killing: 'Killer' caught in victim's photo	728,384
37	Australia's Queensland faces 'biblical' flood	495,251
75	Supplies flown into Queensland's flooded Rockhampton	324,432
81	Asia Pacific	299,699
107	Flooding in Australia's Queensland 'to last weeks'	234,682
114	Snake risk for flooded Queenslanders	227,532
117	Australia: Queensland floods spur more evacuations	222,372
128	Queensland floods: Rockhampton braces for flood peak	201,077
136	Japan new year tuna sale sets price record	190,356
	etc	

## Analysis

Although there was an initially high declared level of audience interest in the story, this did not translate into significantly higher TV audiences – although online usage was strong. One factor affecting both audience interest and editors' response may be time of year, with this event hitting the period between Christmas and across the New Year where news operations are scaled down, news programmes are shorter and marketed less strongly. The Australian floods were effectively managed as a 'spike' story – covered big on one day and then tailing off rapidly in spite of the potential audience interest indicated by the Pulse scores. The audience interest is understandable given the UK's close ties to Australia. The BBC's response may have been an editorial judgement about the significance of the story, or may have been affected by reduced resources at that time of year.

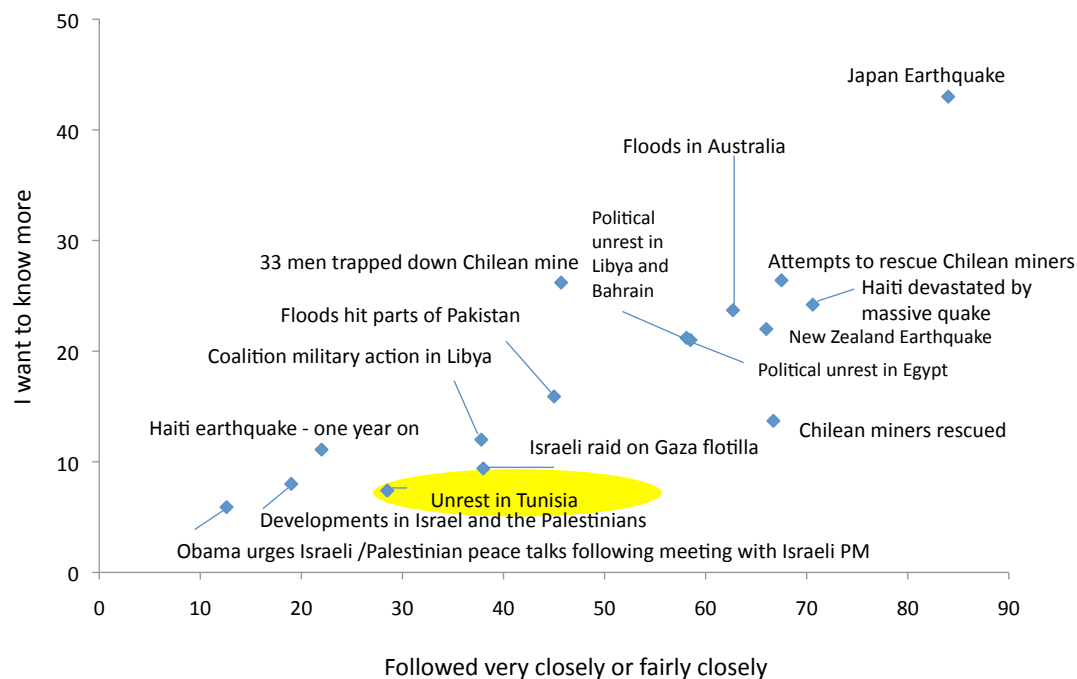
## Tunisia

Tunisia's long-standing President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was deposed in January 2011 after a series of public protests. The demonstrations were the most dramatic in 30 years and were precipitated by high unemployment, food inflation, corruption, a lack of freedom of speech and of other political freedoms. The protests inspired other uprisings in the Middle East, including in Egypt, Libya, and Syria.<sup>14</sup>

### *Audience Interest*

There were very low initial levels of audience interest in the protests in Tunisia, as their significance wasn't clear from the outset. Interest grew when the President stood down but there was little engagement in the underlying issues. Interest in the 'Arab Spring' protests grew significantly as they spread across the region.

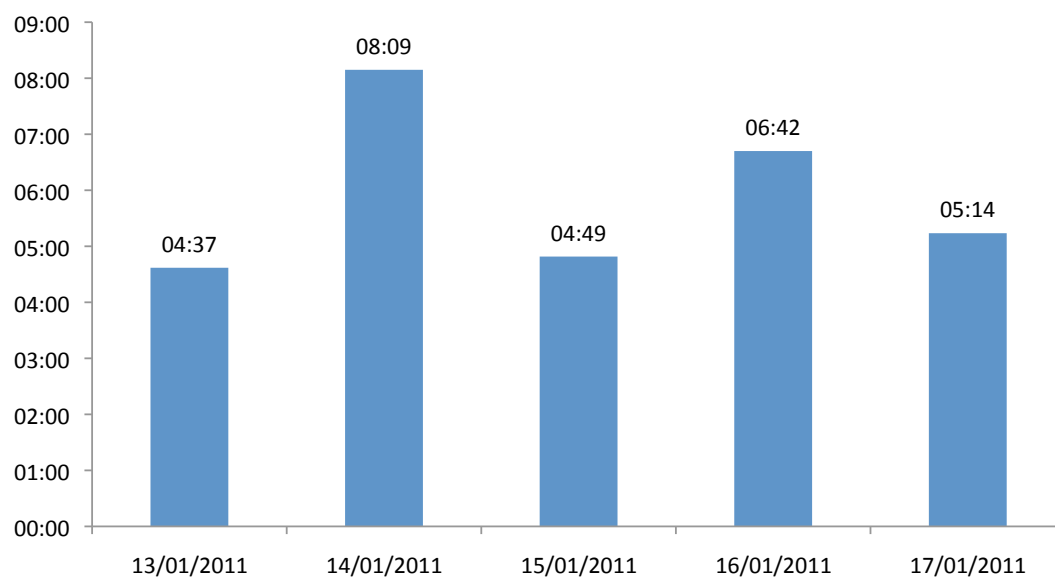
### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More



TV: The BBC picked up on the Tunisia story and ran coverage of the protests from an early stage.

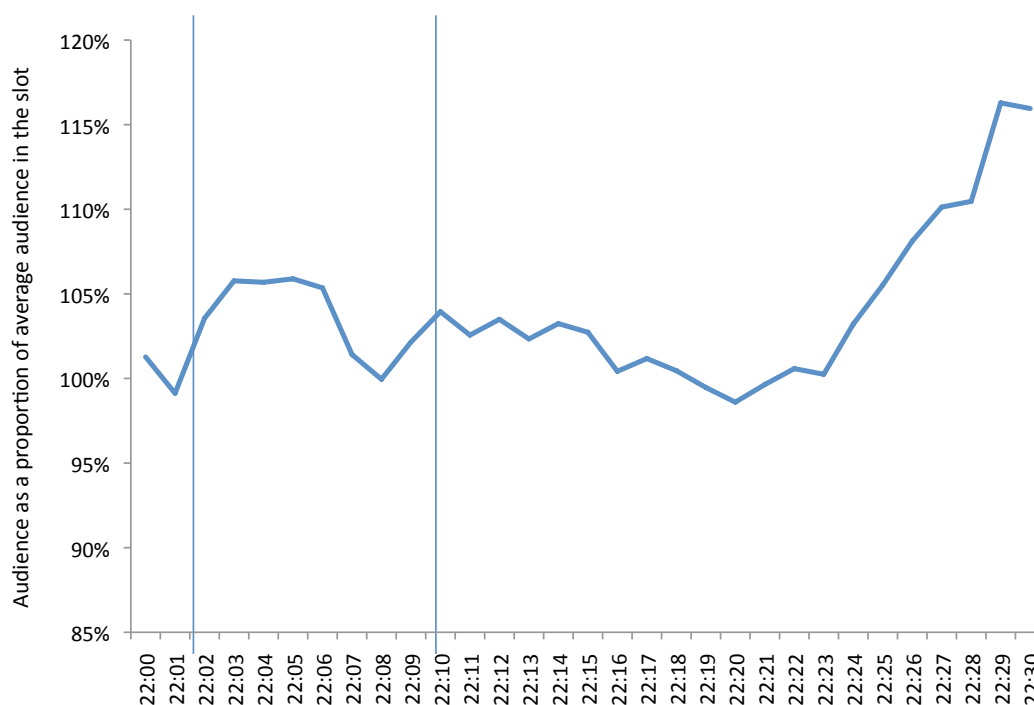
<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian\\_revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian_revolution).

### Ten O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Tunisia Story



Through the peak period of January, the 10pm bulletin ran an average of five minutes per night and it was the lead item on three nights (14–16 January). At the height of events, when it was the lead item, audience interest in the story increased the average audience figure for the programme.

### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 14<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2011



ONLINE: The online audience, which selects its own news agenda rather than editors deciding what is of most interest, did not take up the Tunisia story

with any enthusiasm. On 13 January there were major developments in Tunisia, but it did not reach the top 100 of online stories.

#### **African Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 13 Jan. 2011**

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
101	Rhino Poacher shot dead in Africa	33,580
116	Tunisia President Ben Ali 'will not seek new term'	28,052
130	The UK doctor planning to return to south Sudan	24,778
135	Tunisia protests: Live bullets fired in central Tunis	23,849
369	Somaliland sentences German to four years for porn	6,758
403	Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan wins party primary	6,018
420	Somalia's al-Shabab bans mixed-sex handshakes	5,741
439	Tunisia imposes curfew in Tunis to quell protests	5,437
470	South Sudan's referendum vote reaches 60%, says SPLM	4,980

News of the President standing down pushed it into the top 20, but other angles and analysis on the events in Tunisia stayed way down the top 500 stories viewed.

#### **African Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 14 Jan. 2011**

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
14	Tunisia: President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali forced out	350,213
36	Tunisian protests: Tunis marchers urge Ben Ali to go	115,163
99	Global piracy costs billions, says study	29,067
113	In pictures: Tunisia unrest	24,638
125	Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan wins party primary	22,348
148	Q&A: Tunisia crisis	18,242
196	Police fire tear gas at Tunisian protesters	12,973
218	Somaliland sentences German to four years for porn	11,186
234	Tunisia protests: Cyber war mirrors unrest on streets	10,131
302	Tourist back from Tunisia 'glad to be home'	7,538
362	Tunisian opposition welcomes President Ben Ali's pledge	5,940
371	Pirates seize Danish ship's crew in Gulf of Aden	5,716
378	'Rhino poachers' shot dead in South Africa	5,602
428	Exit Ben Ali - but can Tunisia change?	4,770
454	Is deadly rioting in Tunisia and Algeria linked?	4,409
483	Tunisia President Ben Ali 'will not seek new term'	4,145
497	Somalia's al-Shabab bans mixed-sex handshakes	4,013

#### *Analysis*

Tunisia is a good example of the BBC (the 10pm news in particular) fulfilling its public service mission by plucking out the events in Tunisia at an early stage, against low audience interest, in order to highlight their public significance. It also demonstrates the value of specialist reporting and analysis which enabled them to recognise the potential significance of events in Tunis. The contrast between the BBC's TV editors' choices in relation to the story, and the audience's self-selecting choices online, is clear.

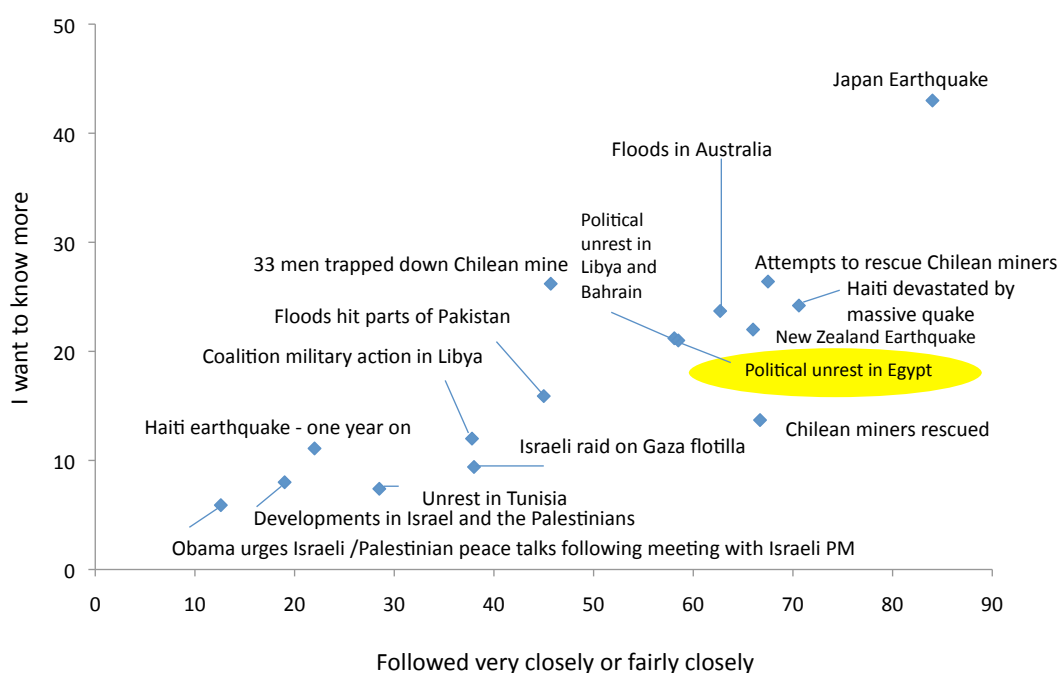
## Egypt

The popular uprising in Egypt started on 25 January 2011. There was a campaign of largely non-violent demonstrations and strikes aimed at deposing President Hosni Mubarak. There were some violent clashes between security forces and protesters with at least 846 people killed and 6,000 injured. After initially resisting, Mubarak stood down on 11 February 2011 and handed power to the country's military council. Protests, demanding democratic reforms, continued through the year.

### *Audience Interest*

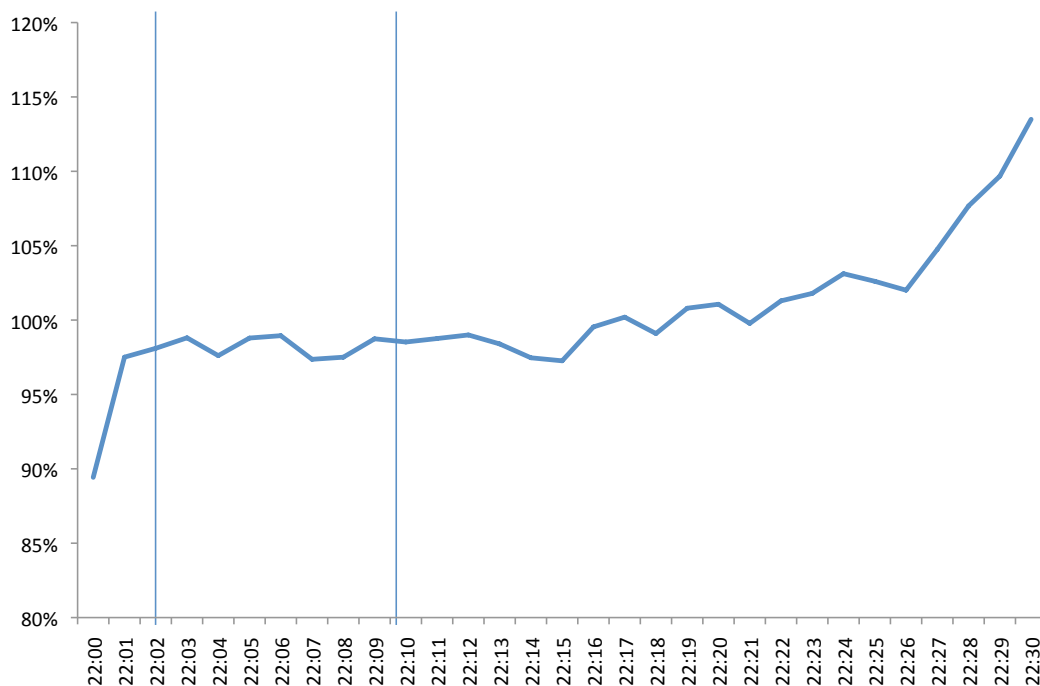
By the time the protests in Egypt started, audiences were alerted to the potential significance of the movement, having seen the Tunisian President fall. So there were reasonably high levels of interest from the outset. The unrest in Egypt scored well on the Pulse index both in terms of audiences following closely and wanting to know more. It did not score as highly as the largely human-interest narratives from Haiti and the rescue of the Chilean miners.

### **Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More**



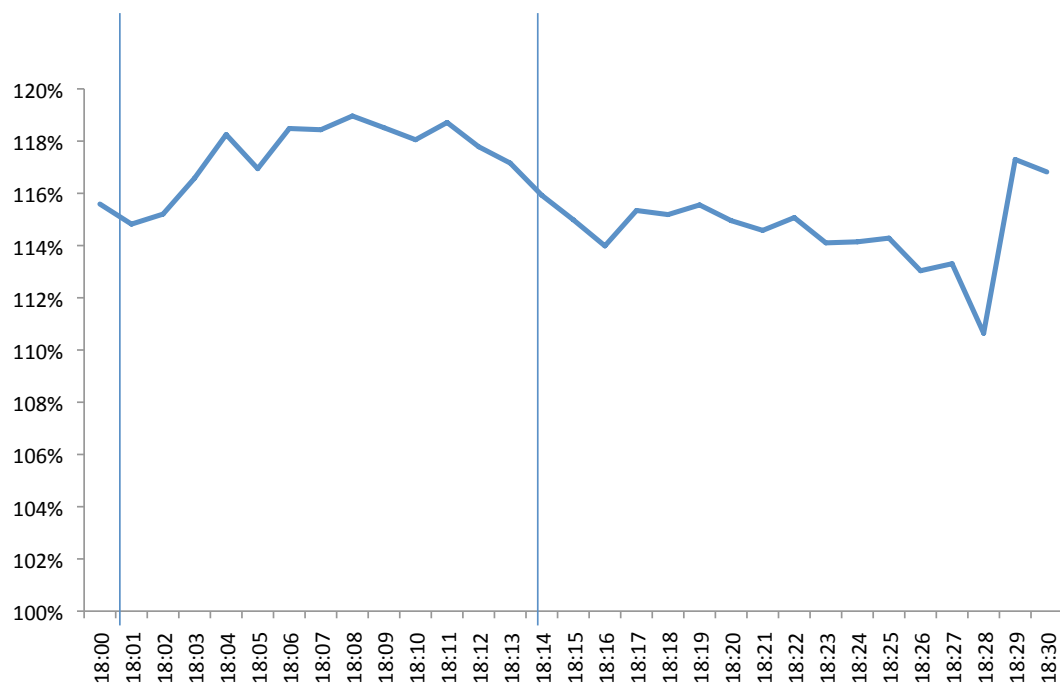
TV: The BBC's coverage illustrates some interesting dynamics between the 6pm news (which usually has a more domestic remit), the 10pm news (which usually has a more international remit), and the online audience. The BBC put Egypt top of the bulletin for the first time for the 10pm on the 27 January 2012 and the audience held up at about average levels. However, it did not figure highly in the online rankings at this stage.

### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 27<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2011



The next day, Egypt was top of the 6pm and drove the audience to above average levels.





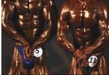





### Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 28<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2011



At this point, Egypt was high in the BBC Online rankings.

## Top Online Stories, 28<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2011\*

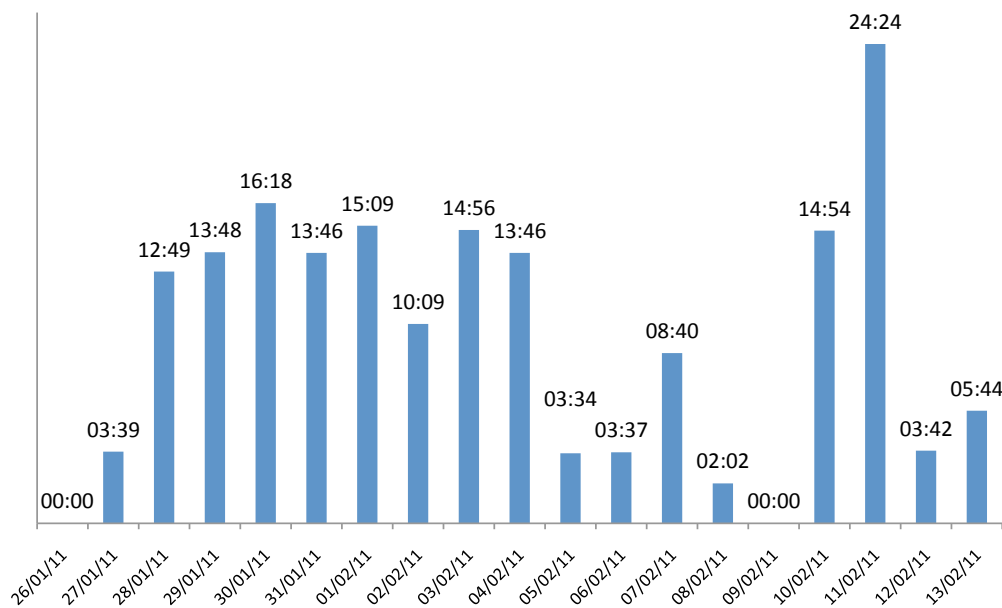
### Top 50 all editions

- 1  **Egypt PM apologises for violence**  
Page views: 1,055,543  
7.3% of the top 50  
Middle East
- 2  **Queensland survives Cyclone Yasi**  
Page views: 883,414  
6.1% of the top 50  
Asia Pacific
- 3  **LIVE: Egypt unrest**  
Page views: 791,743  
5.5% of the top 50  
Middle East
- 4  **Pub TV football choice 'upheld'**  
Page views: 790,457  
5.5% of the top 50  
Business
- 5  **Masters of the universe: meet the world's best-paid men**  
Page views: 604,229  
4.2% of the top 50  
Business
- 6  **BBC coverage of Egypt unrest**  
Page views: 553,814  
3.8% of the top 50  
Election 2010
- 7  **Liverpool rejects 'big society'**  
Page views: 515,686  
3.6% of the top 50  
Merseyside
- 8  **Tough new smoking ban in New York**  
Page views: 507,357  
3.5% of the top 50  
US and Canada
- 9  **BBC coverage of Egypt protests**  
Page views: 505,429  
3.5% of the top 50  
Election 2010
- 10  **Aid money 'spent on Pope visit'**  
Page views: 487,086  
3.4% of the top 50  
Politics

\*Note: These are not comparable to other online figures.

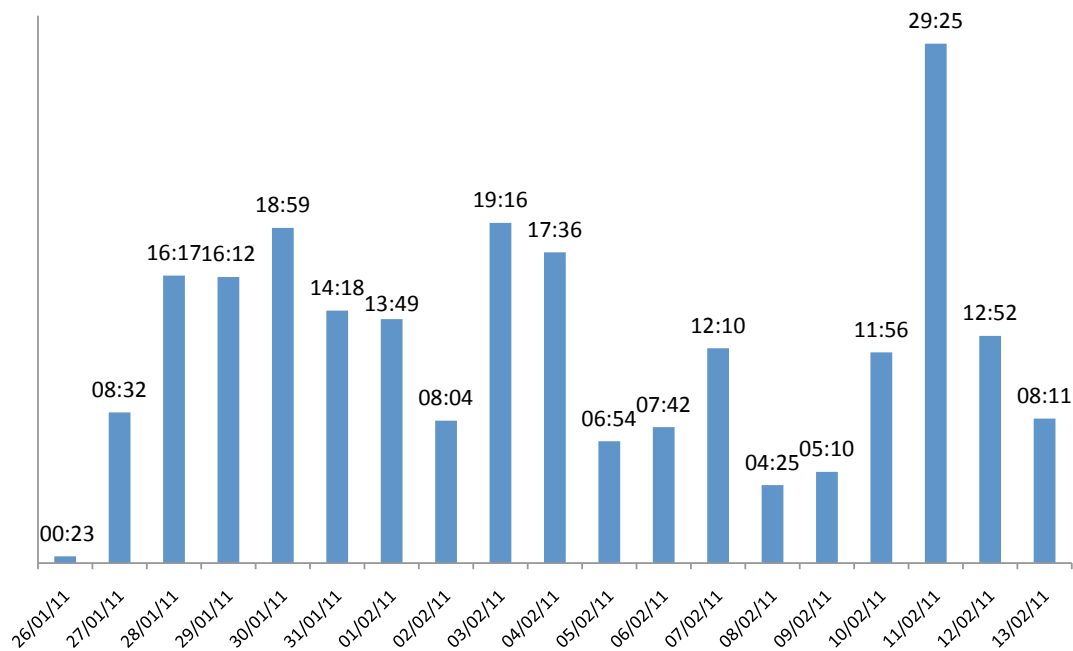
The BBC frequently devoted half of the 6pm news to the Egyptian uprising. This peaked on 11 February when Mubarak stepped down.

### Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Egyptian Uprising



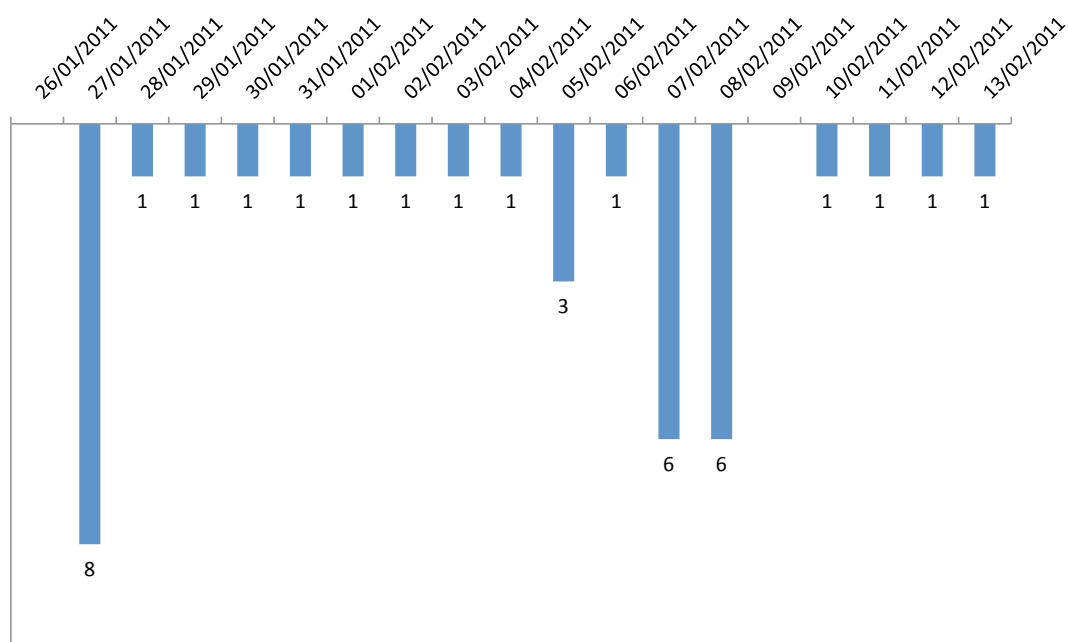
The 10pm had a little more coverage than the 6pm and followed a similar pattern.

### Ten O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Egyptian Uprising

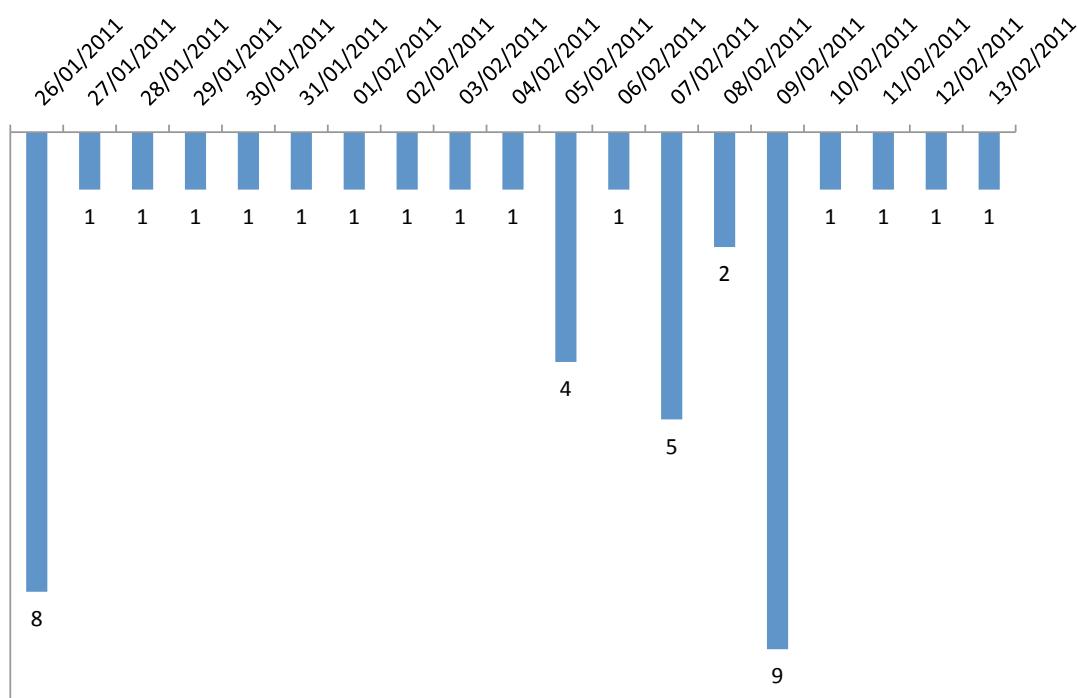


Egypt was consistently at the top of the running order for both the 6pm and the 10pm bulletins.

### Six O'Clock News, Position of Egyptian uprising

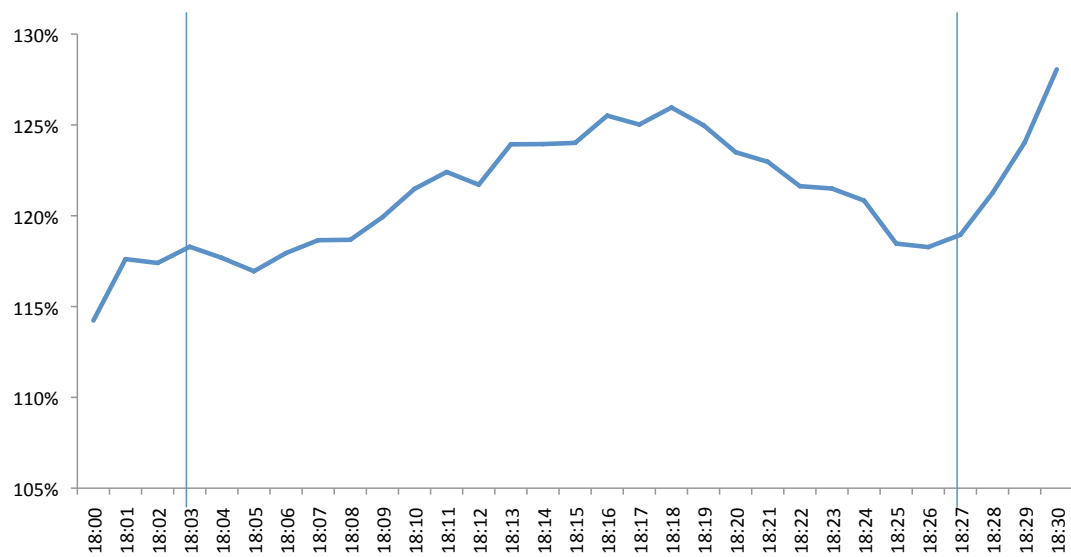


### Ten O'Clock News, Position of Egyptian uprising



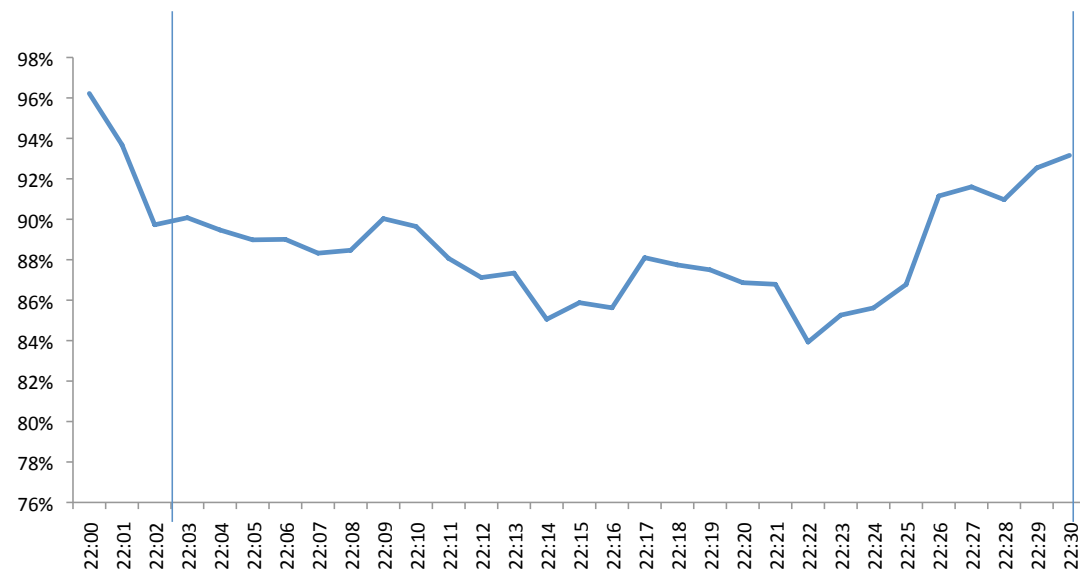
Mubarak's letter of resignation was read at 5pm UK time on 11 February. The 6pm devoted the whole programme to it and got an above-average audience that built steadily for 20 minutes. After that, the audience dropped away, perhaps again illustrating that the audience does not have the same appetite for the level of extended coverage the editors wish to provide.

### Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 11<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011



The audience to Egypt on the 10pm was a bit below average but stable.

### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 11<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011













This was a familiar pattern for the 10pm during this period – surprising given the audience for the programme is normally more attuned to international coverage. Given the time difference, with Egypt two hours ahead of the UK, it may be that the UK audience felt by late evening they already knew the primary events of the day from Egypt. It is clear the 6pm benefited more than the 10pm in audience uplift from coverage of Egypt.

## Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2011



ONLINE: The online audience engaged strongly with the story once events had begun to gain momentum. However, again, online interest lagged behind the commitment given to the story by TV editors. Egypt was the biggest story online for the BBC on 3 February.

## Top Online Stories, 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2011\*

Top 50 all editions		
1		<b>Egypt PM apologises for violence</b> Page views: 1,055,543 7.3% of the top 50 Middle East
2		<b>Queensland survives Cyclone Yasi</b> Page views: 883,414 6.1% of the top 50 Asia Pacific
3		<b>LIVE: Egypt unrest</b> Page views: 791,743 5.5% of the top 50 Middle East
4		<b>Pub TV football choice 'upheld'</b> Page views: 790,457 5.5% of the top 50 Business
5		<b>Masters of the universe: meet the world's best-paid men</b> Page views: 604,229 4.2% of the top 50 Business
6		<b>BBC coverage of Egypt unrest</b> Page views: 553,814 3.8% of the top 50 Election 2010
7		<b>Liverpool rejects 'big society'</b> Page views: 515,686 3.6% of the top 50 Merseyside
8		<b>Tough new smoking ban in New York</b> Page views: 507,357 3.5% of the top 50 US and Canada
9		<b>BBC coverage of Egypt protests</b> Page views: 505,429 3.5% of the top 50 Election 2010
10		<b>Aid money 'spent on Pope visit'</b> Page views: 487,086 3.4% of the top 50 Politics

\*Note: These are not comparable to other online figures.

### *Analysis*

The BBC made a significant commitment to the Egyptian protests from an early stage. There was raised audience interest, having been primed to the potential significance by the deposing of the Tunisian President. However, the early evening news clearly benefited to a greater extent than the 10pm – in spite of the international remit for the later programme. This may reflect the time difference (with the day having ended in Cairo before the 10pm came to air) and audiences using a range of information sources and programmes to follow a fast-moving and developing issue – so by 10pm audiences knew the main events of the day. It was also a story which, of course, received expansive coverage across all other media.

The online audience engaged strongly with the story – but lagged by a day behind the commitment given to it by TV editors. This may illustrate the value of professional editors filtering events and promoting those of public interest before the self-selecting online audience reaches them.

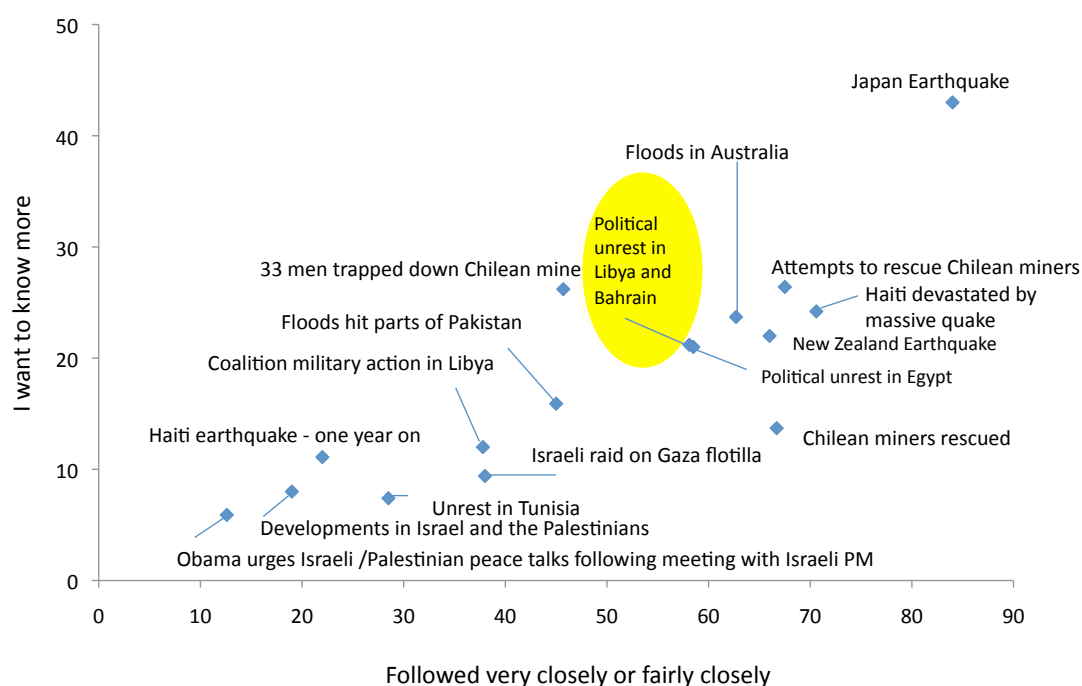
## Libya

The revolution in Libya, which eventually deposed President Gaddafi, began with protests in the city of Benghazi on Tuesday, 15 February 2011. These led to clashes with security forces who fired on the crowd. The protests escalated into a rebellion that spread across the country, with the forces opposing Gaddafi establishing an interim governing body, the National Transitional Council. In early March, Gaddafi's forces rallied, pushed eastwards and retook several coastal cities before attacking Benghazi. A UN resolution authorised member states to establish and enforce a no-fly zone over Libya, and to use 'all necessary measures' to prevent attacks on civilians. Gaddafi was eventually captured and killed in October 2011.

### *Audience Interest*

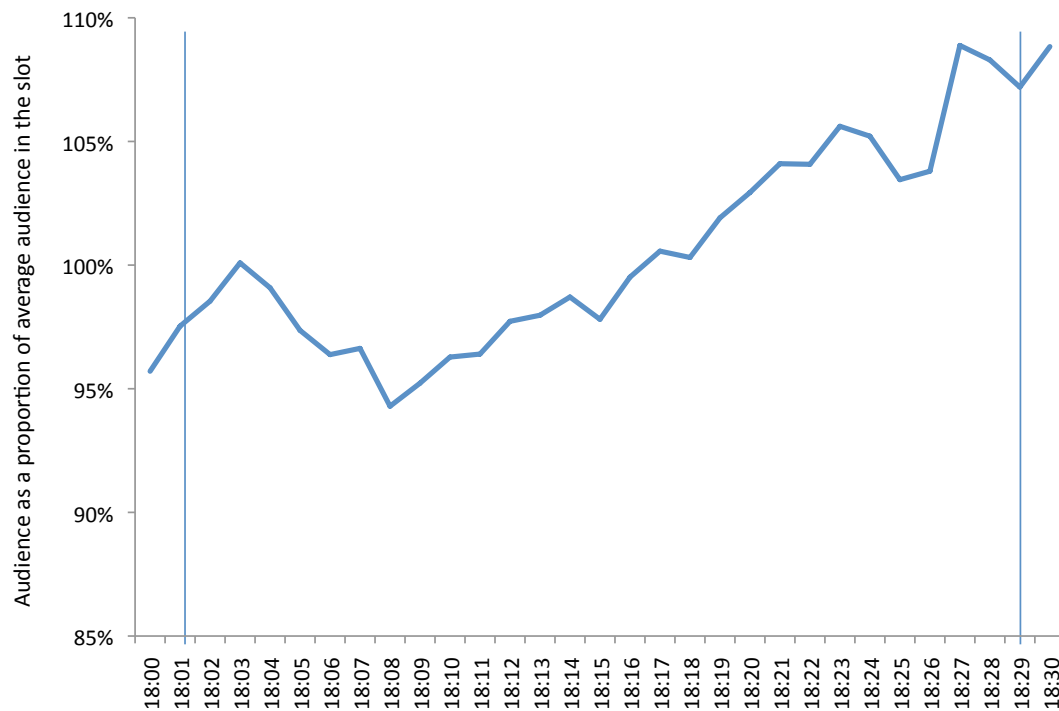
With the potential consequences of unrest in the Middle East established for the audience following Tunisia and Egypt, there were strong levels of interest in Libya from the outset – and those levels of interest remained high across several weeks. Interestingly, audiences engaged more strongly with the story during the negotiation of, and after, the UN resolution authorising member states to prevent attacks on civilians. This was probably due to the more direct involvement of UK forces in enforcing the no-fly zone which benefited the opposition.

### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More

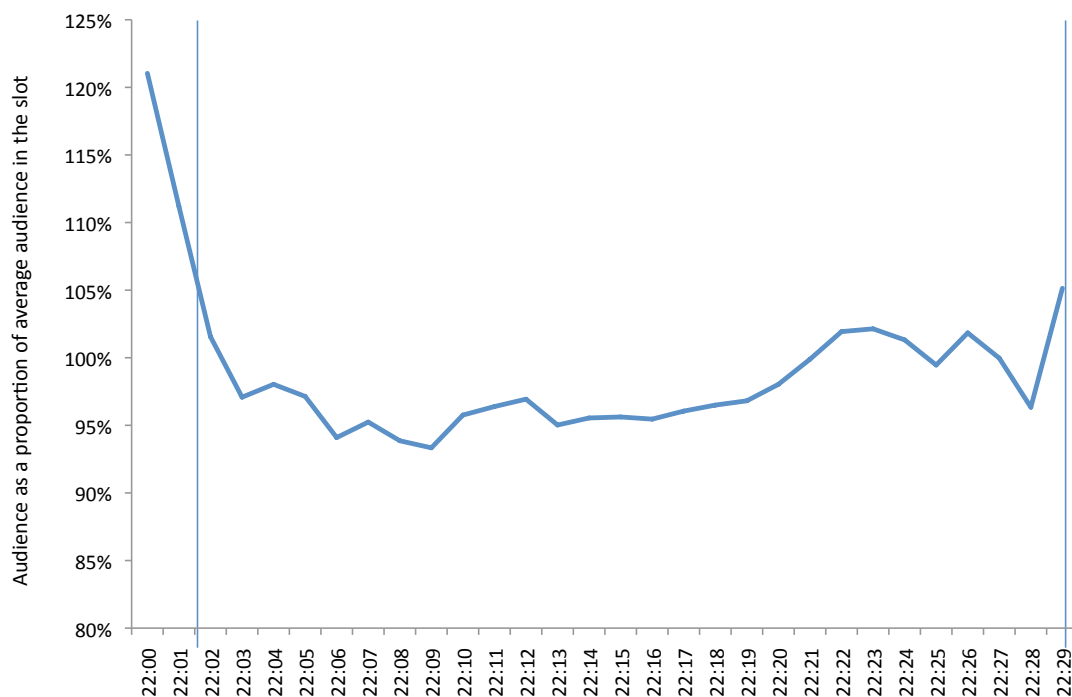


TV: The time given to the story fluctuated with events – but stayed near the top of the 6pm over a period of weeks. However, the story did not disrupt the usual audience trends for either programme (gradually building through the 6pm, gradually tailing off through the 10pm). As with Egypt, the audience reaction to the 6pm was stronger than that at 10pm. (See vertical axes.)

### Six O'Clock News Minute by minute audience 18 Mar. 2011

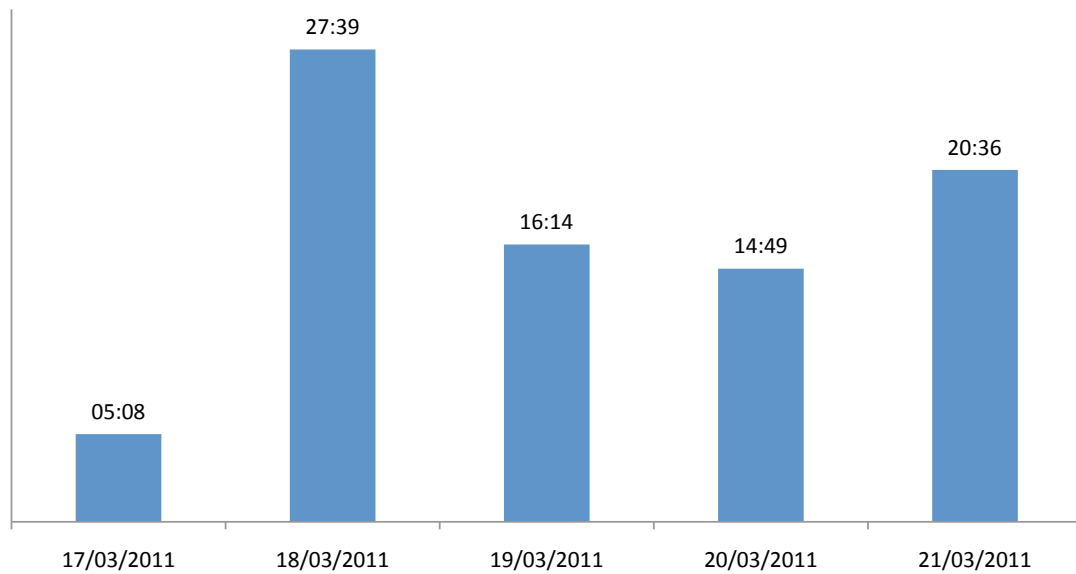


### Ten O'Clock News Minute by minute audience 18 Mar. 2011



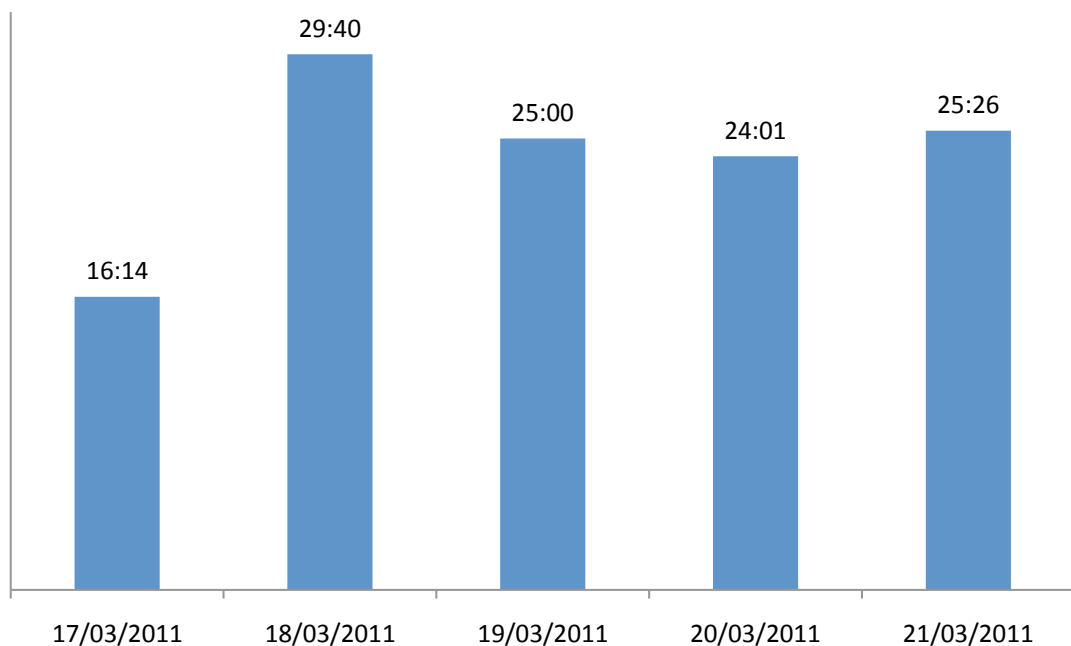
Audiences picked up on both 6pm and 10pm as the UN resolution was debated and approved. Both programmes devoted a significant amount of time to the UN resolution.

### Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Libya Resolution



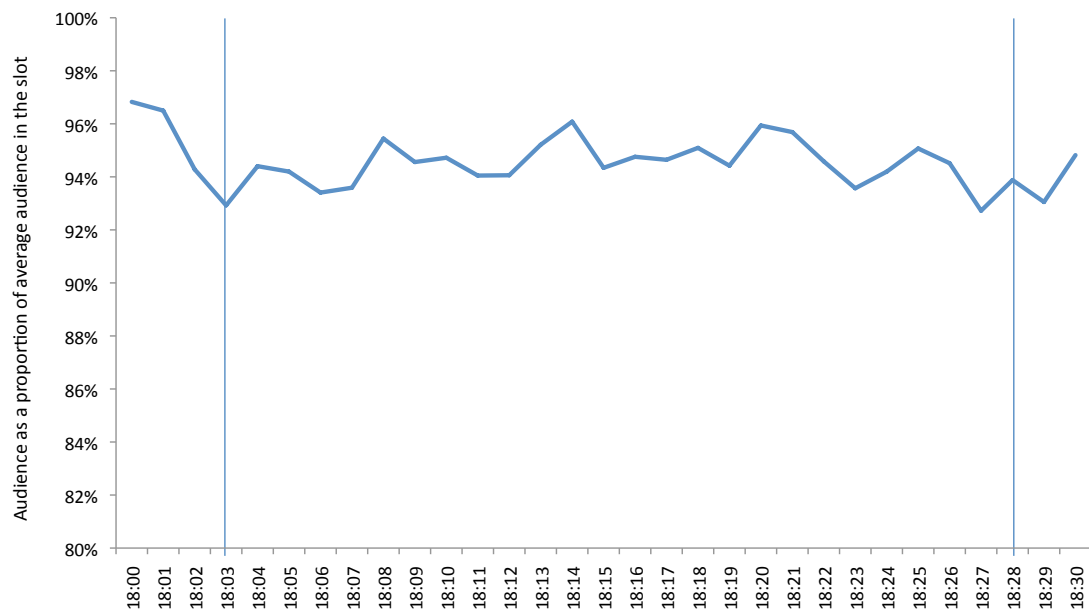
The 10pm devoted more time to the story than the 6pm (as per its more international remit).

### Ten O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Libya Resolution

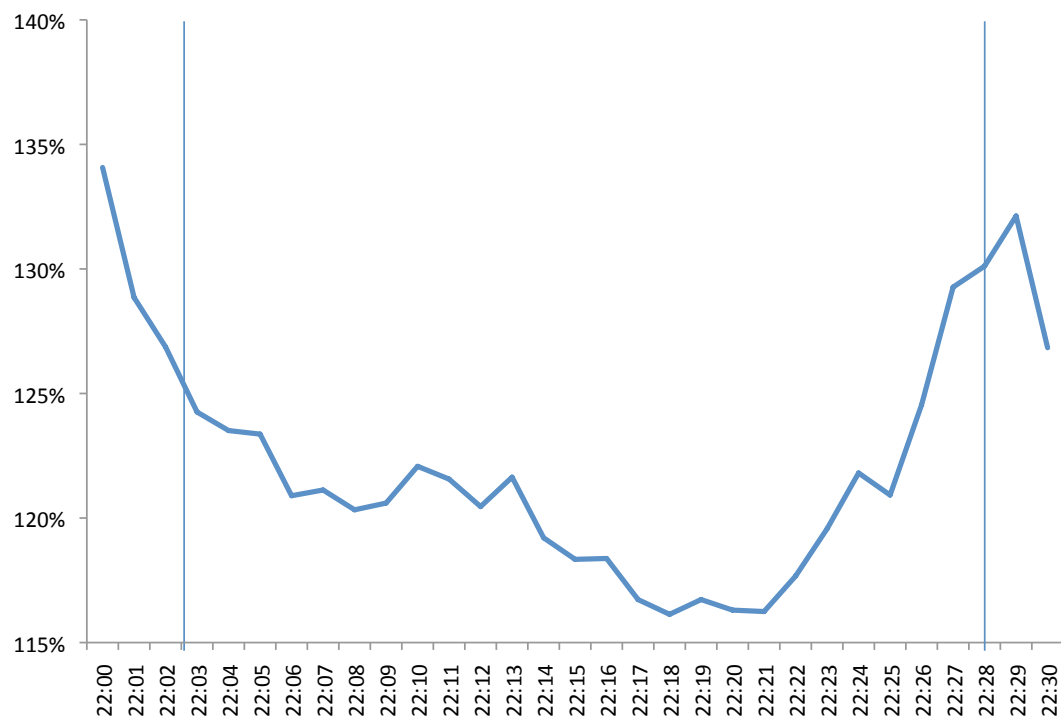


When the Gaddafi regime began to fall in August, again both programmes devoted significant time and profile to events. This time, however, the 6pm audience stayed at broadly average levels, while the audience for the 10pm was significantly increased. (See vertical axes.)

### Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 22 Aug. 2011



### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 22 Aug. 2011



ONLINE: Libya was the biggest story in the Middle East section in February – but only one story made it into the top 10 online stories overall.

## Middle East Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 16 Feb. 2011-22 Feb. 2011

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
3	Libya: Pro-Gaddafi forces 'to observe ceasefire'	667,186
14	Libya: UK forces prepare after UN no-fly zone vote	357,737
15	David Cameron cautious over Libya ceasefire offer	338,020
21	Libya: President Obama gives Gaddafi ultimatum	266,392
37	Yemen unrest: 'Dozens killed' as gunmen target rally	131,436
43	Libya: UN backs action against Colonel Gaddafi	93,339
57	Cameron's first war	67,890
70	Libya in maps	54,556
73	Saudi king warns against unrest while boosting benefits	53,135
81	Libya: Saif al-Islam Gaddafi says UN resolution 'unfair'	44,238
88	Libya unrest: West moves to enforce no-fly zone	39,971
90	Libya: Foreign minister announces immediate ceasefire	39,249
91	Tripoli eyewitness: Afraid to watch TV	39,238
152	Ivory Coast crisis: 'Deadly shelling' in Abidjan	19,088
155	Libya unrest: How to monitor Gaddafi's ceasefire	18,858
158	Libya Crisis	18,593
161	DR Congo blocks Soco from oil search in Virunga park etc	18,094

### *Analysis*

Following Tunisia and Egypt, audience recognition of the significance of the Libya uprising was higher and meant there was strong engagement from an early stage. Unusually, a political development, the UN resolution authorising protection of civilians, drove higher levels of engagement. This was most likely due to a recognition that the West was about to become directly involved militarily. It might also have been a response to action to prevent the attacks on civilians – the sense that ‘something is being done’ and that a resolution to a conflict with many civilian victims might be possible.

Later in the year, as Gaddafi fell, audience interest again rose – responding to the drama of hunt for Gaddafi, a familiar figure to Western audiences.

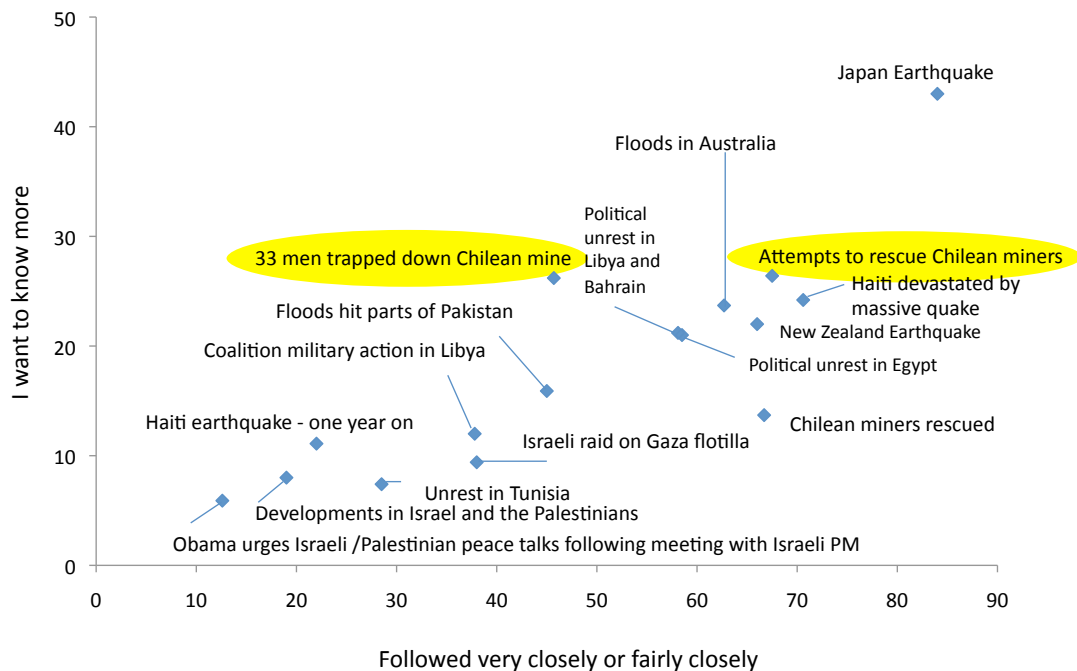
## Chilean Miners

In August 2010 a collapse at the Copiapo mine in the Atacama desert in Chile trapped 33 miners some 700 metres underground and 5 kilometres from the mine entrance. Seventeen days after the accident, a note was retrieved confirming that all 33 were still alive. The Chilean government began a long but ambitious rescue attempt which culminated on 13 October 2010 when all 33 were brought safely to the surface.

### *Audience Interest*

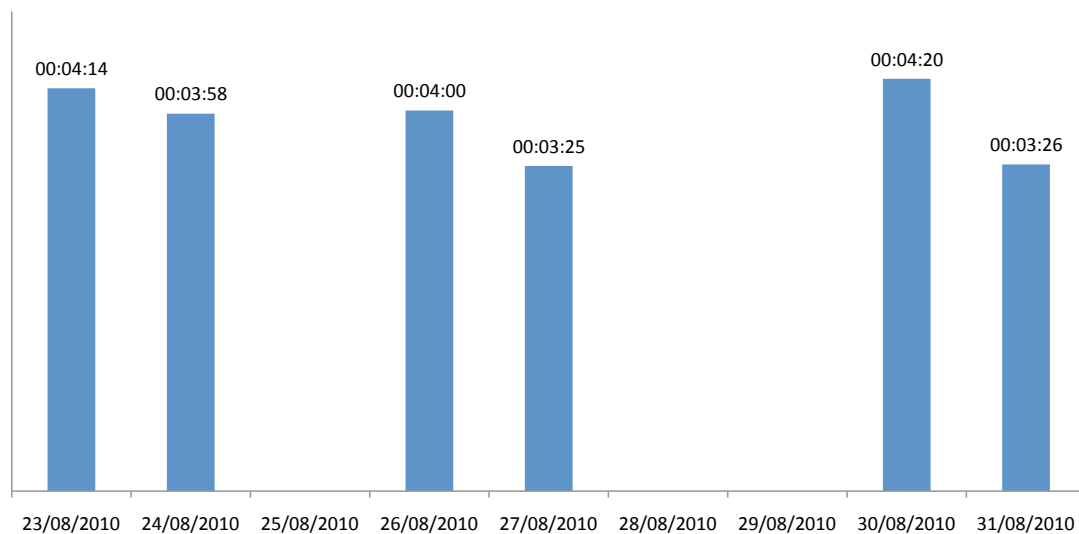
Together with the Japan and Haiti earthquakes, this story was the biggest audience draw of the period studied. It scored highly across both TV and online, with audiences following developments closely and with a strong appetite for more. Of all the stories and programmes analysed, this scored second highest, after the Japan earthquake, on the criteria of wanting to know more in the Pulse Survey.

### Follow Closely and Wanting to Know More

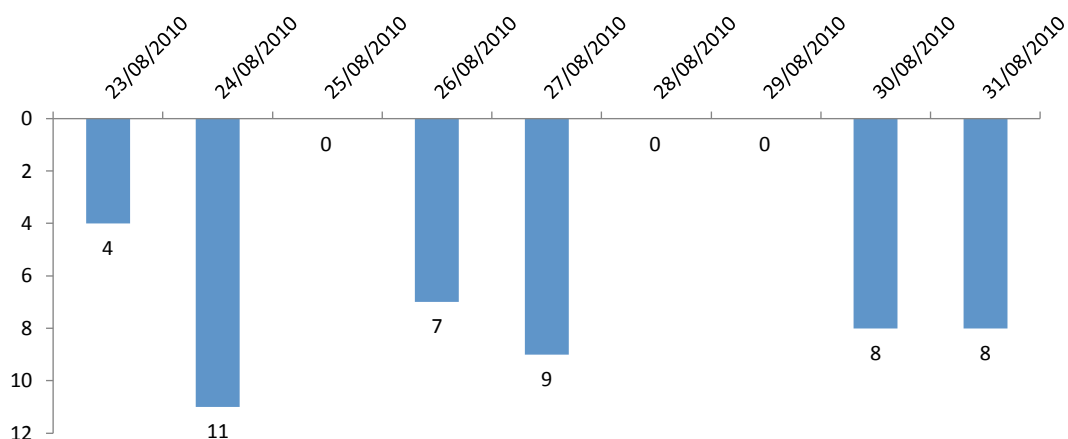


TV: In common with other news sources, the original mining accident went unnoticed by the 6pm or 10pm bulletins. When the miners were first located, the 6pm devoted four minutes to the story mid-bulletin for a number of nights.

### Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Chilean Miners

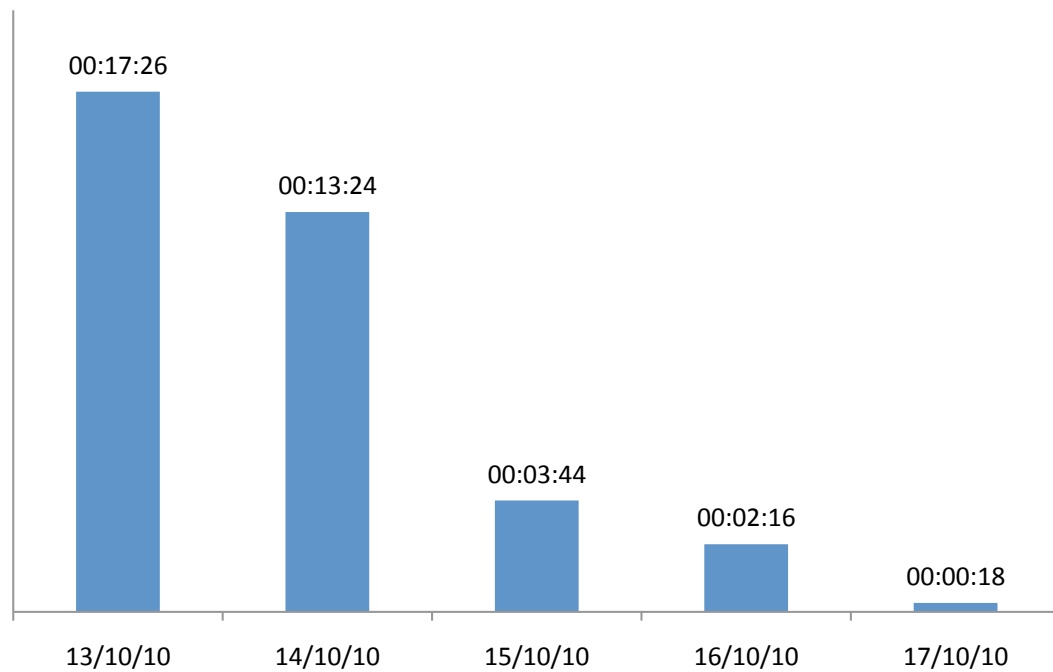


### Six O'Clock News, Position of Chilean Miners

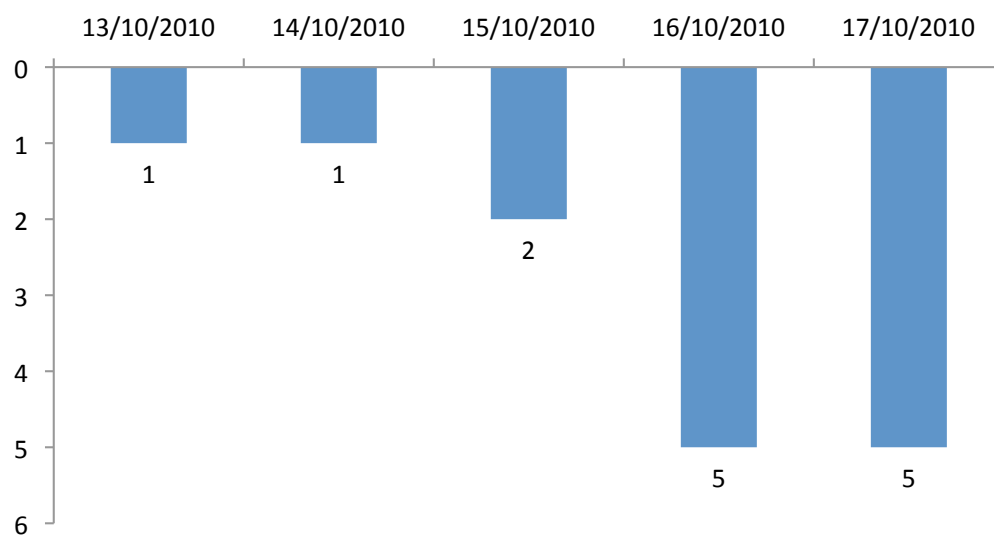


TV didn't seek to exploit the drama in its early stages. Once the rescue became tangible the duration and placement of coverage increased. However, even at this stage, the story didn't impact audience levels for 6pm discernibly. The day of the rescue there was extensive coverage, which then subsided rapidly over the days that followed.

### Six O'Clock News, Time Devoted to Chilean Miners

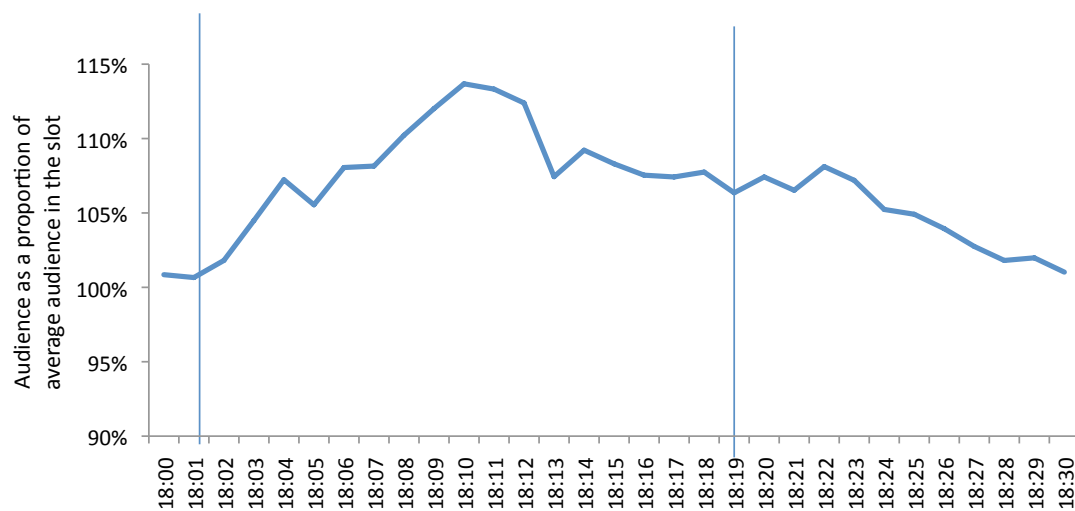


### Six O'Clock News, Position of Chilean Miners

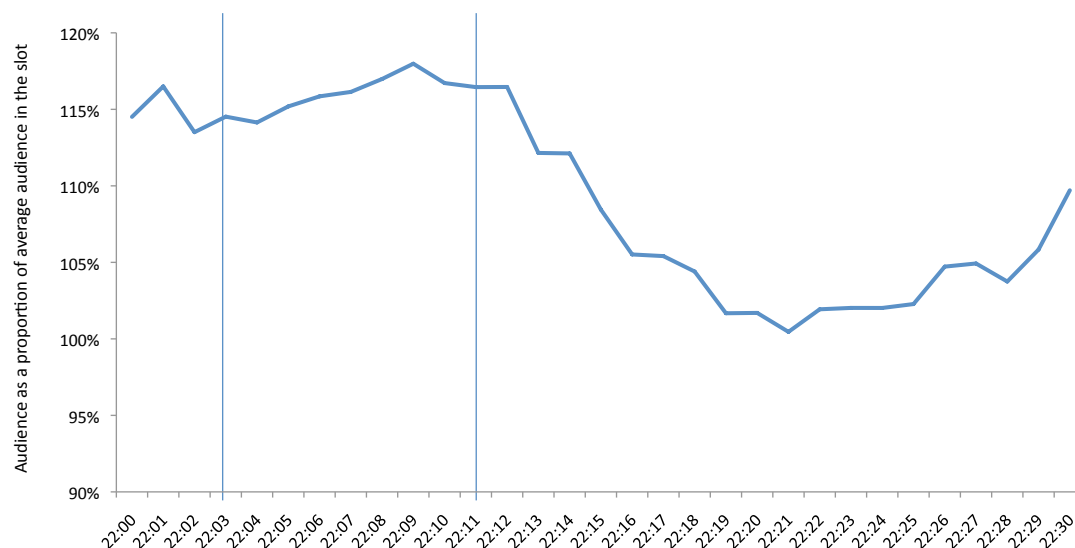


Audiences at both 6pm and 10pm were increased by up to 20% on the day of the rescue, with dramatic pictures of miners coming up to the surface in a capsule and emotional scenes of reunion.

### Six O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 13 Oct. 2010



### Ten O'Clock News Minute by Minute Audience 13 Oct. 2010



ONLINE: The initial mine collapse was not reported online either. On the day of the accident nothing featured in the day's Latin American coverage.

### Latin American stories in the BBC Online Top 500 6 Aug. 2010

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
128	Latin America	18,717
376	Calderon: Mexico drug gangs seeking to replace state	3,787

Audiences strengthened when the miners were found alive underground – although not spectacularly. It was outside the top 30 online stories of the day.

### Latin American Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 23 Aug. 2010

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
11	Bodies hung from bridge in Cuernavaca, Mexico	377,098
26	Rescuing 33 miners trapped in Chile 'to take months'	176,802
32	Miners trapped in Chile mine for 17 days are alive	97,971
105	Wyclef Jean to appeal against Haiti election ruling	22,007
246	Trapped Chile miners get supplies	8,009
262	Miners trapped in Chile mine for 17 days are alive	7,457

On the day of the rescue, however, it dominated online coverage with more than 2m page views.

### Latin American Stories in the BBC Online Top 500 13 Oct. 2010

<u>Position</u>	<u>Story</u>	<u>Page Views</u>
2	Chilean Mine Rescue Live	2,064,494
3	Celebrations as last trapped Chile miner is rescued	1,843,961
6	Jubilation as Chile mine rescue ends (in pictures)	455,502
10	World Headlines	295,354
21	Jubilation as Chile mine rescue ends (Ascent)	201,564
26	Audio slideshow: 69 days underground	162,174
31	Second Chile miner's euphoria at surface	148,302
32	Jubilation as Chile mine rescue ends (Profiles)	144,792
35	Rescuer greets trapped Chilean miners underground	130,484
39	Jubilation as Chile mine rescue ends	108,057
44	Chile mine: Rescue day operation	95,421
53	Jubilation as Chile mine rescue ends (Timeline)	69,947
55	12th Chile miner reaches surface as camera films rescue tunnel	67,056
59	First Chile miner rescued after 69 days underground	62,067
62	Will life ever be the same for Chilean miners?	60,030

Substantial interest continued in the online coverage in days after the rescue – when TV coverage had subsided.

### *Analysis*

The high levels of audience interest in the rescue (as opposed to the earlier stages of the story) illustrates the power of a human drama and of the emotional pictures of them emerging. Although interest levels were negligible at the time of the accident, and no better than average when they were discovered alive underground, once a rescue became tangible, audience interest strongly increased. It also built as the narrative played out over a number of days, culminating on the day of rescue. High levels of audience engagement online perhaps indicate the halo-effect of a 'good news' story.

## Conclusions

These snapshots of a series of major international events and their coverage on BBC TV and online illustrate some connections between declared audience interest in international news and their actual consumption. The relationship between audience interest and editorial decisions made by the BBC is also illustrated, although not straightforward.

- Most foreign stories get more coverage on the BBC 10pm news compared to the 6pm bulletin. As noted, this reflects the different agenda of the two bulletins – the 6pm has a more domestic remit, the 10pm a more international remit. However, as audience numbers during the Egypt and Libya uprisings illustrate, the audience does not always follow that declared remit. Higher audiences for some international stories at 6pm and lower audiences at 10pm for those items suggest audiences will find the news at a time they choose, rather than wait for the coverage in a programme with an international weighting to its editorial agenda.
- While levels of declared interest in foreign news are generally below those for domestic stories, and vary greatly by topic, audiences to TV news bulletins dominated by foreign stories hold up relatively well. The most attractive foreign stories can draw up to 20% more than the average, with less attractive ones very rarely depressing the figures to below 10–20% of average. This suggests that, in spite of the challenges facing linear TV, editors can still make decisions on what they think is important rather than simply being led by the audience.
- Furthermore, the self-selecting online audience can sometimes lag behind editorial decisions taken by TV editors. So viewers to the 6pm or 10pm bulletins were offered coverage of the initial Egyptian protests a day before the online numbers for the story really started to rise.
- However, extended coverage of some foreign stories can lead to audiences dropping off during the bulletin even where the audience level has started at a high level. This may simply reflect the fact that the audience appetite for highly extended coverage of the story may be less than that of the programme editors. This was evident in the 10pm's coverage of Japan, and the 6pm on the day of Mubarak's resignation.
- Some international stories however can retain the audience's interest over a period of several months. Pulse data on Egypt and Libya in the first quarter of 2011 (see Annexe 1) suggests that these long running stories were perceived as significant by very large numbers of people over months, possibly helped as a narrative – of the Arab Spring – developed. Interest extended way beyond the core audience for international news (skewed to males, older ages, and higher social classes) to include nearly the entire population. Interest was more for the story in its own terms and its impact on the region, than because of any British angle, and exceeded by far those usually interested in standard Middle East coverage.

- Online audiences for individual stories are on average lower than those for the two main BBC TV news bulletins, and with levels generally ranging from 500k to 3m (compared to average figures of over 4m for the 6pm and 10pm news bulletins) are much more volatile than for TV, according to the story. That is not surprising given the active, self-selecting, nature of online news use as opposed to that for TV. In addition, multiple pages on a major story will fragment the online audience.
- Stories that peaked online included the Japan earthquake, the rescue of the Chilean miners, Egypt, and the New Zealand earthquake. Online audiences for the 2010 Pakistan floods were, in keeping with the Pulse figures, relatively low.
- Human interest and strong narrative is still a major driver of audience attention, as is evident from the numbers viewing the extraordinary images of the Japanese tsunami and the Chilean miners rescue.
- Association with 'people like us' appears to be a major factor for engaging TV viewers, judging by the declared levels of interest in events such as the Australian floods and the Japan earthquake – interest levels higher than similar major natural disasters like the Pakistan floods or Haiti earthquake.
- High audience interest does not always translate to increased viewing numbers however. The declared levels of interest in the Australian floods did not translate into major increases in viewing figures. Yet huge events do drive audience figures –as with the Japan earthquake, or the Libyan uprising.
- Editorial decisions on story profile (i.e. decisions on duration and placement) do not appear to have a direct correlation in audience engagement or numbers. This may of course be because on TV most viewers do not know everything contained in the programme in advance – so individual events do not provide 'appointments to view' unless they are already known about or are running stories. There are established patterns to TV news audiences which are only disturbed by the biggest events.
- Decisions on TV placement and duration appear to be divorced from audience interest and online behaviour. For example, the 10pm's commitment to reporting the floods in Pakistan was in the face of very moderate audience interest. Similarly, their decision to report Tunisian protests from a relatively early stage reflects their recognition of its potential significance in spite of low audience interest. Equally, once the Chilean miners had been rescued, the news programmes wound down coverage fairly rapidly – in spite of continuing audience interest and appetite. This reflects a 'public interest' framework for editorial decision-making in the BBC – rather than simply adopting a strategy to drive the highest audiences.

- Consequently, BBC TV news editors can still play an important part in setting the news agenda according to their editorial values; a focus on major foreign stories does not have to come at the price of audience numbers.
- Further, TV coverage can drive online audiences – but our case studies provide no evidence of online coverage driving TV audiences. This indicates the continuing importance of TV coverage to inform audiences about things of public interest, which online is less fit for due to the self-selection of items by the audience. This public interest purpose and functionality of TV news, along with its mass audiences, needs to be taken greater account of in the debate about the drift of news audiences to digital platforms.
- A geographical frame is still useful for news organisations in terms of deployment of staff and resources or organisation of coverage. However, the patterns of audience interest suggest people engage with news according to non-geographic factors including human interest, ‘people like us’, and the extent to which an event may have a direct impact on their lives, regardless of where it has taken place. Location may be important in the production of news, but seems to be becoming less significant in determining consumption.

## **Annexe 1. Research on Audience Interest in the Arab Spring: Events in Egypt and Libya in the First Quarter of 2011**

The RISJ *Digital News Report* reveals relatively low levels of declared interest in international news within the UK. However, we know from that survey (conducted online in April 2012) that while overall levels of interest were low, they were skewed by gender, age, and class. When respondents were asked to list their top five categories of news (from a total of 13: 12 named and 1 'other' category), 19% overall chose international news, with 22% for males as against 16% for females, 22% of over 55s as against 18% of those who were 34 or under. Similar patterns emerged by social class, with 22% of ABC1s choosing international news as against just 13% of C2DEs.

A BBC Pulse Survey conducted in the last week of December 2010, i.e. *before* the big international news events of 2011, asked how closely people followed UK and international news and news 'from your area'. This survey might be expected to produce a much higher level of declared interest in international news, both because there was no need to exclude any of the categories asked about (there were only 3 as against 13), and the Pulse Survey prompts people about categories and stories, and in that sense may lead some to exaggerate how far they do actually follow news. However, insofar as these reservations are valid, they are constant across the Pulse data that we will draw on in the rest of this Annexe. As expected, the levels of interest in international news from Pulse in December 2010 are relatively high. Whereas 68% said that they followed UK news very or fairly closely and 65% did so for news from their area, overall 52.9% declared themselves to be following international news in general very closely (9.3%) or fairly closely (43.6%), with that breaking down to 60.5% for men, as against 45.6% for women. The figures we have aggregate age and class, with figures of 74.8% following very or fairly closely for males over 55 in social groups ABC1, as against 51.7% for males in the same age group from groups C2DE.

While the December 2010 Pulse figures give us a general picture of whether people say they follow international news closely we also have three in-depth studies of responses, motivations and interest in the events in the Middle East in the first quarter of 2011. These three surveys are for Egypt before the fall of Mubarak conducted in 1–2 February 2011 and then between 15–16 February after the fall of Mubarak, and for Libya from the week of 14–20 March 2011, i.e. just about a month after the uprising.

## *Egypt*

The two Egypt in-depth surveys give interesting results. Shortly before the fall of Mubarak the Pulse Survey shows that on 1–2 February 49% of respondents said they'd been following the news of the protests very (12%) or fairly (37%) closely. More men were in this category than woman (53% vs 45.5%) and more ABC1s than C2DEs (53.3% vs 44.7%). Only 3% of the sample hadn't heard of the Egypt protests, roughly a week after they'd begun on 25 January.

As to motivations, those feeling that it was very or fairly important to them personally to understand news about the protests (60.7%) significantly exceeded those following the protests and an even higher percentage (69%) thought it was important that 'people in Britain in general understand news about the protests in Egypt', with a pretty wide consensus on that latter point between social classes ABC1 (74.2%) and C2DE (64.2%). A similarly impressive number (64%) thought they had a good or broad understanding about the protests and while there were differences by gender (72% of men vs 56% of women) there were not such great differences by social class – 67.2% of ABC1s thought they had a good or broad understanding as against 60.5% of C2DEs. When asked which of eight different angles of the protests interested people, it was striking that the top three mentioned by respondents were 'Why people are protesting' (55.2%), the 'Impact in other parts of the Middle East' (51.1%), and 'President Mubarak's response to the protests' (46%) – in other words the human and geopolitical aspects, way ahead of purely British angles such as 'the effects on British tourists and other people in Egypt' (33.5%) or Britain's interests in Egypt (32.5%).

Two weeks later, after the fall of President Mubarak, the BBC conducted a similarly in-depth study through the Pulse Survey. By then the numbers following the protests either very (13.2%) or fairly (38.2%) closely had increased to 53.4% (showing no drop off in declared attention after weeks of coverage of Middle East crises) and those who thought it was very or fairly important to them personally to understand the protests (60.5%) showed no drop off from the figure at the beginning of the month. The same picture applied to the 69.6% saying it was very or fairly important that people in Britain understand the protests. As to the angles of coverage of the protest that were of most interest to respondents in this period, there was a similar picture to before the toppling of Mubarak. Top choices were 'Why the Egyptians were protesting' (57.1%), 'What kind of government Egypt might have in the future' (52.7%), and 'The impact of the protests in other parts of the Middle East' (45.9%), with British-focused questions coming in far behind.

## *Libya*

Interest in Middle East stories continued at a high level of intensity for several more weeks. A Pulse Survey conducted in the week of 21–27 February – i.e. shortly after the fall of both the Tunisian and Egyptian leaders – revealed that 58% of respondents said they were following the political unrest in Libya and Bahrain either very (20.4%) or fairly (37.7%) closely. This is consistent with the idea of interest building in the light of recent events elsewhere in the region. We have much more detail on Libya from an in-depth study conducted between 14 and 20 March. There the numbers following unrest in Libya alone were marginally lower, with 54.3% saying they were following it very (13.1%) closely or fairly (41.2%) closely. The breakdown here by class was less dramatic than for international news in general; while 62.2% of ABC1s were following events very or fairly closely, 45.5% of C2DEs were also doing so.

With this study of Libya there were similarly impressive figures in terms of people's stated motivations for being interested in the coverage. 70% said that it was very (18.6%) or fairly (52.2%) important to them personally to understand news about the unrest in Libya, with this figure rising to 85% among the over 55 age group. 77% thought it was very (22.6%) or fairly (54.5%) important that people in Britain in general should understand the news about Libya, with over 90% of the over 55s saying that. But one should not exaggerate the differences by age or class; among respondents as a whole only 2.8% said that it was not at all important for people in Britain to understand events in Libya.

Libya, as the third major Arab uprising, and one in a country where the story appeared rather more complex than in Egypt, led to rather different audience responses in terms of motivations. Asked to indicate which angles interested them most, respondents placed 'The impact of the unrest on other parts of the Middle East' first, at 57.6%, followed by Britain's economic interests, at 44.5%, 'Why opponents want Gaddafi to step down' at 43.6%, followed closely behind by 'The effect on British oil workers and other British people in Libya', at 41.80%, with 'David Cameron calling for a no-fly zone over Libya' at 35.7%.

## *Implications*

What is interesting about all three of these cases is that there was a very high level of interest and engagement. Clearly they were important and highly significant, and there was little sense in the first quarter of 2011 of the intensive coverage of unfamiliar places leading to a decline in stated audience interest or engagement. However, it is possible that, while the places may have been unfamiliar, interest was intensified since the events created their own narrative, there was a clear sense of a story building in the Arab Spring – the fall of dictators – and there was a wide awareness of the significance of these developments to the wider Middle East region. And while the Israel–Palestine conflict clearly stands at the heart of the rest of the Middle East coverage, the Arab Spring engaged people in a way that it appears that coverage of the main regional conflict rarely does. At the beginning of 2011 just 10.5% of respondents to the Pulse Survey said they were following coverage of developments between Israel and Palestine either very or fairly closely, with only 4.4% saying they wanted to know more. By the end of January the figures had climbed to 16.2% and 6.5% respectively, with a peak in the last week of February at 25.7% following very or fairly closely and 8.8% wanting to know more. It seems clear that events elsewhere in the region

increased interest in Israel–Palestine coverage, but from a very low base when compared to the figures noted above, with over 50% following events in Egypt and Libya very or fairly closely and the generally high figures for the range of foreign stories analysed here as presented in the graphs on page 6 and subsequently.

## **Annexe 2: Dates of Major News Events Covered by Pulse Surveys in 2010/11 and Included in Graphs in the Report**

Haiti devastated by massive quake  
(18 January–24 January 2010)

Israeli raid on Gaza flotilla  
(7–13 June 2010)

Obama urges Israeli –Palestinian peace talks following meeting with Israeli PM  
(12–18 July 2010)

Floods hit parts of Pakistan  
(16–22 August 2010)

33 men trapped down Chilean mine  
(6–12 September 2010)

Attempts to rescue Chilean miners  
(11–17 October 2010)

Chilean miners rescued  
(18–24 October 2010)

Floods in Australia  
(17–23 January 2011)

Haiti earthquake – one year on  
(17–23 January 2011)

New Zealand earthquake  
(28 February–6 March 2011)

Political unrest in Egypt  
(February 2011)

Japan earthquake  
(14–20 March 2011)

Political unrest in Libya and Bahrain  
(21–27 February 2011)

Coalition military action in Libya  
(9–15 May 2011)

Unrest in Tunisia  
(January 2011)

Developments between Israel and the Palestinians  
(24–30 January 2011)

## About the Authors

### Richard Sambrook

Richard Sambrook is Professor of Journalism and Director of the Centre for Journalism at Cardiff University. He spent 30 years as a journalist and manager in the BBC, editing many major programmes and covering events from China to the Middle East, Europe, Russia, and the United States. He was Director of the BBC's Global News Division overseeing services for audiences of 240 million people each week. He has published with the RISJ *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant?* and an RISJ Report, *Delivering Trust: Impartiality and Objectivity in the Digital Age*.

### Simon Terrington

Simon Terrington set up Terrington & Co in 2009. Its clients include the BBC, NHK (Japan), the Cabinet Office, the National Magazine Company, Shortlist Media, Freesat, Agon, MTV, The Arts Council and NBC Universal. Previously he founded Human Capital (a media strategy and research company) in 1995 and worked there until 2009. It worked for about 60 clients in the UK, US, Canada, Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia and Russia. The firm was sold in 2008.

Simon has a BA in mathematics from Cambridge, a Master's degree in the philosophy of mathematics and a PhD (collaborative game theory) from London University. He was a Visiting Fellow with the Reuters Institute in 2009/10. He has written and presented radio programmes on chess and politics for BBC World Service and Radio 4.

### David A. L. Levy

David A. L. Levy is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Previously he was Controller, Public Policy at the BBC. Prior to this he worked as a journalist for the BBC World Service and then for BBC News and Current Affairs as a radio reporter, a TV reporter on *Newsnight* and Editor of *Analysis* on BBC Radio 4.

He is the author of *Europe's Digital Revolution: Broadcasting Regulation, the EU and the Nation State* (Routledge 1999/2001), and joint editor with Tim Gardam of *The Price of Plurality* (Reuters Institute/Ofcom 2008), with Rasmus Kleis Nielsen of *The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy* (Reuters Institute 2010) and with Robert G Picard of *Is there a Better Structure for News Providers? The Potential in Charitable and Trust ownership* (Reuters Institute 2011).

## Acknowledgements

This research on foreign news has been made possible because Helen Boaden, then Director of BBC News, kindly gave us access to the relevant BBC data. The Reuters Institute would like to thank her and the BBC News audience research team for their assistance with data. The report is an independent piece of research and the analysis and findings are solely the responsibility of the authors.

## SELECTED RISJ PUBLICATIONS

James Painter

**Poles Apart: The International Reporting of Climate Scepticism**

Lara Fielden

**Regulating for Trust in Journalism: Standards Regulation in the Age of Blended Media**

David A. L. Levy and Robert G. Picard (eds)

**Is there a Better Structure for News Providers? The Potential in Charitable and Trust Ownership**

David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds)

**The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy**

Tim Gardam and David A. L. Levy (eds)

**The Price of Plurality: Choice, Diversity, and Broadcasting Institutions in the Digital Age**

*published in association with Ofcom*

John Lloyd and Julia Hobsbawm

**The Power of the Commentariat**

*published in association with Editorial Intelligence Ltd*

## CHALLENGES

Nick Fraser

**Why Documentaries Matter**

Nicola Bruno and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

**Survival is Success: Journalistic Online Start-ups in Western Europe**

Paolo Mancini

**Between Commodification and Lifestyle Politics: Does Silvio Berlusconi Provide a New Model of Politics for the 21st Century?**

John Lloyd

**Scandal! News International and the Rights of Journalism**

Stephen Coleman (ed.)

**Leaders in the Living Room: The Prime Ministerial Debates of 2010. Evidence, Evaluation and Some Recommendations**

Richard Sambrook

**Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The Changing Face of International News**

James Painter

**Summoned by Science: Reporting Climate Change at Copenhagen and Beyond**

John Kelly

**Red Kayaks and Hidden Gold: The Rise, Challenges and Value of Citizen Journalism**

Stephen Whittle and Glenda Cooper

**Privacy, Probity, and Public Interest**

Stephen Coleman, Scott Anthony, and David E Morrison

**Public Trust in the News: A Constructivist Study of the Social Life of the News**

Nik Gowing

**'Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans: The New Tyranny of Shifting Information Power in Crises**

Andrew Currah

**What's Happening to Our News: An Investigation into the Likely Impact of the Digital Revolution on the Economics of News Publishing in the UK**

James Painter

**Counter-Hegemonic News: A Case Study of Al-Jazeera English and Telesur**

Florian Fossato and John Lloyd with Alexander Verkhovsky

**The Web that Failed: How Opposition Politics and Independent Initiatives are Failing on the Internet in Russia**