

Broadcasters failed to prepare audiences for the Arab spring, says research

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Broadcasters failed to prepare audiences for events in North Africa and the Middle East, according to new research from the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) and the University of East Anglia (UEA).

Published today (Weds June 22), the Outside the Box report looks in detail at the nature of non-news factual coverage on all the main television channels in 2010 and finds that some countries like Libya and Yemen received little or no coverage at all.

In 2010, five out of the 12 countries which have experienced revolutions, civil uprisings or major protests to date were not the principal subject of any new non-news factual programme on BBC1, BBC2, BBC3, BBC4, ITV1, Channel 4, Channel 5, Sky1 or More 4 - specifically Algeria, Bahrain, Libya, Oman, and Yemen.

Other countries in the region which also received no such coverage include Lebanon, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The only time UK audiences had the opportunity to watch a programme which was principally about Syria was the BBC4 series Syrian School. Similarly, Tunisia only received significant coverage in On Hannibal's Trail (BBC4) and Morocco in Jamie does Marrakesh (Channel 4).

IBT director Mark Galloway said: "Our research is a stark reminder of the narrow range of international stories covered on television. Public service broadcasters need to reflect a much broader view of the world so that UK audiences have an opportunity to understand what is really

happening in other countries."

The report's author is Martin Scott, a lecturer in media and international development at the University of East Anglia. He said: "The results of this study strongly suggest that UK television left audiences remarkably unprepared for these momentous events. Public opinion and public debate in the UK about the Arab Spring is surely the worse for UK television's persistent failure to cover adequately this part of the world."

In total, North Africa and the Middle East received just five per cent of all international non-news factual coverage in 2010. This lack of coverage is by no means a one-off or confined solely to non-news programming. In 2007 North Africa and the Middle East also received just five per cent of all new international factual programming and in 2009 approximately five per cent of all international news coverage.

Mr Scott added: "I'm not suggesting that the BBC and other broadcasters should have predicted the Arab Spring but that they have not lived up to their responsibility to give audiences the opportunity to understand better this part of the world. How can the British public develop informed opinions and reach considered judgements about events in North Africa and the Middle East if they have little or no basis upon which to make these judgements?"

Since 1989 IBT has been conducting a longitudinal study of international factual programming to establish how much international coverage there is on which channels, covering what topics, through which genres, in what countries and how this has changed over time. The research presented in this report represents the continuation of this study for the year 2010.

A striking finding of the research is the extent of the decline in new international factual programming on terrestrial channels. In 2010 the

main UK terrestrial channels broadcast fewer hours of new international factual programming than at any time since the study began in 1989. International content is in decline on every terrestrial channel except Channel 4, and BBC1 has now replaced ITV1 as the channel with the least amount of new factual coverage of developing countries.

Although international content is declining on terrestrial channels, it is increasing on some digital channels. In 2010, BBC3, BBC4 and More4 all had record amounts of new international factual programming.

"This migration of international content to digital channels matters," said Mr Galloway "because audiences for digital channels are usually much smaller than for terrestrial channels. It is important that all audiences have access to international content regardless of which channels they usually watch."

This research also looks in detail at the nature of international content. The regions of the world which receive the most coverage are North America (28 per cent) and Europe (25 per cent). The Middle East and North Africa (five per cent) and Latin America and the Caribbean (six per cent) receive the least coverage.

While this concentration of international coverage is almost identical to the pattern of coverage noted in previous research. North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the [Middle East](#) and North Africa all received exactly the same percentage of international factual coverage in 2007 as they did in 2010.

This research reveals how the nature of international factual coverage has remained remarkably static over time. Although individual producers and commissioners do not set out to reproduce the same view of the world on television each year, the study reveals that the combined result of all of those individual commissioning decisions, amongst all

broadcasters, is to produce factual programmes that cover broadly the same topics, in the same formats, featuring the same parts of the world, every year.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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