



Culture, Welsh language and Communications Committee

The impact of Covid-19 on journalism and local media in Wales

July 2020

Introduction

People across Wales have turned to the BBC in record numbers as a source of news, entertainment and companionship during the coronavirus pandemic. Recent figures show that as many as 97% of the Welsh adult population have turned to the BBC in some weeks - slightly higher than the UK figure of 94% - with the vast majority rating the BBC's response highly.

The BBC took swift action at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to repurpose our services and programmes for the benefit of all audiences ensuring we kept the audiences informed, educated and entertained in these unprecedented times.

The BBC's universal, public service mission has proved more important than ever during the coronavirus crisis. The BBC has informed, educated and entertained during this time of need, as it has for nearly 100 years. It has also delivered trusted news to millions in the UK and worldwide, ensured every child in the UK can follow their nation's curriculum, kept audiences entertained, brought people together and supported the wider industry

UK News

- During this period, the BBC has enhanced its core role to bring trusted news and information to audiences in Wales, the UK and around the world in a fast-moving situation, and to counter confusion and misinformation.
- BBC One moved *Question Time* to the more prominent slot of 8pm on Thursdays and some news bulletins were extended, which served to keep audiences up-to-date on the latest developments and advice. For younger audiences, *Newsround* bulletins air on CBBC and on BBC Sounds, the BBC produced a daily edition of the Coronavirus podcast.
- Audiences continue to trust the public service broadcasters, with the BBC as the most trusted. This was borne out in research conducted by Ofcom at the start of lockdown, which shows that 83% of people trust coverage on BBC TV.
- The BBC has specific initiatives to combat disinformation. Reality Check is the BBC's principal fact-checking service which runs across all platforms including social media. This service tackles fake news stories and challenges statements from public figures and institutions which may be false or misleading, and presents the verifiable facts instead. Research conducted by Ofcom during the lockdown shows almost half of UK adults have been exposed to false claims about the coronavirus.

- During the Covid-19 pandemic the BBC has created a dedicated team covering and debunking misinformation daily – bringing together Reality Check, BBC Monitoring and our expert correspondents in the UK and around the world.
- BBC news has consistently reflected different policies and regulations in place across the United Kingdom during the coronavirus pandemic. There has been a clear commitment to explain differences across the UK and to highlight to audiences when policies and regulations only apply to a specific nation in the UK. When major changes to the regulations in Wales have been announced, the story has been reported across all output, including online articles and live reaction and packages on television and radio. In addition when major announcements have been made affecting England only, the *BBC News at Six* and *Ten* have included a live element from each of the nations, to highlight the differences in policy.
- The Welsh Government’s daily news conference has featured live on the News Channel as well as BBC Two. Representatives of the Welsh Government have been held to account live on network TV and radio output during this period.
- The BBC has reflected the situation in Wales to audiences across the UK. Hywel Griffith, Tomos Morgan and Mark Hutchings – the on-air network journalists based in Wales – have updated audiences throughout the period on TV and radio. The packages are too numerous to list, but a couple of recent examples include a package by Tomos Morgan on how victims of domestic abuse are being affected and a piece from Hywel Griffith on the effect of the lockdown on people who are shielding across the UK, using Welsh case studies to paint a wider picture. Significant online stories produced by BBC Wales News have been featured on the BBC News home page and UK-wide indexes to illustrate the developing story in Wales to a wider audience.
- At the start of the pandemic, BBC network news attracted audiences equivalent to 78% of the UK adult population, with a peak audience of nearly 40 million watching across one week. This was up 35% on the same time last year. For BBC Online news, the peak in traffic hit 83 million weekly unique browsers mid March.
- BBC network news attracted audiences equivalent to 79% of the Wales adult population, with a peak audience of nearly 1.9m watching across one week. This was up 40% on the same time last year.

BBC Wales News

Audiences in Wales have turned to the BBC in significant numbers during this crisis for the latest information and analysis about the situation in Wales.

- During the lockdown, BBC Wales's teams have delivered comprehensive daily coverage on our BBC Wales News Online and Cymru Fyw services. We deliver a Wales version of the BBC News homepage for signed-in users in Wales and we have used this capability to ensure that coronavirus stories of particular interest to the Welsh audience have been featured prominently.
- Across TV and Radio we have delivered over 14 hours of weekday output for *BBC Wales Today*, *Newyddion* for S4C, BBC Radio Wales and BBC Radio Cymru.
- The BBC Wales News team moved at pace to adopt new ways of working – including extensive home working – from the outset of the crisis. The dedication and flexibility of approach demonstrated by the news team as well as technical and operational staff during this period ensured that high quality output could continue to be safely delivered every day.
- Despite the challenges, BBC Wales has extended its news coverage during this period. The online services in English and Welsh introduced live pages to provide continuous updates on the pandemic in Wales. On television, the Welsh Government's daily coronavirus news conference has been broadcast daily in its own, half-hour slot at 12.30pm on BBC One Wales and it has been repeated in full on BBC Radio Wales every day. Radio services were also extended, with *Post Cyntaf* on BBC Radio Cymru and *Gareth Lewis in Drivetime* on BBC Radio Wales extended by half an hour and an hour respectively each day. Welsh Government and UK Government Ministers have been held to account on daily programmes as well as in more in-depth formats on *Sunday Supplement* and *Politics Wales*. Opposition parties and other voices have had their views presented and challenged too.
- BBC Wales' Current Affairs team delivered a five part series for BBC One Wales capturing the lockdown experiences of a range of individuals from across Wales. The team also delivered a hard-hitting half-hour investigation into coronavirus in care homes which assessed issues including the number of deaths and access to tests.
- In late March, a difficult decision was taken to pause morning bulletins from the nations and regions during the *Breakfast* programme. This was due to the unprecedented demands on teams across the UK and the need to adapt to the demands of covering the Coronavirus crisis. These are now scheduled to restart on Monday 13th July. Initially, they will broadcast three times – just before 6.30, 7.30 and 8.30 – before returning to the full complement of bulletins in September.
- BBC Wales News has offered comprehensive coverage and analysis of the impact of the coronavirus on Wales. From reflecting the experiences of individuals who experienced the tragic loss of family members to telling the stories of NHS staff and patients at an ICU the aim has been to cover the impact of this crisis on

individuals and communities in every corner of Wales. As lockdown restrictions ease and the number of cases decline, the editorial focus has shifted to reflecting the experiences of workers and businesses battling for survival.

- The direct experiences and concerns of audiences have continually informed questions put to decision makers by correspondents and reporters. Throughout this period there has been insight and analysis on significant recurring themes - including the impact on care homes, the availability of testing and PPE and the current debate on the speed of easing restrictions in Wales.
- At the end of March, *BBC Wales Today* attracted record audiences with the equivalent of 60% of the Wales adult population watching across the combined bulletins, around 1.47m across one week. This is up 40% on the same time last year. S4C news output – produced by BBC Wales - peaked slightly later at the start of May (during the week commencing May 4th) when over 80,000 tuned into any news coverage during the week (3-min reach). This was up +76% on the same week in 2019.
- Audiences also turned to our online sites with record numbers accessing information across the UK. For BBC Wales's English language online news site, the peak in traffic hit 5.7million unique weekly browsers in early April and BBC Cymru Fyw saw a peak in weekly traffic of almost 70,000 unique browsers. Engagement with BBC Wales News content on Facebook peaked at 1.2million weekly engaged users at the end of March, which is nearly 5 times higher compared to the 2020 weekly average before Covid-19.