

BBC Radio 4 Today and “Europe” Irish Referendum

Survey September 2 – November 2, 2002

An examination of the treatment of the coverage of the Irish Referendum on the Nice Treaty, based on the full transcripts of the relevant broadcasts.

Conducted by Minotaur Media for Global Britain

Summary

Minotaur Media surveyed the output of the BBC Radio 4 Today programme during the period September 2 - November 2, 2002 and transcribed and analysed every item during that period relating to EU affairs. The special focus of this report is on the coverage of the events building up to the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty held on October 19.

The BBC's coverage of the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty fell short of Charter requirements in several key areas:

- ❑ The total amount of coverage was 21 minutes, and only 14 in the week of the referendum itself. Of 12 major stories covered in that week (in terms of programme time), the referendum was deemed the least important. There was not enough time to present the range of views involved, leading to over-simplification and inaccuracy.
- ❑ This amounted to "bias by omission" - the audience of a BBC flagship programme was not properly informed about a key European issue that had significant importance to the UK. Furthermore, no UK politician was interviewed about the vote.
- ❑ The Nice Treaty was referred on most occasions as "the treaty of enlargement", an over-generalisation that is particularly contested by euro-sceptics. More issues were at stake in the referendum, including Irish neutrality and reform of European institutions. These factors were virtually ignored in editorial links. Editorial shorthand should not distort the truth.
- ❑ A centre-piece interview on the vote was broadcast outside peak listening hours, was prefaced by an unsatisfactory introduction, and gave considerably more time to consideration of the 'yes' vote than to the 'no' side of the campaign.
- ❑ The 'no' vote was summarised directly by only one politician, Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein, a figure who for a UK audience has negative connotations (the 'balancing' opinion came from Taoiseach Bertie Ahern)
- ❑ During the survey period as a whole, covering 54 editions of Today, Europe was the subject of 151 programme items, 101 of which were substantive reports totalling 298 minutes. In addition European issues occupied only 5 out of 162 "shop window" slots at 7.10am, 7.30am and 8.10am. This amounted to less than 5% of programme time, compared to 9-14% in previous survey periods. It therefore seems that Europe is being pushed to the periphery of Today's reportage, despite the importance of unfolding events such as enlargement the Convention on the Future of Europe.
- ❑ There was a strong bias towards pro-EU speakers. In programme interviews, (excluding soundbites and vox pop contributions), there were 36 pro-European Union contributions

(52%), 19 (28%) expressing euro-sceptic opinions or challenging specific pieces of EU legislation and 14 (20%) who were neutral.

- ❑ An item on Irish inward investment - painting a very rosy picture of the impact of the EU - broke the BBC Producer Guidelines in that it used statistics without putting them in their proper context.

Introduction

BBC Radio 4's Today is arguably the most important and influential news and current affairs programme in Britain. The programme regularly receives listening figures in excess of 6 million, and is habitually referred to as 'agenda-setting' in terms its relationship to the national press and other areas of the broadcast media.

On Monday 2 September 2002, Minotaur Media Tracking began a thorough and comprehensive investigation into the Today programme's coverage of European Union issues. To ensure that research is as current and relevant as possible, the project has been divided into phases. The first nine week phase incorporated two such events: the Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice and the European Council Summit in Brussels.

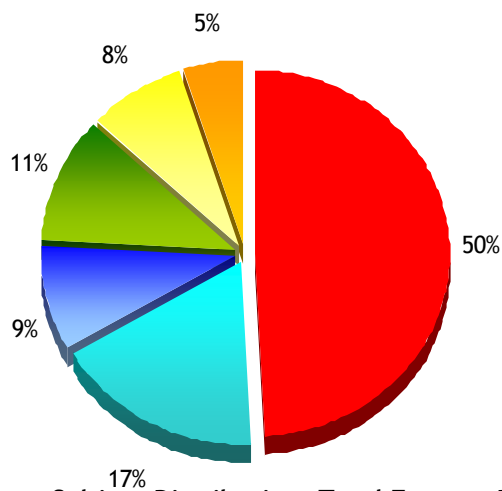
Minotaur sought to establish whether the BBC's requirements of broad impartiality and fairness were met on the Today programme in its coverage of the Irish Referendum and whether sufficient time was given over to the discussion of this and other European matters during the nine-weeks September 2 - November 2, 2002.

The Today Agenda

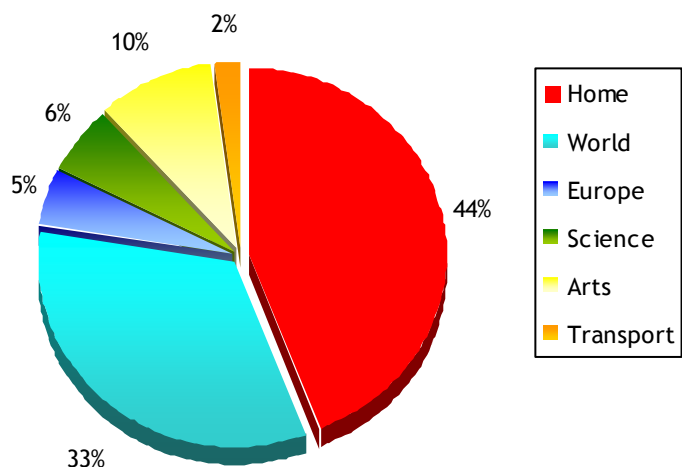
Within days of monitoring beginning, it became apparent that a fundamental shift had occurred within Today's news agenda. The programme's composition had altered significantly since the last extended period of monitoring had been undertaken in 2000. The key difference was a decline in coverage of European affairs, apparently triggered partly by greater emphasis being placed on world affairs and partly because the main political parties - and especially the Conservatives - appeared unwilling to engage in political debate over the many developing themes linked to the UK's involvement in Europe.

The charts illustrate the amount of time given by the programme in its 'feature'-style reports to various categories of news, first for the nine-week period from May to July 2000, and then for the nine weeks of the most recent survey from September to November 2002.

Subject Distribution 2000



Subject Distribution 2002



Subject Distribution: Total Feature Duration

Subject Area	Total Duration (2000)	Total Duration (2002)
Home Affairs	46 hours 36 minutes	44 hours 10 minutes
World News	16 hours 25 minutes	33 hours 9 minutes
Europe	8 hours 32 minutes	4 hours 58 minutes
Science and Environment	10 hours 34 minutes	5 hours 50 minutes
Arts, Culture and Sport	7 hours 34 minutes	9 hours 30 minutes
Transport	4 hours 40 minutes	2 hours 9 minutes

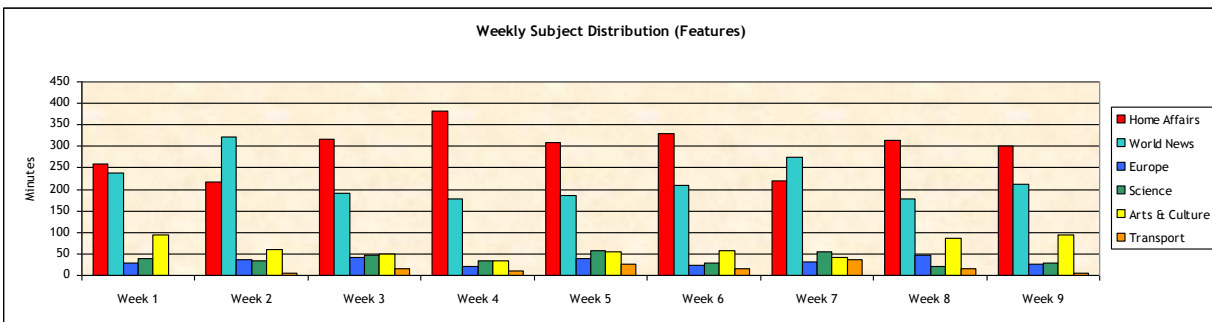
The figures show that Today's coverage of European politics dropped sharply, from 9% of all feature items in 2000 to just 5% in 2002. The largest category growth came in World News, which had virtually doubled since 2000, to more than a third of the programme's substantive reports. The increase in World News can be attributed to some extent to the continued coverage of post-September 11 terrorism issues.

In fact, a comment within the programme itself referred to the shift. It suggested a direct relationship between the prominence of international events and the decline in coverage of EU-related stories.

"With Iraq dominating the headlines, the euro referendum seems rather a footnote in the news."

(James Naughtie, Today, 4th September 2002)

However, despite Mr Naughtie's comment, analysis showed that the correlation between the increase in world news and the fall in European political news was not so straightforward and that Europe had not been directly sidelined by more 'important', 'newsworthy' or 'dramatic' stories on the international agenda. While features relating directly to terrorism, war or national security certainly accounted for the *rise* in the World News category, they did not dominate the foreign affairs agenda entirely, and there remained a solid and diverse range of stories not concerned with such issues. Similarly, the overall total of 34% was not constant or inflexible - the proportion of World News per programme fluctuated between 14% and 82%, and the agenda taken by Today was subject to wide variations on both a weekly and daily basis. The chart below shows how the various categories changed in prominence over the nine-week period.



Although the rise in international news clearly provided a new shape to the Today programme's agenda, close analysis of the programme content suggests that other factors were responsible for triggering the decline in European features.

Foremost, the domestic political landscape has shifted significantly over this two year period, particularly with regards to the Conservative Party. After placing so great an emphasis on their 'Save the Pound' campaign at the 2001 General Election, the Conservatives have been conspicuously reluctant to tackle any issue relating to the EU in the news media since their defeat.

"Mr Duncan Smith has tried to pick a delicate path; and his supporters point to his success in burying Europe as a political issue, in refocusing the party on public services, and his robust line against racism within the party."

(Norman Smith, BBC political correspondent, Today, 13th September 2002)

Despite this, Conservative politicians did appear on the programme to discuss 'Europe'; but with no major EU-related policy initiatives arriving from any of the main political parties the debate appeared to be stagnating. Contributions were overwhelmingly in the form of responses to specific EU stories, or occasionally listeners would hear familiar voices from either side of the debate restating their eurosceptic or europhile viewpoints. During the nine-weeks in autumn 2002, there were only 17 contributions on Europe by Conservative politicians, compared to 39 in the summer of 2000.

Official Labour Party policy remained focused on the 'five economic tests' set out by the chancellor in October 1997, and five years on, the repetition of this policy appeared to be grating somewhat with the Today programme's presenters.

GORDON BROWN: . . . and that's why we have this assessment, perhaps the most rigorous piece of economic work that's been done by the Treasury . .

JAMES NAUGHTIE: (*interrupting*) Spare us the five tests.

(Today, 30th September 2002)

During the monitoring period, government ministers repeatedly refused to be drawn on the timing of a referendum, and it seemed that presenters would often turn to other matters rather than pursue this question with any enthusiasm. With the debates surrounding Europe apparently being closed down by both the government and the opposition, the Liberal Democrats - and their pro-euro views - were marginalised. Only one spokesman from the party was invited to discuss European matters in the whole nine weeks.

Clearly, the Today programme can no longer rely so heavily upon the mainstream parties to rouse discussion on Europe. However, the European project moves on at full pace - with very important themes such as enlargement, and reform of budgetary and administrative structures centre stage - and the BBC cannot ignore its charter responsibility to examine these issues in

a wide-ranging and comprehensive manner. With the major parties reluctant to engage fully in the debate, one of the ways in which BBC News could successfully bring these issues to the fore is through close and detailed coverage of key European events and the questions they raise.

Today and Europe - Autumn 2002

Over the nine-week monitoring period 2 September - 2 November 2002, Today broadcast a total of 151 separate items relating to the European Union. Of these, 50 were brief references contained in bulletin pieces and newspaper reviews, while 101 were substantive reports, which included general features, business items, or world press reviews from a particular European city. These 101 items accounted for 298 minutes of airtime. They ran for an average length of 2 minutes 52 seconds per feature.

The analysis of the positioning of European items reveals that they were mostly outside those sections of the programme which provide space for longer packages to be delivered immediately subsequent to the 7am, 7.30am and 8am bulletins. Reports in these extended slots can last anywhere between seven minutes and nineteen minutes, although the average is around twelve minutes. Over the nine weeks of monitoring there were 162 of these 'windows', but only five reports on European politics which lasted for seven minutes or more. European issues did appear in these slots on other occasions, but these tended to be as a single question, or series of short questions, during an interview with a politician which covered a number of disparate themes. In previous event-based monitoring investigations - for example, the 2001 General Election, the launch of euro notes and coins, the Seville Summit - there were far fewer examples of such poly-subject interviews, doubtless because European issues were higher on the agenda during these periods.

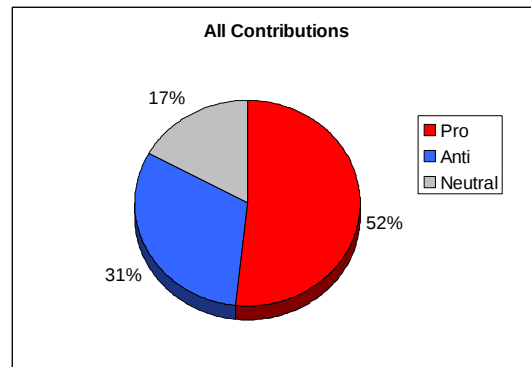
Contributions

The table below lists in detail the contribution to the programme in terms of whether speakers were expressing euro-phile or euro-sceptic views. Each interview, soundbite and vox pop was assessed and categorised according to the nature of the contribution made, rather than simply the established views of the person concerned, or their party affiliation. For example, when Labour MEP Glenys Kinnock spoke critically of the EU for allowing Zimbabwe's trade minister to attend talks in Brussels in spite of 'smart sanctions' against the Mugabe government (Today, 25th September), her viewpoint was categorised as being 'Against specific EU legislation/action', based on the opinions expressed in that interview. Similarly, when Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe spoke about previous Tory splits on Europe (Today 8th October), her contribution was placed in the 'Neutral/Factual' category, as she expressed no specific viewpoint for or against the euro, or on a particular European issue.

Contributions by Party	Labour	Conservative	Liberal	Green	EU Politician	Other
Pro-euro/ Pro-EU	17	2	1	0	13	7
In favour of specific EU legislation/action	0	5	0	0	8	8
Anti-euro, anti-EU or Eurosceptic	3	9	0	1	0	5
Against specific EU legislation/action	2	0	0	0	3	14
Neutral/Factual viewpoint	2	1	0	0	0	17
Total Speakers	24	17	1	1	24	51

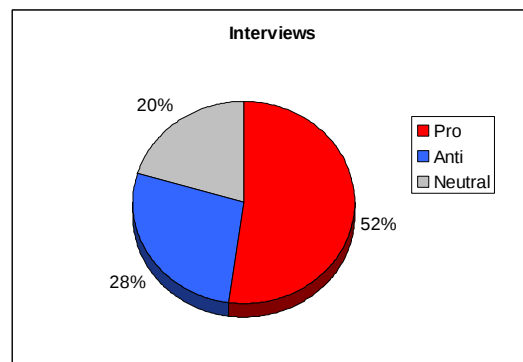
In order to show the proportions of positive and negative sentiments, the more detailed figures from the table above were combined into broad categories of 'Pro', 'Anti' and 'Neutral'. The results below show that exactly half of speakers on the programme were Pro-Euro, Pro-European, or were in favour of particular EU legislation. By contrast, only a third expressed an anti-euro, eurosceptic, anti-European, or spoke out against a specific piece of EU legislation.

All Contributors	
Pro-euro, Pro-EU, In favour of specific EU legislation or action	61
Anti-euro, anti-EU, Eurosceptic, Against specific EU legislation or action	37
Neutral or factual viewpoint	20
Total	118



If soundbites and vox pop contributions are excluded from these calculations, the data which is left relates specifically to the long-form interviews conducted by the programme. Again, in interviews on European matters, the Today audience were much more likely to hear a pro-European viewpoint expressed than they were an anti- or eurosceptic perspective - in interviews the proportion was almost 2:1 in favour of pro-European speakers.

Interviews Only	
Pro-euro, Pro-EU, In favour of specific EU legislation or action	36
Anti-euro, anti-EU, Eurosceptic, Against specific EU legislation or action	19
Neutral or factual viewpoint	14
Total	69



The Irish Referendum on the Treaty of Nice

Over the seven weeks leading up to the second Irish Referendum on the Nice Treaty and on the days subsequent to the result being announced, the Today programme broadcast eleven separate reports relating to this event. Four of these were brief items such as bulletin reports or newspaper reviews. The remaining seven ‘feature’ reports amounted to just 21 minutes of coverage in total.

This was a very low figure, particularly in comparison to the programme’s previous coverage of significant European events. In January 2002, for example, Today devoted 86 minutes to coverage of the successful introduction of euro notes and coins in *just a single edition* of the programme; 22 out of 33 feature reports on that day had focused on the euro launch, with a generous proportion of the newspaper reviews and bulletins also given over to this issue. Similarly, the period surrounding the June 2002 European Council summit in Seville generated 69 programme items, with features amounting to 137 minutes - in itself a sharp decrease from the Feira summit in June 2000, which included 104 separate items and 322 minutes of features.

Of course, these events were different in nature, and therefore not directly comparable to the Irish referendum. But these examples do serve to illustrate how much time the programme has allocated to European political events in the past; and conversely, how negligible the 21-minute treatment of the Irish issue actually was.

September 18th Inward Investment

The first report concerning Ireland appeared on September 18th, with an item comparing levels of inward investment in the British and Irish economies. Although not specifically relating to the referendum on the Nice Treaty, this four minute report has been included in this analysis and overall totals for referendum coverage, as it provided an introduction to the economic issues which would later underpin the programme’s treatment of the referendum itself. The preamble to the piece was unequivocal, drawing a stark comparison between a Britain ‘not doing so well’ in terms of inward investment and an Ireland ‘doing brilliantly’.

JOHN HUMPHRYS: Britain is not doing so well in persuading foreign countries to invest here, that’s what the latest figures show. Ireland has been doing brilliantly. We’ve slipped from 16th to 25th place in the league table; they’ve gone from 71st to 4th

This was at best over-simplistic and at worst seriously misleading. The details were so inadequate as to render the statement virtually meaningless. No source for the league table was given, and there was thus no guidance to their validity - for example whether they came from an organisation with a particular axe to grind. Brief details did emerge obliquely later on in the feature: the Liberal Democrat interviewee qualified his opening contribution by saying, "let's not read too much into one report" - thus alerting listeners that there may be variations in findings between similar reports, but information on how the figures had actually been compiled was not provided. Listeners were left to speculate as to how often these figures were published and over what time scale they had been gathered. This introduction was therefore a clear contravention of the BBC's Producer Guidelines, which stipulate explicitly that the source and context of statistics must always be given:

Statistics should be used or reported carefully and in context. It is extremely difficult to convey the context of statistical evidence in a few words, so programmes may need to find time to explain perspectives. With regularly published sets of statistics this may mean giving the trend of the figures over a relevant period. Even then statistical evidence should not be accorded more weight than could stand scrutiny. Sources should always be indicated so the audience can form a judgement about the status of the evidence. (BBC Website)

The failure to meet these specific requirements is all the more disturbing in that the figures were being used to underpin the questionable viewpoint that membership of the EU brings unqualified direct economic benefits.

The first interviewee, Austin Hughes, chief economist at the Irish Intercontinental Bank, was asked to endorse this viewpoint by being asked why Ireland had 'been so successful'. He proceeded to give an overview of various contributory factors he thought were involved in Ireland's move up the inward investment league table. He pointed out that the starting figure of 71st was actually relatively old, and had been around since the late 1980s - "a very bad time" in the Irish economy. Yet still no effort was made by Mr Humphrys in his questioning to establish the time period involved for the British assessment, and whether the UK's slipping down the league table by nine places had occurred over the same 13-year period.

Mr Hughes's contribution to the discussion was fairly neutral throughout; he provided a number of contributory factors behind Ireland's growth in inward investment. He suggested that the rise in inward investment could be attributed to a number of different reasons: the country's favourable tax regime; its skilled labour force; a late baby boom with technologically skilled graduates coming into the labour market; Ireland being the only country inside EMU with

English as a first language; and a partnership process between government, employers and trade unions to build the economy.

In the single supplementary question put to Mr Hughes, John Humphrys was keen to focus on just one issue - the part Ireland's adoption of the single currency had played in its "success":

JH: If, out of all that lot you took one thing, where would the euro come, your membership of the EMU?

In the event, Mr Hughes refused to be drawn into identifying Ireland's euro membership as a paramount factor in its successful attraction of inward investment, and briefly reaffirmed his opinion that it was but one of the contributory reasons he had previously listed.

John Humphrys then turned to Liberal Democrat Treasury Spokesman, Matthew Taylor, with a soft opening question which sought - despite the arguments made by Austin Hughes to the contrary - to maintain the link between the figures on inward investment and Ireland's membership of the single currency

What have we to make from all that? Apart from joining the euro, which you want to do, I know.

This gave Matthew Taylor clear space to advance his predictably pro-euro views. He claimed that the new figures on inward investment added to a series of reports which had highlighted three key areas where, "Ireland's done very well, and Britain's done very badly". He cited education, infrastructure, and "the fact that we're not in the eurozone", as the central reasons for these differences. Mr Taylor then asserted that American companies were increasingly looking to invest in Ireland as an English-language base without exchange rate risks, "at a time when Britain's exchange rates have made us uncompetitive in many manufacturing sectors."

Mr Humphrys tried to challenge the pro-euro line, observing:

On the other hand, if you compare us with other European countries on the continent who are in the euro, we're doing well.

But this was sidestepped by Mr Taylor, who proceeded to cite a further range of pro-euro comparative statistics on inward investment, before concluding with a point on recession in farming and manufacturing caused, he suggested, by these sectors being exposed to the

'exchange rate risk'. Overall, the highly partisan views of Matthew Taylor were not challenged sufficiently. The absence of a eurosceptic interviewee, combined by the weak questioning by Mr Humphrys meant that the report was inherently unbalanced. Furthermore, the tenor of the questions put to both interviewees sought to establish a direct correlation between the rise in Ireland's inward investment figures and its membership of the single currency - an association of Irish economic success with membership of the Eurozone which would recur throughout the reporting of the referendum.

September 20th: Irish Referendum

The second of September's reports on Ireland dealt specifically with the referendum itself. With a duration of two and a half minutes, the report was brief, and featured a discussion between John Humphrys and Nick Miller, political correspondent for the Evening Echo in Cork. Although Mr Miller spoke from a position of personal neutrality, he drew attention to some of the issues surrounding the 'No' campaign. Of particular interest - particularly in relation to the inward investment package which had been broadcast two days previously - were his suggestions that dissatisfaction with the Irish government could trigger a protest vote against the Nice Treaty.

JOHN HUMPHRYS: So, why would they want to give the government a black eye at this stage?

NICK MILLER: Because the economy is . . . well, whether or not it's undergoing a downturn is really a moot point. But certainly we had an election in May this year, there were all sorts of promises made by the returning coalition - an awful lot of those promises have been broken. Even the prime minister, Bertie Ahern, has had to abandon plans for a national stadium, and there's a feeling that there's going to be cutbacks - in fact there already are cutbacks across most sectors of government at the moment.

JH: Compared with most countries in Europe, Ireland has been doing *extraordinarily* well.

NM: It has been doing extremely well, but you have to remember that we've had five years of extraordinary economic growth, and that growth appears to have all but come to an end. People have got used to a good lifestyle, and they expected it to continue forever.

These comments were notable in that they challenged the received wisdom - established by the report two days previously, and bolstered at various points through the reporting of the referendum - of Ireland as a booming economy which had benefited extraordinarily from its membership of both the European Union and single currency. However, arguments such as these would have been better included within the context of the inward investment report

itself: either from a guest speaker with this perspective, or by John Humphrys using this information to form a robust line of questioning against his Europhile guest. Although the analysis from Mr Miller did provide some degree of challenge to the contentions made earlier in the week, broadcasting this alternative viewpoint two days afterwards and in a less prominent time-slot (before the 7am bulletin, rather than some way after it))was not an ideal way in which to provide balance, if this was intended. Furthermore, the interview with Mr Miller was not without difficulties of its own.

The brevity of the interview meant that many of the issues raised were reduced to shorthand, with little space to elaborate or explain. The following quick-fire exchange was typical:

NM: Well I suppose the ‘no’ arguments mainly centre on issues such as Irish neutrality, fears about mass migration from central and eastern European countries . . .

JH: Because, of course, the treaty would have allowed - or *will* allow - the enlargement of the European Union, bringing in another fifteen countries?

NM: Yes, well certainly in the short run they’re looking at ten countries.

JH: Ten countries immediately, yes.

NM: . . .and there are huge fears - amongst certain sections of the society, I should say - about open borders.

JH: So, they threw it out last time, a huge embarrassment for everybody. Will they say ‘yes’ this time?

This led to broad generalisations. Mr Humphrys stated that the rejection of the Treaty by the 2001 referendum had been “a huge embarrassment to everybody”; one can only presume - though it was not clear from the words spoken - that he meant everybody *aside* from the half million Irish voters who had expressed their dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Nice in 2001, and eurosceptics in the UK and Europe. Similarly, the contents of the treaty itself were reduced to a shorthand that was to become familiar: it was presented as ‘allowing the enlargement of the European Union’ - a description which will be contested in due course.

Mr Miller discussed issues of concern for the ‘No’ campaign: Irish neutrality, mass migration and open borders, but there were no attempts to explore them further through the questioning. Conversely, one of the central concerns of Nice opponents, that it would lead to the creation of a two-tier voting system in the European Union, was omitted completely. Mr Miller’s other suggestions for voter opposition to the Treaty also veered away from the central convictions of the ‘No’ argument. He identified voter ignorance as a factor in the rejection of the treaty in the first referendum (“only sixteen percent of people had a clear idea when they went out to

vote”) and suggested people might vote ‘No’ as a domestic protest against government economic mismanagement, including the abandoning of Bertie Ahern’s plans for a national stadium. This analysis diluted the ‘No’ arguments and demonstrated that, while Mr Miller’s points on the Irish economy provided some degree of balance to the report on inward investment, the arguments against Nice would have been more accurately expressed had they come from one of the ‘No’ campaigners themselves. Ultimately, the two reports in September passed without any contribution from a eurosceptic guest.

The Referendum Week in Detail

The five days leading up to the vote in Ireland on Saturday 19th October were a logical period for the programme to bring deeper insights into coverage of European Union politics, to examine in depth the various shades of opinion raised by the referendum, and to assess the wider implications of the Nice Treaty for both Britain and the rest of the EU. Although this was clearly mainly an Irish matter, stemming from issues within Ireland, the vote had a direct relevance to the UK, particularly with regard to enlargement. Despite this - and the programme’s remit to deliver wide-ranging coverage - the programme carried only two substantive reports in the week leading up to and including the vote, with a further three items on the day after the result had been announced - two of these being combined within features primarily concerned with Romano Prodi’s comments on the euro stability pact.

The table below shows the main items covered by the Today programme during the referendum period. All news items which received three or more separate reports over this eight day period were logged and timed.

Main Stories: Monday 14 th to Monday 21 st October 2002			
Story	Number of Features	Total Airtime	Average length of feature
Bali Bomb	19	104 min	5min 28sec
Iraq	12	59 min	4min 54sec
Northern Ireland	8	37 min	4min 38sec
War on Terror	4	29 min	7min 15sec
Scientific Inventions	8	28 min	3min 30sec
Fire-fighters threaten strike	7	26 min	3min 42 sec
Anniversaries of Historical Events	4	22 min	5min 30sec
Washington Sniper	6	22 min	3 min 40sec
Test Case on Murder Sentences	3	18 min	6 min
Education	3	15 min	5 min
Government Road improvements	3	15 min	5 min
Irish Referendum on Nice	5	14 min	2min 48 sec

This demonstrates clearly that the Irish referendum was given a low priority in Today's agenda over the course of these eight days, both in total airtime and average feature length.

Of course, arguments about the relative importance of different news stories are difficult. It could be that the Irish referendum was pushed down the agenda by programme editors because they judged it was not newsworthy enough. But the facts suggest otherwise, because although much time was given during the period to the "strong" stories outlined above, there was still also room in the programme for numerous other less newsworthy features. The 12 major news stories in the table amounted to 6 hours and 29 minutes of coverage. But this was slightly *less than half* of the total 13 hours and 4 minutes of features which were broadcast by Today during this eight day period.

The programme also delivered 6 hours and 35 minutes of other material, mainly in the form of single, standalone reports, on a diverse range of subjects, many not strongly newsworthy in the hard sense of the word, and certainly not as important as the referendum. Some of the more obscure items included: a five minute interview with the founder of a new group campaigning for the rights of fat people; a discussion entitled 'is darts a sport?'; the history of colour; a report on the wastage of oddly shaped and coloured fruit in supermarkets; an interview with a Sunderland student refusing to evacuate his house following the discovery of an unexploded war-time bomb; an American rap artist's recording of a pro-hunting song; news that the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes was being honoured by the Royal Society of Chemistry; and a four minute interview with a scientist who had published a book looking at 'the secret life of dust'.

Such stories are an important part of the Today "mix". However, the point remains important. The meagre coverage given to the Irish referendum was not because it was crowded out of the agenda by more 'important' or 'newsworthy' stories. If an average of just five seconds been shaved off all other news reports during this week and given over instead to the referendum, coverage could have been increased to 52 minutes - almost four times its actual level, and ample time to explore the missed complexities underlined below.

18th October: Business News

On the day before the referendum, the programme carried its first item in four weeks on the referendum with a package that was the only opportunity for those on opposing sides of the argument to engage in a head to head debate. Despite the imminence of the vote, the report was placed at 6.15am in the business news sequence and thus well outside of the programme's

peak listening time. Of course, the referendum was of central and special importance to the business community, but the impact was also of relevance to general listeners, and they - it turned out - missed any similar analysis. Business reporter Rebecca Marston chaired the debate between Maria Cronin, director of European Affairs at the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, who was speaking in favour of a 'Yes' vote, and Anthony Coughlan, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin, for the 'No' campaign. Ms Marston's introduction contained broad generalisations, and emphasised strongly arguments employed by the 'Yes' campaign. As such, it was not neutral.

The Irish will vote again tomorrow on whether to back plans to expand the European Union. Ireland is the only EU nation not to have ratified the Nice Treaty, which will pave the way for ten states, mainly from Eastern Europe to join the EU. Ireland's 'No' vote last year came as a shock - although it did come on the back of a low turn-out. A second 'no' would push the European Union into a period of serious uncertainty.

Detail on the treaty's actual provisions was sparse, and the familiar shorthand of 'paving the way for enlargement' was employed. Ms Marston's suggestion that the 2001 result 'came as a shock' also raises concerns. While some may certainly have experienced 'shock', her statement disregarded completely those who might have felt 'relief', 'jubilation', or even a more neutral 'surprise'. The omission of any qualification to the word 'shock' conveyed a consensus that did not exist.

Ms Marston associated, in the very next clause, the 'No' vote in the first referendum with the low turn-out. Throughout the campaign, the Irish government used this as a justification for what many regarded as an undemocratic restaging of the vote, but no hint of any opposing views was provided. Similarly, her mention of the 'serious uncertainty' into which the European Union would be pushed could have been better (and impartially) explained if the mooted back-up plans - such as the renegotiation of Nice, or drawing up of a new treaty - had been briefly explained. Ms Marston continued:

Irish business is firmly behind the treaty, and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation has launched its first ever public campaign to try to secure a 'Yes' vote. It argues increasing the EU market to five hundred million people would boost trade and employment. But those against say this would be at the expense of - among others - Irish farmers, whose subsidies would go down in order to pay the new members.

There was a clear imbalance here in the representation of the two arguments. The dichotomy set up by Ms Marston's comparison was clear: on the one hand, the 'yes' campaign backed by captains of industry - a movement for overall societal good and 'a boost to trade and employment'; and on the other, the 'no' movement relying on the thorny issue of agricultural

subsidies, about which every major UK political party, and the public at large, is critical. Overall, this was over-simplification at its worst. It seriously skewed the perception of what the referendum was about and failed to give proper weight to the reasons for the 'no' vote in the previous campaign.

The interview itself was less than robust, and aside from one supplementary question to the 'Yes' campaign representative, mainly consisted of asking each side to express their particular viewpoints. Maria Cronin, from the 'Yes' campaign spoke first, explaining initially that the Nice Treaty was a mechanism to put in place institutional reform, leading to an enlargement programme of 'strategic business importance'. She argued that every previous round of enlargement had boosted Irish business, and mentioned her campaign slogan, "enlargement equals trade equals jobs". Rebecca Marston noted that the Irish economy was dependent on foreign investment, and that half the work-force was employed by multinationals. She then asked Maria Cronin, "but do you really believe a 'No' vote would seriously alter that?". Maria Cronin responded in the affirmative, and went on to speak about Ireland's position of influence within the EU and the ten accession countries themselves. She also mirrored comments made in Ms Marston's introduction, saying that direct investment would be put in jeopardy by the 'undoubted uncertainty' that would follow an Irish rejection of the Nice Treaty.

'No' campaigner, Anthony Coughlan was then drawn into the discussion with a straightforward, 'what do you say to that?'. He began by contending that the situation had been misrepresented, that none of the groups on the 'No' side were opposed to EU enlargement, and that, in fact, this would occur anyway, irrespective of the result of the second referendum. He argued that the Nice Treaty wouldn't actually admit new countries into the EU, but that process would be undertaken through accession treaties still under negotiation. He stated that the Nice Treaty set out 'a scheme of votes and seats for the applicant countries' which would be included in these accession treaties, 'irrespective of how people voted on Nice'. He concluded by saying:

Our objections to the Treaty of Nice have nothing, therefore, essentially to do with opposition to EU enlargement, which will proceed anyway, because there's sufficient political will and momentum behind it, but due to other criticisms of things in the Treaty of Nice, that are not necessary for enlargement.

The most obvious course at this juncture would have been for Ms Marston to have asked Mr Coughlan to define precisely what these other criticisms were. Up to that point, he had sought only to explain the provisions of the treaty, rather than provide listeners with the specifics of his opposition to it. This was an extremely important point, but it was important that he

should explain more and give the real reasons that underpinned the 'no' perspective. But Ms Marston responded to his comment by turning once again to Maria Cronin: 'OK, Maria, what do you say to that?' Ms Cronin used this opportunity to claim that the Nice Treaty as 'the only show in town' for anyone in favour of Enlargement. She spoke of the Amsterdam Treaty, where member states had agreed on the institutional reforms which were required for enlargement to take place, and likened the EU's expansion to a business expansion, where structural changes would be required to enlarge so greatly. Ms Cronin concluded:

And that's what this Treaty is all about. And therefore, if we want enlargement, if we want it to happen on schedule - and the candidate countries have all asked us to help them in this regard - if this is what we want, then we need to vote yes on Saturday.

Mr Coughlan was not given an opportunity to respond to this, nor to elaborate further on his earlier points. Listeners therefore, were provided with a greater knowledge of what the Treaty of Nice actually contained, but little understanding of which of these provisions the 'No' side were actually opposed to - save perhaps for the reduction of farm subsidies, as had been outlined in the introduction.

The interview structure was therefore biased in favour of Maria Cronin and her 'Yes' arguments. Foremost, there was a clear disparity between the amounts of time afforded to each speaker. Of the package - lasting a total of 4 minutes 45 seconds - the 'Yes' representative spoke for 1 minute 58 seconds while the 'No' representative spoke for only 1 minute 16 seconds. The imbalance was compounded still further by the way the interview was structured: two questions to the 'Yes' representative, a single opportunity for the 'No' representative to speak, followed by the 'Yes' campaigner being given the final word.

Of course, interviews are very much a fluid process, and cannot easily be conducted by stopwatch; in some cases - for instance, at the hands of a particularly tough interviewer - having extra time is perhaps of no benefit at all. However, in an example such as this, where the guests were permitted to speak virtually without interruption, the inequality became vitally important. It would seem that Mr Coughlan himself was expecting another opportunity to speak; otherwise, he would perhaps have spent less time correcting the references to Nice as the 'enlargement' treaty, and more time outlining his reasons for his opposition. However, due to poor stewardship, the single live discussion on the issues surrounding the Nice passed, rather extraordinarily, without a single reason for opposition to the treaty being put.

Overall, this interview, as one of the main vehicles introducing listeners to the key issues of the referendum, was deeply flawed. It was both imbalanced and did not allow the speaker representing the 'no' vote to advance clearly the arguments being deployed.

19th October: Bulletins

The day of the referendum began with a bulletin report in the 7am news, placed fifth out of nine reports, which was repeated at 8am. Again, the treaty was referred to directly as 'the Nice Treaty on European enlargement', and a further description said how the treaty 'sets out changes to the EU's institutions which are required before new member states, mainly from Eastern Europe, are allowed to join.' Daniel Hannan, the Conservative MEP, criticised the simplicity of such descriptions in an article in the next day's Sunday Telegraph:

It is something of a surprise, then, to read the Nice Treaty and find that enlargement is barely mentioned: it comes in a codicil tacked on at the end, and could easily have been agreed without a referendum. Nice is about deepening rather than widening the EU. It provides, among other things, for the scrapping of 39 national vetoes, the harmonisation of justice and home affairs and the establishment of pan-European political parties.

(Sunday Telegraph, 20th October 2002)

It was noticeable that none of the concerns catalogued by Mr Hannan were discussed or even mentioned by the programme in its coverage of the referendum, either in bulletins or the extended reports. This demonstrates the pitfalls in distilling complex pieces of legislation into just a few words. Of course, it would have been impractical to provide a comprehensive explanation of all the treaty's provisions each time it was referred to, particularly in shorter reports. But by referring to Nice repeatedly as 'the treaty of enlargement', the Today programme reduced the document to just a single aspect, an aspect which, eurosceptics contested, was not even the real basis of the treaty. As *The Spectator* said,

Campaigners for a Yes this Saturday have been telling the Irish that the ratification of Nice is necessary for the EU to be enlarged to include ten new member states, most of them from the former Communist bloc. This is simply untrue. The EU agreed to admit four new members in 1994 without ratifying a new treaty, just as it admitted the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland without a new treaty in 1972, and Greece in 1981.

(19th October, 2002)

In framing this news item, the Today programme was therefore apparently ignoring an important strand of euro-sceptic opinion about the nature of the vote. For this reason, it was at best over-simplified and at worst, biased.

19th October: Irish Referendum Package

This six minute report broadcast at 7.15am was divided into two sections, a pre-recorded package from Dublin by BBC correspondent James Helm, and a live interview conducted by John Humphrys, with Mark Brennock, political correspondent for the Irish Times. Mr Humphrys also provided the introduction to the James Helm report which, in its brevity, encountered the same pitfalls as the bulletins had encountered, referring again to the treaty as ‘the Nice Treaty on European enlargement.’

Part One: Report from Dublin

Mr Helm began his report with a vox pop with three Irish voters outside Dublin’s football ground, where campaigners were canvassing for votes. The first speaker expressed her intention to vote ‘No’ in the referendum, saying that she feared that in five year’s time there would be a two-tier system in Europe. The second interviewee expressed a more mixed opinion which veered towards support of the treaty: “Possibly ‘Yes’, but I’m not absolutely certain that I’m going to vote ‘Yes’ - it’s just a possible ‘Yes’. I don’t know who to believe.” While the third speaker was more certain in her intention to vote in favour of the treaty, giving the reason that “If Ireland votes ‘No’ again this time, the Europeans will look on them very badly.”.

Next came a sound-clip of Bertie Ahern, from his final speech of the campaign, in which he urged the Irish people to vote “for the strongest ever protection for our neutrality”, to “give other countries the opportunities we’ve had” and to vote “for an Ireland which remains at the heart of the European Union.”. This was followed by two Irish business people, the first supportive of the treaty, due to the expansion into Eastern Europe which enlargement would bring; the second speaker opposed to the referendum on the grounds that the government was asking for a second vote, and pointed out that she was not against enlargement, but against the changes to the European processes which the Nice Treaty would bring.

James Helm then explained the ‘No’ camp’s argument that Nice would reduce Ireland’s influence and bring about a two-tier Europe, were introduced in a soundbite from Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams, who explained that the referendum on Nice was about how voters wanted the EU to be ruled - on the basis of equality, partnership and states having the same

rights, or as a two-tier system. Mr Adams concluded by asking if the preference was to have an EU as a free federation of sovereign states, or as a United States of Europe. Mr Helm concluded his report by citing opinion polls which suggested a large proportion of voters hadn't yet made up their minds, and said "As Ireland's voters grapple with the issues, the progress of Europe's grand enlargement plan hinges on their verdict."

The decision to include Gerry Adams as one of the two political contributors raised some issues for a British audience: his links with the IRA - and, at the time of the referendum, with his party's alleged spying at Stormont - meant he was not arriving at the debate with an untarnished reputation, and for a proportion of the audience his speaking in favour of 'No' vote - given the absence of other voices - may have been a negative influence on their perception of this side of the campaign. It would not have mattered at all if coverage had been more extensive. But as Mr Adams was the sole political contributor talking about the 'No' campaign, it created significant bias in linking it with 'extreme' (from the perspective of many UK listeners familiar with Mr Adams) political opinions.

This aside, James Helm's package was evenly balanced in terms of contributions and it allowed central arguments from either side of the debate to be aired clearly, albeit briefly. It introduced for the first time in the coverage that concerns about Ireland's neutrality were involved in the vote, a topic which was not fully explored either here or elsewhere in the coverage. Although the vox pops were slightly weighted in favour of a 'Yes' vote, one of these was an 'undecided Yes', and the articulacy of the arguments from the speaker providing 'No' arguments perhaps balanced out the inequality in numbers.

Of course, the BBC had to tread very carefully with location reports such as this one. A similar package broadcast on Radio 4's PM programme, covering the first Irish referendum on Nice, had drawn complaints that the report had failed to reflect the views of those supporting a 'No' vote. The BBC's programme complaints committee had agreed, stating:

" . . . the comments of interviewees on the forthcoming referendum all tended to suggest that a "yes" vote was both desirable and inevitable. As events have demonstrated, this was not a balanced picture." (BBC Programme Complaints Bulletin)

Following these findings, the programme team were "reminded of the duty to reflect debates fairly", and it is therefore possible that this judgement had an impact upon the compiling of James Helm's report on the second Irish referendum.

Part Two: Interview with Mark Brennock, Irish Times

Following James Helm's location report, John Humphrys brought journalist Mark Brennock into the discussion. Mr Brennock's contribution was even-handed throughout, beginning with a background on the predicted turn-out, which he assumed would be higher this time, due to the enthusiasm of campaigning on both sides. He also outlined some of the reasons people might vote either for or against the treaty, including an opposition or support of greater European integration, the issue of military neutrality and fears that supporting the Nice Treaty would lead towards ultimate participation in a European Army, and said that these issues had been debated back and forth over the past eighteen months.

At one juncture, Mr Humphrys asked if there was a specific anti-European Union element within the overall 'No' vote.

JOHN HUMPHRYS: So, for anybody is it an anti-Europe vote? An anti-European Union vote?

MARK BRENNOCK: There is an element here, there is a traditional anti-European element which has been here right since the first referendum we had on joining the European Union in 1972, but that in itself is quite small, most referendums we have had on various European Union treaties over the years have been approved quite . . .

JH: Well, you've done very well out of Europe, haven't you over the years?

As previously discussed, the notion that Ireland had benefited greatly from its membership of the EU was a leitmotif of coverage of the referendum. Mr Humphrys himself had made similar observations repeatedly during his previous interviews. In the report on Irish inward investment on September 18th, Mr Humphrys noted "Britain is not doing so well in persuading foreign countries to invest here, that's what the latest figures show. Ireland has been doing brilliantly". Likewise, in his interview with Nick Miller on September 20th Mr Humphrys stated, "Compared with most countries in Europe, Ireland has been doing *extraordinarily* well", and in response to Mr Miller's suggestion that a 'No' vote could mean the Nice Treaty being thrown out all together, Mr Humphrys expressed astonishment: "Wow! And all done by Ireland, which has benefited so much from the European Union?".

This raised issues of over-generalisation, as these 'benefits' were not explained fully, nor balanced by other arguments to the contrary, for example with discussion of the possible negative aspects of Ireland's EU membership, such as the loss of sovereignty or lack of control over interest rates. Moreover, these comments fed into wider notions that Ireland had somehow acted 'ungratefully' in its rejection of the Nice Treaty in the first referendum, or that the Irish were now somehow acting spitefully in their refusal to allow applicant countries

to share in the benefits it had received from EU membership. Mr Miller, for example, agreed with Mr Humphrys that Ireland had ‘benefited so much’, by explaining “Yes, it’s kind of ironic. I was over in Poland recently, where they were saying that it was almost as if Ireland was pulling up the ladder on the applicant countries.” This concept of an ‘ungrateful’ Ireland featured heavily in the European press both immediately before the first referendum:

The best pupils of the European class have spat in the soup... The blow is all the more treacherous in that it comes from a country that owes its new wealth to Europe
(*Liberation*, cited at *BBC News Online*)

And also in the approach to the second:

Hungary’s daily Magyar Hirlap newspaper said Ireland would be seen as an “an untrustworthy and ungrateful nation” if it again said ‘No’.
(*ABC News Online*)

The comments made repeatedly by Mr Humphrys would have been perfectly justified if they had been directed against a member of the ‘No’ campaign during a robust interview. But these examples all occurred during discussions with neutral commentators, where the purpose was to mould a consensus of opinion, rather than to arouse a heated argument. Mark Brannock did offer a different perspective in response to Mr Humphrys’ statement, asserting that while his country had received ‘significant financial transfers’ since 1972, it had now moved to the position of being a net contributor to - rather than a net recipient of - European Union funds. However, he qualified this by saying that, “. . . some more cynical people do suggest that this may have had an influence on some voters in recent years to move to a more sceptical position”, which ultimately reinforced the concept that a ‘No’ vote on Nice was emanating from a selfish perspective, rather than any solid ideological opposition to the contents of the treaty. On balance, therefore, the comments of Mr Humphrys distorted the impression conveyed about the relationship between Ireland and the EU, and did not take into account that there were differing views, particularly among eurosceptics.

19th October: Newspaper Review

The final referendum report that morning turned to coverage of the campaign as outlined in the British press.

PETER DONALDSON: Most of the papers take to the streets of the Irish Republic, as people there prepare to vote on the Nice Treaty on EU enlargement. The Daily Mirror says the result hangs on a knife edge, while the Guardian detects what it

calls a "palpable sense of drama". It is clear, the paper says, that the EU will be plunged into a constitutional crisis involving scores of millions of people, if a few thousand Irish voters reject the treaty once again. The Daily Telegraph believes the Irish are now the only Europeans who actually know what's in the treaty. Every taxi driver, it says, can apparently expound in 'staggering detail' on the two-speed European mechanism. The Times, meanwhile, relishes the sight of Vote No campaigners in County Monaghan, invoking fearful images of a European superstate. In Britain, the speaker could easily be a Conservative sounding off about the threat from Brussels, the paper says. But in this case, he represents a party not normally seen as a close ally of the Tories - Sinn Fein.

The Guardian's warning of 'a constitutional crisis' echoed the familiar warnings given by the European Commission, Irish government and business leaders. Yet the précis of the Daily Telegraph's viewpoint which followed was significant, as it did not adequately balance the Guardian's view. On closer examination of the Telegraph article, the section chosen by Today was one of the few neutral aspects of the whole piece. Elsewhere, journalist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard looked at numerous forms of opposition to Nice: he addressed arguments from the left ('No to Nice, No to a bosses' Europe); threats to Irish neutrality with the creation of 'a quarter million strong European Army'; and fears of mass immigration if enlargement went ahead. Mr Evans-Pritchard noted that this was the first time any country had been asked to vote twice on the same treaty text, and said that "all the big guns of Irish public life have been deployed in a saturation campaign by the Yes side". Even the taxi-driver example was bowdlerised by Today; the actual paragraph read:

Every taxi driver, it seems, can expound on "enhanced co-operation", the two-speed Europe mechanism or argue in staggering detail as to whether or not Article 133 opens the way for the forced privatisation of public transport and health care.

The newspaper review section, by the nature of its brevity, paints press opinion with broad strokes, but Today was clearly acting unfairly by using the Telegraph article in this way. The Telegraph's vociferous attack on the Nice Treaty was thus neutered completely, and the tone of the summary presented by Today was wholly different to the article as it appeared in print.

The use of the Times article linked the 'No' campaign with Sinn Fein, as had occurred already in the James Helm package earlier in the morning. While there can be no doubt that Sinn Fein were indeed campaigning for a 'No', their inclusion here was again problematic. For the majority of Britons, Sinn Fein is only discussed in the context of the IRA, and it is rare that the party's policies on other political issues is discussed or referred to in the British media. With no further explanation provided on the ideology behind Sinn Fein's opposition to Nice, this brief summary of the Times report created clear associations between euro-scepticism, terrorism and the British Conservative Party. A discussion of Sinn Fein's involvement in the

'No' campaign had a rightful place in the debates surrounding the Irish referendum, but it required a more detailed consideration of this potentially inflammatory issue, to prevent confusion and misunderstanding.

21st October: Newspaper Review

With the referendum result announced on Sunday 20th, the following morning's edition of Today began its analysis during the Newspaper Review slot at 6.12am, with the same report repeated at 7.43am.

The 'Yes' vote in the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty is carried on the front pages of many of this morning's papers. The Daily Telegraph says the result came as a huge relief to the Irish prime minister, Bertie Ahern, who'd staked considerable political capital on holding a second referendum. The Independent suspects relief coursed through almost all of Europe's capitals when the result was declared. The Guardian found the prime minister of Poland in good spirits, promising to raise a glass of Guinness to Mr Ahern's government, for opening the way for his country and nine others to join the EU in 2004.

Two themes emerged here which were to extend throughout the morning: first, 'relief' - felt both by Bertie Ahern and through Europe's capitals - and second, the gratitude from the accession countries. Although this section of the programme is reliant on external factors - namely what journalists in the British press have decided to write on a given day - the examples chosen provided a wholly positive view of the result, even from the eurosceptic Daily Telegraph. Upon closer inspection of this Telegraph article, other viewpoints *were* expressed, for example, John Gormley from the Green Party commented, "There was, I think, a huge guilt trip, a certain intimidation - and a lot of money as well." Yet any responses from the 'No' campaign, or from disappointed Irish voters themselves, were omitted entirely from reporting of the referendum result.

21st October: Referendum Result

At 6.34am, Today presenter Sarah Montague was joined by correspondents Kevin Connolly and Tim Franks, in order to discuss both the referendum result, and comments made by EU President Romano Prodi on the euro stability pact. One and a half minutes of this four minute report was given over the referendum, with the remainder dealing with the Prodi issue. Presenter Sarah Montague opened the package by stating:

“Ireland has finally voted ‘Yes’ to European enlargement, that’ll be a relief to the European Commission - it faces a different problem now though - created by its own president Romano Prodi. He called the stability pact rules ‘stupid’. “

Again, the vote had simply been on ‘enlargement’ and the referendum result was framed in terms of a ‘relief’ - this time for the European Commission. Her first question, to correspondent Kevin Connolly asked if, ‘given that there was earlier a ‘No’ vote, can one say that this result reflects the true will of the people?’ Mr Connolly replied “I think you probably can”, although he said that eyebrows might be raised ‘at the democratic credentials of an exercise where the government has gone back to the electorate, effectively telling it that it got the answer wrong the first time.’ He also suggested that the Irish government’s tactic through the second campaign had been to ‘frighten people’ about the consequences of a ‘No’ vote. These comments were interesting as they were based around key arguments which were never explored before the vote itself. For them to emerge once the result had been announced was somewhat perplexing, and raised the question of whether these issues might have been more usefully raised in direct questioning to Irish ministers, members of the ‘Yes’ campaign, or EU representatives in the run-up to polling day. Mr Connolly concluded, however, that “in slightly peculiar circumstances, I think you can argue that the will of the Irish people has now, more or less, finally been expressed”. But neither he nor the presenter mentioned at this stage the exact size of the vote, the turnout or the swing from ‘no’ to ‘yes’.

Sarah Montague’s next question contextualised the result in a way which was quickly becoming familiar: “It must be truly a tremendous relief for Bertie Ahern?” Kevin Connolly agreed with this, and moved on to talk about the accession countries.

“I think it is, because as always with these things you have the march of a continent - the aspirations of countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, hanging on peculiarly Irish circumstances. “

Again, any possibility that there may be opposition to European Union membership in these candidate countries was omitted completely. While certainly, the aspirations of these *governments* may have been hanging on Irish circumstances, the EU’s own figures show a different attitude among the citizens themselves. In the three candidate countries mentioned by Kevin Connolly, support for EU membership lies at 51%, 60% and 46% respectively. In Estonia and in Latvia, the figure is as low as 33% (*Candidate Countries Eurobarometer*, March 2002). The obvious difficulty here is that the candidate countries were depicted as having a singularity in their attitudes, which is not the case.

Mr Connolly added that, to some extent a referendum could be seen as a popularity poll on the government in power, and that the 'Yes' camp had been concerned that they could be punished for the failings of the domestic government. He concluded:

“...the Irish have always seen themselves as particularly enthusiastic Europeans, and it's sat uncomfortably with them to have voted no in the first place, so the margin this time was almost two 'Yes' votes for every one 'No'.”

Once more, the difficulty here was that the sentiments of the whole of Ireland were being distilled into very general phrases which excluded any sense of opposition. By simply placing the word 'many' before the word 'Irish', a more equal representation of attitudes might have been delivered; but, ultimately, any dissension was negated entirely.

21st October: Bulletins

Having not been featured in the report at 6am, the referendum result appeared in later bulletins, although, once more, it was mentioned only as a precursor to a report mainly concerned with the financing of enlargement and with Romano Prodi's comments on the stability pact. The bulletins began:

“European Union officials have expressed relief that the Irish Republic has voted in favour of allowing the EU to admit ten new members. A 'No' vote could have scuppered the plans.”

Again, listeners were presented with a reaction of 'relief' from those who had favoured the 'Yes' vote, while the basis of the referendum itself had been distorted so completely that it had by this stage become a vote 'in favour of allowing the EU to admit ten new members' - a clear misrepresentation of the whole exercise, and in turn, those who had opposed it.

21st October: Interview with Jonathan Faull

This was an interview with Jonathan Faull, Romano Prodi's spokesman, and therefore a strong supporter of the EU and its institutions. Sarah Montague sought to achieve balance by putting to him a series of questions that seemed to be designed to adopt a broadly eurosceptic standpoint. She began with a strong sideswipe at the democratic legitimacy of the decision to hold a second referendum on Nice:

“If you don't like the answer, ask the question again. That's what happened in Ireland, and second time round the referendum on the Nice Treaty produced the answer Europe

wanted: a ‘Yes’ to changes that will give Ireland less of a say in decision making, but are deemed necessary to allow ten new countries to join the EU.”

As mentioned before, this point might have been more usefully put to an Irish MP or EU commissioner during the campaign, rather than afterwards when the changed result appeared at least partially to vindicate the decision to go ahead with the poll. In addition, the phrase ‘the answer Europe wanted’ was not accurate because it was not specific enough. It was almost certainly the answer the European Union’s *political institutions* wanted, but not all of Europe’s citizens.

From this starting point, the bulk of the package focused on Romano Prodi’s comments on the stability pact. Sarah Montague returned to the referendum towards the end. She began by quoting an unnamed MEP, who had said that the Nice Treaty was ‘the death of the European dream because what it allows for is a two-tier Europe’, and suggested that the big powers, Germany and France are ‘going to end up running Europe’, thwarting the ambitions of smaller countries when they had signed up to Europe. Mr Faull replied that this was ‘a profound misunderstanding’ of what the EU was about. He continued that the European Union was a new way of organising political relationships in Europe, adding ‘we don’t have one power dominating others anymore’. Ms Montague interrupted, stating: ‘They would argue that that’s what the European Union was about, and yet that the way that things are progressing, it’s not what it *will* be about.’ Mr Faull replied:

“No, no, no. The arrangements which the Treaty of Nice brings in, which are needed for enlargement and the discussions taking place in the convention on the future of Europe now, are about maintaining, improving the balance in Europe between big and small, between north, south, east and west. That’s the European Union’s great contribution to the modern history of our continent, we have done that. Otherwise, countries big and small - now including Ireland - wouldn’t have ratified the Treaty of Nice, they all did. They all did through parliamentary process, except Ireland, which has now done it by referendum.”

The interview was brought to a close here, which meant that there was no opportunity to press Mr Faull further, or to lead the interview onto other issues raised by the Irish referendum. Questions on the wider European democratic process, and of whether it was proper for the Irish electorate to be asked to vote for a second time on Nice, though mentioned in the introduction, were in the end not put directly to Mr Faull. This interview was the single opportunity for an EU representative to answer such concerns, yet Mr Faull was questioned on Nice for just one minute of the six minute package. Of course, by the time this interview took place, the result was a *fait accompli*, and the stability pact issue was a fresher story. However, the interview with Jonathon Faull underlined how both politicians and EU leaders had

not been subjected to robust interrogation by the Today programme during the entire course of the referendum campaign.

21st October: World Press Review

Today's coverage of the Irish referendum culminated with a review of Dublin's papers by Kevin Connolly, which, it was said, were 'basking in foreign reaction to the news' that voters had finally endorsed "the treaty which paves the way for enlargement of the European Union". The Irish Independent's headline 'Nice one Ireland' was recounted together with Bertie Ahern celebrating in 'a fancy city centre bar with a French name - truly Ireland is back at the heart of Europe'. Mr Connolly added that the Irish Times had sent reporters to Eastern Europe 'to record at first hand the gratitude of the applicant countries', where the Polish prime minister poured himself a Guinness, before launching into a song about how much he loved Ireland. Kevin Connolly continued:

"Still, there are sour notes if you look for them. The 'Yes' campaign brought together an unprecedented cross-party coalition and range of political leaders past and present. The Irish Star says one of those past leaders, Garrett Fitzgerald, grumpily accused Bertie Ahern of delaying the announcement of the referendum result so he could attend a Gaelic football international. Mr Ahern, characteristically, says that's not quite true: he did go to the game, but he had to leave the end before the end without knowing the score to keep his appointment with history."

Mr Connolly turned his attention next to newspaper coverage of the Real IRA, and child sex abuse in the Catholic Church, before returning again to the referendum result:

". . . Still, overwhelming, the mood is of mingled triumph and relief at the outcome of that second treaty referendum. The Examiner alone finds a downside - the one day, it notes, when the eyes of Europe were on Ireland, the tourist board must have been rubbing its hands, only for it to rain relentlessly all day."

While Mr Connolly was clearly reliant on what had been published in the Irish newspapers, , their support of the 'Yes' vote meant that opposition to the Treaty had evaporated completely. To use Mr Connolly's own phraseology, the only 'sour notes' or 'downsides' to the 'triumph and relief' were two rather frivolous stories on a Gaelic football match and the inclement weather. As such, listeners were left in no doubt that the referendum had had a positive outcome for the Irish government, the accession countries and, by implication, the voters themselves.

Conclusion

Although the Irish referendum did not involve directly British voters, the vote had direct significance to the UK because it was presented as being a vital step in the road to the EU agreeing its proposals on enlargement. It may be deemed difficult to make such topics editorially exciting, but it is the job of programmes such as *Today* to do so in order to bring its listeners the wide-ranging content required by the BBC's Charter.

In the event, coverage of the Irish referendum by the BBC was deeply unsatisfactory and did not meet the Charter requirement. Coverage was severely limited in its scope, failed to address properly the issues involved - mainly by over-compression - and challenged the views of too few participants in the debate. Its centre-piece interview on the topic, the day before the poll, was tucked away in the business news section, had an introduction that cast the 'no' vote in an unfavourable light and was imbalanced in the amount of time and consideration it gave to the 'yes' vote.

Europe-wide opinion remains deeply divided on the issues brought to the fore by the Irish referendum. According to the EU's own survey, on the question of majority voting - a central provision of the Nice Treaty - 41% of those polled across the fifteen member states were in favour, while 33% favoured unanimity in the European decision making process, a difference of just 8%. (*Eurobarometer 57* p.91) On the wider question of EU enlargement, half of those polled expressed an opinion in favour of expansion, thirty percent were against and twenty percent were undecided. Given this background, and the issues at stake for the whole of the European Union, it is difficult to see why the issue was pushed so far down the agenda, and such a narrow range of opinion came to be expressed.

Significantly, the programme presented the referendum almost entirely as a domestic Irish concern. The event was important to listeners in the United Kingdom for a variety of reasons, but none of these were explored in any depth. No United Kingdom politician was invited to give a perspective on the vote (in terms, for example, of the impact on the UK's future role in Europe). Similarly, no EU politician or spokesman appeared until *after* the referendum result had been announced. Even in terms of Irish politicians, political viewpoints were extremely scarce, with only a brief soundbites from Bertie Ahern and Gerry Adams to represent the two sides of the debate.

Many of the problems identified by this survey originate from a single cause: the lack of time given over to the referendum. The more an issue is compressed, the greater the danger of distortion.

The central issues raised by the survey are as follows:

- ❑ **Fall in EU-related coverage:** During the survey period (from September 2 to November 2, covering 54 editions) there were 151 programme items related to EU issues, 101 of which were substantive reports totalling 298 minutes. This represented a decrease in the amount of the Today programme devoted to EU-related issues. The proportion fell to only 5%, compared to 9% during previous monitoring. And of the key programme headline feature "windows" immediately after bulletins at 7am, 7.30am and 8am - a total of 162 of which were available in the monitoring period - only five were devoted to European issues of any description (and only one to the referendum itself). Programme presenters and correspondents actually openly referred on air to being bored with European issues.
- ❑ **Speaker bias:** From September 2 to November 2, there were a total of 118 contributors on EU affairs, 61 (52%) of whom were pro-euro, pro-EU (in favour of specific EU legislation or action), against 37 (31%) who were euro-sceptic or anti-EU specific legislation or action, and 20 (17%) who were neutral or who expressed a factual viewpoint. If soundbites and vox pops contributions are removed from the equation, the numbers were 36 (52%) pro-EU or pro-euro contributions, 19 (28%) expressing euro-sceptic or anti-EU sentiments, and 14 (20%) neutral. This indicates clearly that coverage and analysis on the programme was heavily skewed towards contributions from those of pro-EU or pro-euro views.
- ❑ **Irish referendum pushed out:** Consideration of the Irish referendum was reduced to a total of 21 minutes over the entire nine-week monitoring period and 14 minutes in the week of the vote and its aftermath. Analysis of all the stories covered in the referendum week showed that 6hrs 29 minutes were devoted to a range of important topics, both international and domestic, such as the Bali bomb and the prospect of war with Iraq, and a number of domestic issues such as events in Northern Ireland and the threat of a fire-fighters' strike. Of the twelve main stories that week (defined as those items receiving three or more separate feature reports) the Irish referendum was the least important in terms of total airtime and average length of features. There was also space in the programme for a further 6hrs 35 minutes of feature material devoted to single issues such as a discussion of whether darts is a sport and a rap singer's recording of a pro-hunt song. Producers cannot therefore argue that Ireland was "crowded out" as an issue. The simple

fact seems to be that the story was deemed not important enough. Had each of the single issues covered been reduced by only five seconds in length, coverage of the referendum could have been tripled. This amounts to “bias by omission”, as it assumes that listeners are not sufficiently interested in structural matters relating to the UK’s involvement in the EU for adequate coverage to be mounted. In addition, one of the key interviews on the referendum - an item on business news the day before the vote involving the only major rehearsal of some of the main arguments from both sides - was broadcast between 6.15am and 6.30am. This was firmly outside peak listening hours and also suggested that referendum was not seen as a mainstream issue.

- ❑ **Over-simplification:** the provisions of the Nice Treaty - and therefore what the Irish were voting about - were not properly explained, with a shorthand developing (‘Nice Treaty on EU Enlargement’) which was at best over-simplified and at worst inaccurate. Eurosceptics insist that the Treaty of Nice was not about enlargement at all, (as each new country will have its own separate accession treaty) and that the provisions of Nice were about “deepening” rather than “widening” the European Union with revised voting powers and the loss of vetoes. The continued use of the term ‘Enlargement Treaty’ unjustly favoured the ‘yes’ perspective. The issue of neutrality, very important to many Irish voters and a significant factor in the previous ‘no’ vote, was scarcely mentioned and certainly not explored in any depth. A number of reports, but particularly in the bulletins in the day of the referendum, contained sweeping generalisations that amounted to conveying bias. John Humphrys, for example, (on September 20), heavily pressed for time, claimed that the previous ‘no’ vote had been “an embarrassment to everybody” (not taking into account that for the ‘no’ camp it had been a triumph).
- ❑ **Generalisation:** Presenters and correspondents commented too sweepingly on the viewpoints of whole nations (‘the Irish’, ‘the accession countries’, ‘European capitals’) and used broad generalisation (‘everybody’), in ways that suggested a non-existent consensus in attitudes towards policies. In using such terms, the programme did not adequately take into account the range of opinions across the European Union and elsewhere, and gave the impression that there was greater agreement than there was or actually is.
- ❑ **Insufficient range of interviewees:** No Irish, UK or European Union politicians were questioned directly on the issues arising from Nice in the run-up to the referendum, the only direct contributions from politicians being in short soundbites from Gerry Adams and Bertie Ahern. Otherwise “expert” observers were used. Following the result, the only interview was with Jonathan Faull, the spokesman for Romano Prodi. There was therefore

little opportunity for listeners to appreciate at first hand the range and substance of the arguments being deployed. The only eurosceptic viewpoint from a politician - interviewed in connection with the 'no' campaign - was a soundbite from Gerry Adams, a figure with negative associations for many among the British audience. There was also a failure to interrogate satisfactorily the different shades of opinion on referendum issues.

- ❑ **Bias:** The benefits of the Irish membership of the EU were over-emphasised with no alternative viewpoints on what the country may have relinquished in order to be part of the Union, or in its adopting of the single currency. In addition, there was an imbalance of time and weight given to the 'yes' and 'no' arguments, for example in the centre-piece interview on the business news section of the programme when the 'yes' speaker was allocated almost two minutes, and the 'no' representative just over one minute. In the small overall space allocated to the campaign, this difference was very significant. It was made even more so by the interviewer's approach in steering the 'yes' campaigner to articulate the full range of arguments, while the 'no' campaigner became unwittingly bogged down in technicalities triggered by what had preceded his question.
- ❑ **Breach of Producer Guidelines:** The BBC's own guidelines say that statistics should be reported carefully and used in context, They also state that sources should be clearly indicated. In the introduction to the report on inward investment to Ireland and the UK on September 18, not enough background information was given on the figures being cited, which led to problems in comparisons between the Irish and UK economies.

The Today programme was not the only source of information about the referendum on BBC Radio 4, and other coverage was mounted elsewhere. However, the programme is the network's flagship, and is used by many listeners as their main briefing of the news agenda. On this basis, coverage of the referendum was inadequate.