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Communications, Media and Culture

BBC Charter Review: the Scottish dimension

The BBC is a core element within anomalies in Scotland's overall media provision which have come to look acute.

As Scotland appears to have recovered an increasingly strong sense of its national identity, its media have grown less and less capable of providing a platform for its civil society. While press ownership has passed out of Scottish hands, Scotland continues to be anomalous in European terms by having no TV channel, BBC Alba excepted, with editing and commissioning autonomy. Indigenous TV provision in European regions, none of which have Scotland's historical apparatus as a nation, is the norm. Only in Scotland do we debate what elsewhere in Europe seems obvious, namely, that opt-out TV broadcasting provision does not constitute an adequate broadcast delivery arrangement.

There is little indication in the Green Paper, or in responses from the BBC, to suggest – despite the new visibility of Scotland in UK politics – that the London broadcasting world or its parliamentary overseers are any more sensitive than previously to the real sub-national complexity of the United Kingdom. The BBC is highly valued in Scotland, as it ought to be, but it's increasingly difficult to celebrate the Corporation's worth here when Scottish civil society has democratic, economic and cultural needs which the BBC is decreasingly well resourced to address.

These are some main examples of what from a Scottish viewpoint needs to be addressed:

- The BBC's Scottish operation and its programming in Scotland, *ie* both from London and Glasgow, are by-products of a strategy which is not concerned with Scotland. There is no strategy for Scottish broadcasting (see below).
- The present structure of the BBC severely limits BBC Scotland's autonomy most crucially in the areas of editing and commissioning. Initiatives on both fronts tend to be cosmetic.
- Despite that, the BBC is *de facto*, the key patron for the Scottish independent broadcasting sector, which, however, can never find enough commissioning from the Corporation, nor within a wide enough range of programming, to adequately sustain a Scottish production base. This is why that sector was highly supportive of proposals in 2008 for a new channel (see below).

- The BBC persists in accumulating figures for ‘Scottish’ production spend which invite scepticism – the definition of what constitutes a Scottish production can be contentious - while over the years there is evidence at best of temporary fixes to maintain resourcing of BBC Scotland at a level which can be made to appear acceptable.
- The BBC is unable to provide anything resembling an adequate broadcast platform for TV news and current affairs in Scotland, while STV, because also an opt-out broadcaster, is similarly placed. This is against a background of worrying decline in the Scottish press.
- In a broader context, and in an economic world in which cities and regions compete ruthlessly for investment, the BBC continues to be a prime marketer for London, even though cities like Glasgow and Edinburgh are direct competitors for revenue for tourism, conferences and inward investment. The BBC remains a core contributor to the economic imbalance of the UK. Its rebuttal of that charge seldom engages with the real scale of the problem. Its expensive relocation of buildings to Salford left the hearts and minds of its executives unaffected. The BBC remains a key player in the Londonization of the British state.

These difficulties have been evident for a long time. Their persistence is what drove the Scottish Broadcasting Commission’s work in 2008 and that of the Scottish Digital Network Panel in 2010/11.

The broadcasting proposals in the independence White Paper appeared to ignore the SBC’s recommendations – despite their positive reception at Holyrood – and instead propose the BBC as the solution, where the SBC report instead understood the BBC as part of the problem. The Scottish Government as of November 2015 still seems to believe that the BBC can solve these democratic, cultural and economic shortfalls in broadcasting provision north of the border. This is likely to stall rather than facilitate any solution to the problem.

To imagine that the BBC is resourced to fill all the absences in Scottish broadcast provision is quixotic. Its revenue, in the light of apparent trends in the thinking of the present Westminster government, looks subject to uncertain funding horizons. The few clues available from senior BBC Scotland management in autumn 2015 indicate a likely defence of the status quo, with – perhaps – some movement on news provision (it’s dispiriting to see the return of the now-antiquated notion of the so-called ‘Scottish Six’, which barely begins to address the deficiencies in Scottish broadcast provision).

It is also very surprising to see an organization criticized in Scotland for its London-centric nature proposed as the operator of a Scottish channel. There is no evidence at all that the BBC is culturally capable of providing adequate Scottish broadcasting. All the evidence over many decades points to the opposite conclusion.

If it is felt in Scotland that the BBC literally owes Scotland a better deal, *ie* because of its (contested) failure to spend enough of the licence take north of the border on Scottish programming, then there is an alternative to the still vague and improbable notion of a Scottish channel operated by the BBC. And that is a return to the SBC’s recommendation/

/of a separate Scottish channel. If the rough operating cost of such a channel is still held to be in the region of £80 million per year, then an agreement might be sought from the BBC to part-fund the new channel, *ie* as its due contribution to Scottish broadcasting. The Corporation might also be encouraged to use such a channel strategically as part of its wider operations, also at organizational level, since in fact the BBC's case for its own survival as a public broadcaster could be strengthened if it took the lead in adopting a federal model.

However the whole point of a new Scottish channel is exactly that it should not be run by the BBC. And, indeed, and as was envisaged by the SBC, such a channel would take much of the burden of Scottish expectation away from the BBC.

It is completely unrealistic, in fact, to expect the BBC to compensate for large failings in the Scottish media ecology. The BBC can do more to help, but it is resourced neither financially nor in terms of its institutional culture to be the main solution to Scotland's lack of adequate broadcasting provision.

Holyrood has sent mixed messages about its concerns over the Scottish media. Probably because media oversight still inappropriately resides with DCMS, the focus of MSPs, which is naturally on matters over which they have authority, has been less consistent on the crucial matter of the platform which the Scottish media provide for the concerns of Scottish civil society. Some valuable gains have been achieved through the Scottish Parliament's scrutiny of media matters, but there has arisen a cyclical quality over public debate on Scottish broadcasting, and it is improbable that a better solution will be found than the recommendations widely welcomed in the Scottish Parliament and laid out in the Broadcasting Commission report.

In some other European democracies it has been felt worthwhile, precisely because of the crucial role of the media in the proper functioning of democracy, for the state to make some contribution to the financing of media operations. It may be that a funding partnership with the BBC, with an open view as to other possible funding partners, could provide a truly autonomous Scottish channel.

In the meantime, and as a non-negotiable condition for the running of the BBC, the Corporation needs to become answerable to a Holyrood committee directly as well as to DCMS; Ofcom's operations should likewise become a joint Westminster-Holyrood responsibility; and the question of general media oversight, still at Westminster, needs to be scrutinized in order to bring the oversight of Scottish media to Edinburgh.

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