

SMCA Response to Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee: BBC Charter Renewal Call for Views

23 November 2015

The Scottish Media and Communication Association (SMCA) is Scotland's higher education subject association in the media and communication fields, with the participation of universities and colleges teaching and researching in media and communication studies.

Preface

This response constitutes the range of views expressed by participants at an SMCA discussion meeting, held on Thursday 12th November 2015 at the University of Glasgow, the purpose of which was to compile the range of perspectives of scholars working in media studies in Scotland; as such **this is not a unified response from the SMCA or its member institutions**, but instead a statement of the range of views expressed by the event participants, who are named at the end.

Overall participants expressed support for a strong BBC, and felt that the licence fee offers good value. It is noted that some of the questions asked might be regarded as being consistent with a particular Scottish Government agenda to which the meeting participants may not subscribe. It is also noted that that perceived agenda – in particular the proposed creation of a separate public service broadcasting channel for Scotland to be funded from the licence fee – is taken to be based on a particular calculation of appropriate licence fee spend in Scotland which may be open to challenge.

Responses to the questions should therefore be taken in that overall context of concern for the future of the BBC and its vulnerability to political agendas - north and south of the border - in the charter renewal process.

Question 1 Scale and scope of the BBC

This set of three questions is considered as perhaps the most 'difficult' to answer and it is noted that, as considerations of scale and scope overlap with the three other areas listed in the call for views ('Serving the interests of the Scottish audience'; 'Governance arrangements'; and 'Cost savings'), it is challenging to address the scale and scope of the BBC in isolation.

How should the charter reflect the BBC's priorities and output in Scotland?

The breadth of this question was seen as a potential issue in eliciting a meaningful response: is it that the Charter should reflect a specific quota for Scotland distinct from other UK nations in the BBC structure? It was suggested that the question might be better considered as 'How might the BBC structure be reframed to ensure it may represent the changing polity of the UK's nations (and even regions)?'. Some participants moot that the BBC might therefore formally reflect an 'assymetrical federalism' in its structure.

Should in-house production quotas and Terms of Trade allow greater competition and what impact could this have on the Scottish broadcasting industry?

Following from the point above (re changing polity), some participants suggested that the details of in-house production quotas and Terms of Trade might not necessarily be matters specific to Charter renewal – also that such quotas and terms are not readily transparent - but could follow naturally from a more federal BBC structure. Some argued therefore that it would be of prima facie importance to get the BBC structure right allowing for fair commissioning and production processes, (including with the independent sector), for the constitutive nations of the UK, with more direct control of budgets. On the other hand, in response to this question, other participants noted that there should be no assumption that the BBC needs a complete overhaul or that current commissioning and production practices are inappropriate. It was understood that the current basic principle for allocation of production spend was that it would remain in line with population proportions in the nations; for some of the participants, this was a fair principle in its own right and fairer than a formulation geographically calculated by licence fee generation (which takes no account of central BBC running costs and infrastructure).

Is the BBC's online presence damaging local and regional news outlets within Scotland? What could be done to ensure the BBC works more co-operatively with the local and regional news sector.

In answer to the first of these questions, some participants argued that current issues re viability (or otherwise) of sustaining local and regional newspapers are not exclusive to Scotland or even to the UK or Europe. In particular it was noted that newspapers of all kinds (national, regional and local) can be seen to be in difficulty even in the US where there is no strong PSB news culture. Others expressed concern that cuts could be made to the BBC online services through questioning their legitimacy in this manner and therefore local/regional news audiences could end up worse served without any gain to the Scottish press or the press elsewhere in the UK. It was noted that online can be seen as the future of news and a natural evolution of the BBC's news gathering operation that is contingent on its public service broadcasting activities (and special mention was made of the role of local BBC radio production facilities across Scotland and the UK) however there must always be regard to plurality and sustainability and the democratic function of news. The second of these questions might be regarded as rather loaded (in its imputation that the BBC does not currently work effectively in the sector) and was therefore difficult to respond to.

Question 2 Serving the interests of the Scottish audience

How well is the BBC serving the Scottish audience (English and Gaelic speaking) and representing Scottish issues to the wider UK audience?

The BBC is good value in Scotland and throughout the UK, and any proposals for change should aim to add to the value it already offers, not to diminish it. Participants

felt that the license fee is a fair and reasonable contribution to support a valuable service and any attempt to further cut BBC funding levels would not be acceptable. All further points made in relation to this question, should be read within this context.

Gaelic is served well by Gaelic radio and BBC Alba. However, although there is separate radio provision for Scotland, there is no dedicated Scottish television channel, only Scottish opt-outs in the UK-wide provision. The approach of the Scottish government for the past years was to seek the establishment of this channel – the issue is whether this approach should be supported and, if so, who should pay for the new channel. This is a highly political issue and views diverged among participants. Another question is whether there is demand for such a channel among audiences. There is also a question on whether moving towards a more federal structure of the BBC, with the creation of a Scottish channel, would mean the establishment of other regional channels in England for areas with significantly large populations. For some participants this would allow a more realistic representation of where the UK is heading politically, but for others it would lead to a ghettoization and isolation, with production communities only talking to themselves.

Perhaps the Gaelic argument was stronger and more persuasive about the need for Gaelic media to preserve the language and culture. Welsh language media are identified with Welsh media, but in Scotland the relationship between language and national identity is not the same. Scottish programming reflects Scottish issues, but seems not to be as extensive as that provided in Wales, in terms of the slots dedicated to the regions on BBC1 and BBC2. There are a limited number of companies who produce all Gaelic content and there is a secure budget allocation for them to continue doing this, but little competition. Perhaps a potential consequence of a dedicated Scottish channel might be to boost the co-production community in Scotland.

In terms of whether the BBC represents Scottish issues to the wider UK audience, there have been efforts, since the King report, to represent Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales more, at least in news provision. Some participants felt this was not adequate, that viewers in England learn little about what is going on in the other nations of the UK, and representation can still be improved. Others felt that the same can be said of English regions: compared to them, the other nations enjoy greater representation. Others expressed sympathy with an organization that tries to bring together voices from around the UK rather than ghettoize them, and believe that the role of the BBC must be to give a sense of the diversity of experiences within the country. For others, what matters more is that the production base of programmes shown on the network is in Scotland rather than that the programmes represent 'Scottishness'. This would protect production companies and help develop the industry in Scotland. At the same time, it was argued that there needs to be a balance so that Scotland is not used as a source of lift-and-shift productions for the network. Others suggested that perhaps there isn't always awareness among audiences of where programmes are produced – for instance they are not aware that Question Time is produced in Scotland. This could be seen as an example of lift-and-shift production within the BBC – production capacity should be shared across the UK, but not just to satisfy a quota.

Could Scotland receive a fairer share of BBC spending?

The phrasing of this question assumes that Scotland is not currently receiving a fair share of BBC spending, which is not a proposition participants necessarily wished to endorse. In terms of production spend, this reflects the size of the population – it's around 9.3% of the network spend. It does sometimes seem that the content this money is invested in tends to be generic programming, which is not recognizable as being made in Scotland. Adaptations of Scottish novels are comparatively less common. The discussion should not be about the share of spending BBC Scotland gets, but about how it is spent, whether it helps develop indigenous talent and whether it helps Scottish creative professionals sustain themselves. It is important both that BBC Scotland pitches good creative ideas that earn network investment, and also at the same time that commissioning structures and the location of commissioners allow fair opportunities to Scottish producers to have their proposals heard and judged. Scotland used to have a more central role in producing children's programmes in the past than it does now. The centralization of BBC production was attributed by some participants to the difficulty of persuading commissioners and channel controllers to move outside London - they don't see themselves as anything else than central BBC people.

How well does the BBC support distinctive Scottish content and could it do more in this regard?

Some participants felt that Scottish theatre, culture and the arts are not represented on BBC Scotland television, except during the festival season. Others felt that the Culture Show, which is produced in Scotland does represent Scottish arts. Some thought that BBC drama production is poor, because River City takes up most of the drama budget, yet it is only shown in Scotland. With the same resources original plays could have been commissioned and some believe that the decision to invest all drama resources in River City was wrong. Others noted that the budget limitations that mean a choice has to be made between investing in a daily series or in commissioning plays do not exist in London. It was suggested that perhaps there is a set mentality in the BBC, dictating that audiences outside Scotland would not be interested in Scottish programmes. These programmes do not need to feature stereotypical images of Scottishness in order to represent Scottish content. They should instead promote understanding within other parts of the UK of what goes on in Scotland. There should be greater sharing between parts of the UK of this type of content. The question is not about distinctive Scottish content but about the space that the BBC makes and uses for cultural interchange and plurality. Some felt that cultural differences between England and Scotland are exaggerated in the media due to a lack of education, and programming of this type could help make visible the similarities as well as the differences between different parts of the UK and promote cultural understanding. It was argued that opt-out content does not strengthen this cultural understanding but isolates viewers.

How could the BBC enhance support and development of talent and skills in Scotland?

The BBC has an extensive modern apprenticeship scheme, and they have discussions with Creative Skillset about developing further links with education. There are examples of BBC projects engaging students, which have led to new entry-level jobs. The question is whether these opportunities lead to long-term jobs, or whether they train people who later leave Scotland to work in London. It was also noted that graduate training schemes operate at UK-wide level and thus do not necessarily encourage retention of talent in Scotland.

Question 3 Governance arrangements

How can BBC governance be improved to enhance the Scottish voice?

It was argued that the abolition of the board of governors was an ill-thought out response to a crisis. Some participants suggested that the new arrangement was rushed into and hasn't worked very well. The former broadcasting councils in the nations were charged with responsibilities for content and policy. That was changed because there was a perception that broadcasting councils did not do that job properly and they were just advisory bodies. It was argued that it would have been better to enhance the powers of these bodies, to find ways of making them genuinely responsible, rather than reduce their status. Some suggested that this question could be an attempt to compel the BBC Director General to appear in front of the Scottish Parliament as well as the UK Parliament. It is difficult to decide what to do when you have asymmetrical federalism – can something apply in Scotland that does not apply in Northern Ireland? Should the BBC be more accountable to the Scottish Parliament than it is the Welsh Parliament? Such issues need to be ironed out. If the federalism question is answered politically and feeds into real life, this will be part of future BBC charters. Any change towards more federalism is likely to feed into public institutions like the BBC.

Question 4 Cost savings

What could be the impact of any further cuts to BBC spending in Scotland?

The argument for a more robust BBC in Scotland cannot be made within a context of further cuts.

Respondents

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