

Chapter 8

Challenges for public service radio in small nations

Lessons from Scotland

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Abstract

Scotland does not have any public service radio on a local level, except for a few bulletins or programmes offered by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio Scotland on an opt-out basis. Scottish commercial radio stations do cover local issues, but only in the form of brief hourly news bulletins without any in-depth coverage. By neglecting local news, BBC Scotland fails to meet one of its key obligations as a public service broadcaster – universality of content. Through a review of the existing literature on the role of media in democracy – and in particular the role of local radio – interviews with academics whose expertise lies in the fields of media policy and regulation, and focus groups with members of the public, this study formulates proposals on how to achieve universality in this key area of news provision in Scotland.

Keywords: local, radio, public, service, news, regulation

Introduction

Scotland is a stateless nation, or as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) refers to it in the context of its own structure – a national region. In the radio arena, Scotland has a very strong national player in the form of BBC Radio Scotland, which is both a national radio for Scotland and, as part of the bigger BBC family, a regional one. What Scotland lacks, though, is local public service radio along the lines of similar services in many countries, including south of the border in England. In terms of local news provision, radio audiences in Scotland are served by a network of commercial radio stations, while the BBC in Scotland offers local news only on its website. That level of provision, as we argue in this chapter, is insufficient. Of particular interest to us is provision of local hard news, or what Kernell and colleagues (2018: 240) refer to as “civic affairs news” – news that help inform citizens’ political activity. This is particularly important now that the local press is in

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decline, with titles closing down or reducing staff numbers and output (Fraser, 2017; Mayhew, 2018).

According to a YouGov survey on news consumption, for citizens of the UK, radio is the second most popular source of news, after television and still ahead of print, online news sources, and social media feeds. British people say that local or regional news is the second most important type of news, after national, with a combined figure of 76 per cent saying that it is either “very” or “fairly” important. The four most important types of local news for British people are: crime and policing (80%), local events and entertainment (69%), traffic and travel (63%), and local politics (62%). Although 61 per cent say there is enough local news where they live, it is not clear if the levels of satisfaction vary between the four nations of the UK, given that the BBC runs local radio stations only in England (all figures by YouGov, 2019).

In that context, and with focus on universality of content as one of the stated obligations of public service media, we aim to answer two research questions:

1. What is the state of local news provision by radio in Scotland?
2. How to achieve universality of content for BBC radio in Scotland?

To answer these two questions, we reviewed the existing literature on the role of media in democracy. We also interviewed news editors, station managers, and academics with expertise in the fields of media policy, regulation, and history. Furthermore, we spoke to members of the public in focus groups. The same data set has been used to answer other research questions, with partly overlapping conclusions published elsewhere (see Kocic & Milicev, 2019). Our aim is to evaluate the current local news provision by radio in Scotland and formulate possible ways forward for BBC in Scotland so it can achieve more complete universality of content.

Theoretical perspectives on the role of media

In Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, the BBC is the main public service broadcaster, while commercial rivals have only limited public service obligations. Public broadcasting systems are allocated certain responsibilities and are required to serve the “public interest” in ways that go beyond what market forces can determine (McQuail, 2003: 15), which makes the BBC’s position over local news coverage in Scotland rather peculiar. What seems to be of particular concern here is to what extent the BBC meets its responsibilities in terms of universality and diversity. These are – together with independence and distinctiveness – some of the main responsibilities of public service broadcasters, as defined by Banerjee and Seneviratne (2005). The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) distinguishes

between universality of content and universality of access. It is universality of content that is of particular interest to this study.

The EBU (2002) defines universality of content in two ways: universality of basic supply on generalist channels and universality across the full portfolio of services, some of them specialised or tailored for specific audiences. Writing before the proliferation of digital services, Born and Prosser (2001) argued that in the context of universality of content, the traditional concept of mixed programming is superior to the concept of niche channels, where more demanding programmes on current affairs or the arts are concentrated in specialist channels. While BBC Radio Scotland has maintained the single-channel approach, this chapter demonstrates that it has deliberately neglected a key aspect of news provision – local news coverage.

For Bardoel and d’Haenens, the universality of content requirement presents public service broadcasters (PSBs) with a particular challenge as they seek support of a society that is changing rapidly because of major social trends such as individualisation, lower interest in politics and established institutions, as well as a shift from a mono- to a multicultural society. A key problem is the gradually diminishing reach of PSBs among “problematic groups” such as younger generations, migrants, and the less educated (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2008: 341). Young people often support the ideal of public service in media, but many do not find public service media (PSM) channels or content of personal interest and value (Van den Bulck et al., 2018).

In Scotland, the gap in local news coverage by BBC Radio Scotland is partly filled by commercial radio, in the form of brief hourly news bulletins. Nevertheless, as commercial media have a structural bias against news and current affairs (Aalberg et al., 2010), it remains unclear to what extent this addresses the informational needs of Scottish audiences. This is important because of the potential of local media to contribute to democratic processes. Democracy functions best when its citizens and decision-makers are informed about different viewpoints on policy problems (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015). Local journalism provides information about local public affairs, it holds local elites at least somewhat accountable, it provides a forum for discussion, and it ties communities together (Nielsen, 2015). Local media have the ability to bring politically disinterested citizens together and help them engage in public life (Campbell, 1999). The media do that by raising citizens’ concerns about issues (Smith, 1987) and by providing information on how individuals can participate in politics (Lemert, 1981). Furthermore, local media help foster social integration by helping people navigate their local community and contribute to social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the locale (Costera Meijer, 2010). From this perspective, local and regional media are seen as fundamental resources of both democracy and identity (Robins & Cornford, 1993).

The functioning of democracy relies on an informed citizenship (Esser et al., 2012). News media use is expected to affect political participation by affecting knowledge about current political affairs, which then affects beliefs in one's capability to act on this knowledge (Andersen et al., 2016). Active political participation is key to a healthy democracy, especially within the frameworks of participatory and deliberative democracy (Strömbäck, 2005). Citizens who pay close attention to news about public affairs and politics should not only be able to cast more informed ballots and hold elected officials accountable; they should also be more supportive of democratic processes and procedures (Goidel et al., 2017).

The second equally important function of the media is in facilitating participation in deliberative processes. Carpentier and colleagues (2013) say that the media sphere serves as a location, where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices. This concept is of particular importance to the present study as we believe that local media – and local radio in particular – play a key role in facilitating public participation in democratic processes. This is achieved through its role of bringing to the fore issues relevant to local communities it serves and, through its staple – the phone-in – and other speech-based programmes, facilitate mediated public discussion around those issues.

The arrival of the Internet brought with it a new public sphere with great hopes for the effect of online and mobile news' effect on democracy. Jakubowicz (2008: 5) is among those who believe that the Internet has “transformed large parts of the traditionally passive audience into active communicators, willing to engage in debate and expecting a similar willingness on the part of professional media”. Social media in particular was thought to have democratic potential to engage people in dialogue about issues of common concern and public interest (Hjarvard, 2018; Shirky, 2008). Others, however, have argued that the potential for digital democracy is greatly overstated (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Hindman, 2008). Digital media may subsequently have little effect on democratic attitudes, or the effects may be more nuanced (Goidel et al., 2017). As far as local news coverage is concerned, the emergence of new digital forms of local media has caused a great deal of optimism, but as Nielsen (2015) points out, the evidence that digital-only operations can sustain local journalism on a significant scale is inconclusive.

Radio market and listening habits in Scotland

Currently, there are 34 local commercial stations available to listeners in Scotland (Ofcom, 2019).¹ According to their schedules and service formats, they all provide news coverage in the form of brief hourly news bulletins in peak

hours. At the same time, substantial local news coverage by the BBC exists only on “opt-outs” in some parts of Scotland. BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland each broadcast a half-hour daily news programme, extended to a full hour in winter months, while short local news and weather bulletins are also broadcast on weekdays from studios in Selkirk, Dumfries, Aberdeen, and Inverness. This leaves other parts of Scotland, including large cities such as Glasgow, Edinburgh, or Dundee, without any local news coverage.

In order to help fill the gap in the coverage of local councils and other public bodies in the UK, the BBC in 2017 launched Local News Partnerships – a news agency tasked with providing content for print, broadcast, and online news outlets. The agency currently employs 20 journalists in Scotland who produce content available to over 130 partners, mostly local newspaper and commercial radio stations (BBC, 2019). While certainly a step in the right direction, that project does little to address the lack of local news coverage by BBC Radio in Scotland itself. This is quite important as research by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) consistently shows that listeners in Scotland attach a great deal of importance to local news coverage – it is the second most valued type of content after music (2019). Radio in general remains very popular in Scotland, with 85 per cent of adults tuning in every week in quarter 1 of 2019. Local commercial radio is the most popular type, at 51 per cent weekly reach, while BBC Radio Scotland – at 17.2 per cent – is doing better than local radio in England combined (all figures from Ofcom, 2019).

Methods

The present study – which received ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier University prior to data collection – used a mixed-methods design as a way to collect rich, comprehensive data and compare quantitative and qualitative findings.

Design

We employed an exploratory sequential design (see Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) whereby a qualitative approach was used to explore the previously established quantitative findings. Content analysis was used to reach quantitative findings. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were employed to obtain views of experts, professionals, and government officials, allowing us to gather detailed answers about each respondent’s field of expertise (Guest et al., 2017). Focus groups were used to obtain the views of members of the public. This method was appropriate as group dynamics – based on the interactions between group members – were likely to produce a wider range of views and perspectives than

one-to-one interviews (cf. Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Combining quantitative data about the extent of local news coverage and qualitative data about user needs and ways to address them, we obtained a comprehensive tool to assess the current state of local news provision by radio in Scotland, as well as the ability to draw up suggestions about optimal ways of achieving universality of content for BBC radio in Scotland.

Procedure

The study was undertaken in four consecutive phases: 1) interviews with news editors; 2) content analysis of news bulletin scripts; 3) interviews with experts; and 4) focus groups with the general public. The findings from each phase informed the design of the subsequent phases in the following way. First, news editors at BBC Radio Scotland and Bauer Media² were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured approach to gain insight into stations' editorial policies and output.

Next, content analysis was applied to the news bulletin scripts provided by Bauer Media and the BBC Radio Scotland, looking into programmes by four Bauer Media stations and the BBC Radio Scotland between 25–27 September 2017 (see Table 3). News stories were sorted according to the predetermined categories listed in Tables 2 and 4. Once the state of news provision by commercial and PSB radio in Scotland was quantified, we used semi-structured interviews with six experts and one Scottish government representative to put those findings into perspective and solicit ideas for ways forward. The academics (see Table 1) were chosen on the basis of their extensive knowledge of media history, policy, and regulation in Scotland, or more general expertise on radio and its public service role.

Table 1. Interviewees

Station or news editors	Gary Smith, Head of News, BBC Radio Scotland Lorraine Herbison, Head of News and Sport, Scotland, Bauer Media
Regulators and policy makers	Scottish Government
Academics	Neil Blain, Professor Emeritus of Communications, University of Stirling David Hutchison, Visiting Professor in Media Policy, Glasgow Caledonian University Peter Schlesinger, Professor of Cultural Policy, University of Glasgow and former member for Scotland on the Content Board of Ofcom Peter Lewis, Professor of Media and Culture, London Metropolitan University Chris Frost, Professor of Journalism, John Moores University

Finally, the findings from content analysis and interviews with editors and experts were used to inform the design of the focus groups' interview schedule.

Participants

The academic experts (see Table 1) were chosen on the basis of their extensive knowledge of media history, policy, and regulation in Scotland, or more general expertise on radio and its public service role. Scottish residents aged 18 and above were eligible to participate in our focus groups, provided they had resided in Scotland for more than a year. Invitations for participation were emailed to the members of Edinburgh Active Citizenship Group – whose members are ordinary citizens with a keen interest in public affairs – and students at Edinburgh Napier University. Scottish citizens (N=22; age range 19–72) took part in four focus groups. The purpose was to gain insight into ordinary citizens' views on the importance of local news and local radio.

Data analysis

Both the interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. This is a flexible approach that allows for identification of key patterns (themes) in the data and their interpretation in relation to the research questions and relevant theoretical ideas (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2014). It was a particularly suitable way to address our research questions, which aimed to tap into individuals' conceptions of social phenomena, as it enabled us to capture a wide range of views as well as identify the most dominant ones (cf. Willig, 2013). First, we assigned preliminary codes to the data. Next, we searched for patterns across the interviews. Finally, themes were refined and defined so that each one was coherent and distinct. Consequently, our themes represented the dominant attitudes and perceptions related to local news provision in Scotland, while the minority opinions were recorded as “disproving cases”, helping to form a balanced representation of the entire data set.

Quantitative results

On BBC Radio Scotland we counted 124 stories in total, with the breakdown listed in Table 2.

We note here – as per BBC Radio Scotland's news policy explained by its Head of News Gary Smith – that local stories are included in news bulletins or programmes only if they are considered by editors to be of interest to the wider Scottish audience. Such stories often fall into these categories: crime, traffic, and human interest. Some of the headlines in this category we found included:

“Easterhouse Stabbing Inquiry Continues”; “A Man Has Died Following a Disturbance in Dundee”; and “Motorists Reporting Long Delays on the A9 in the Cairngorm”.

Table 2. Types and number of stories covered by BBC Radio Scotland

BBC Radio Scotland News Coverage	
Local	10
Regional	26
National	35
International	27
Human interest	5
Business	7
Science	10
Arts and entertainment	4
Other	0
Total	124

In the commercial sector, we looked at the output of four Bauer media stations, listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Commercial radio stations included in the content analysis

Station	Output
Clyde 1 (greater Glasgow area)	FM and DAB Weekday news bulletins, hourly 6:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Clyde 2 (greater Glasgow area)	AM and DAB Weekday news bulletins, hourly 6:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Radio Borders (Scottish Borders and North Northumberland)	FM Weekday news bulletins, hourly 6:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Radio Forth (greater Edinburgh area)	FM and DAB Weekday news bulletins, hourly 6:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.

All of the above listed stations have one thing in common – they offer a far smaller number of stories than BBC Radio Scotland, but with more emphasis on local news. Lorraine Herbison, Bauer Media’s head of news for Scotland, points out that this is because local news is Bauer’s USP in terms of its news offering. This point is clearly illustrated in our breakdown of the four radio stations’ news output over the same three days in September 2017, listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Types and number of stories covered by four commercial radio stations

	Station		
	Clyde 1 and 2	Radio Borders	Radio Forth
Local	11	17	12
Regional	13	6	5
National	9	12	17
International	2	4	3
Sport	7	3	9
Human interest	2	0	0
Business	1	2	1
Science	2	1	2
Art and Entertainment	1	2	1
Other	1	0	0
Total	49	47	50

Our analyses demonstrate that in relative terms, commercial radio in Scotland covers a substantial number of local stories. However, those stories are covered in brief only, as the majority of stations, including those listed here, do not go beyond the two-minute news bulletins on the hour, extended to five minutes at 1:00 p.m. on AM stations only (which serve an older audience).

Qualitative results

In our interviews with media experts, three themes emerged: 1) the BBC is not doing a good enough job; 2) commercial radio is not a viable alternative; and 3) the BBC and broadcasting policy in Scotland should be reformed.

Theme one: The BBC is not doing a good enough job

All expert interviewees agree that the BBC could do better in the area of local news provision. Frost said he thought that local news provision “was the main purpose of BBC Scotland”, while Lewis pointed out that attention on local radio suffered due to the BBC’s “prioritising” of television and online services. Schlesinger challenged the traditional concept of mixed programming: “An all-purpose pan-Scottish station’s model is ripe for review, not least as patterns of consumption change apace”.

Theme two: Commercial radio is not a viable alternative

Given the lack of local news provision on BBC Scotland, we asked our interviewees to comment on local news provision by commercial rivals in Scotland. For Schlesinger, “the long-term trend of commercial local radio has been to

de-localise content and to consolidate ownership”, while for Blain, commercial radio is less suitable as an alternative to PSB because it is “more prone to buffeting by various market considerations”. Frost sees deregulation as the main reason why commercial radio fails to provide substantial news coverage and does not expect that to change any time soon.

Theme three:

The BBC and broadcasting policy in Scotland should be reformed

Our interviewees suggested a variety of ways for future local news provision in Scotland – from the preservation of local press (Blain) to the “rethinking” of public provision by the BBC (Schlesinger) or a possible new network of non-BBC PSB stations (Hutchison). Blain thinks the BBC should trial local stations in areas “where research indicated a kind of identity community which would support them”. He adds that the existing provision for Shetland and Orkney could be a useful model. Hutchison argues that the money allocated to the BBC’s new digital channel for Scotland could be better spent by setting up local radio stations. For him, one of the reasons for that is the decline of local press: “When local newspapers were stronger that didn’t matter, but I think it started to matter more and I’m not sure the solution is expanding the BBC website”. The Scottish government, which on broadcasting matters does not have policy-making powers, says it too would like the BBC to go beyond just the local opt-outs: “We believe that [...] audiences would also welcome dedicated services from the BBC offering high quality news and current affairs from the distinctive perspective of Scotland’s regions”.

For Lewis and the Scottish government, the solution lies in devolution of broadcasting in the UK, which in the government’s view would “ensure that proportionate decisions can be taken which recognise the requirements of viewers and listeners in Scotland”. Schlesinger believes the dilemma facing the BBC is “how to design and market content that will appeal to younger demographics without an entrenched habit of radio listening [and balance it] with attention to existing radio audiences”. This is of course the dilemma facing all PSBs around the world, as highlighted by Van den Bulck and colleagues (2018).

Focus groups

Thematic analysis of the focus groups revealed four dominant, interrelated themes: 1) we are second best for the BBC; 2) there is a need for a variety of local news; 3) commercial radio does not do news well; and 4) the BBC may not be the only solution.

Theme one: We are second best for the BBC

Most of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of the BBC in Scotland, most notably its trustworthiness and impartiality. These were perceived as compromised by a “really obvious political bias it has, which is [...] not even subtle now, it’s just awful”. According to our participants, the station also lacked in spirit and creativity (“There is no energy in that radio”), which was attributed to the inferior status of the regional provider in relation to the national corporation:

I feel like there’s a very strong sense in Scotland with a lot of people that we are second best for the BBC.

BBC Scotland’s news [...] I think they’re badly prepared, truly badly prepared compared to BBC core. Main news broadcast and lot of the news is very vague, they don’t grow traction or stimulate.

Our focus groups were also critical of the extent to which BBC Scotland catered for different groups, tastes, and needs. Main perceived deficiencies were to do with repetitiveness (“It’s always the same lady that’s on, she kind of backslaps and jokes with the people. It seems a fairly trivial chat”), and the lack of local content (“But there usually seems to be chat shows, it’s not local news”). Nevertheless, many participants praised particular elements of BBC Scotland’s output, such as the morning programme, sports, or night-time music.

Theme two: There is a need for a variety of local news

In line with the aforementioned 2019 YouGov survey of news consumption, most participants expressed great interest in local news. In addition, they voiced frustration that local news is “not out there” or that “if it’s covered at all, it’s not in-depth”. There was a shared feeling that important local information was obtained accidentally (“I only happen to hear about these if somebody happens to come on the door”) or that “you’ve got to want to make an effort to look for it”. Interests included council spending and planning, transport, infrastructure, services, schools, education, and “feel-good” stories. Finally, several participants stressed the relevance of local information to the possibility of civic action and political activity:

Like, if you want things to change, or if you want to hear about local corruption, or bad planning, or that sort of things, local news should be a platform.

I think it’s good to know what they’re spending money on, because that shows what your local Council thinks is important. And if I think something is important and you can see they’re not spending any money on it, then I would ask myself why. Or ask them.

Theme three: Commercial radio does not do news well

Although commercial radio in Scotland provides news in the form of short hourly bulletins, our participants did not feel that this was an adequate way to provide local news coverage, labelling it “ridiculous”. Similar to experts, focus groups expressed the view that commercial media cannot be an adequate substitute for PSBs: “Every time I listen to any local channel on the radio, I never hear the news in it, I just hear the same pop tune that is on the next channel”.

At the same time, our focus groups perceived some aspects of commercial radio rather positively: “I think they can be fun to listen to and I think there are a lot of really good people, like, hosting different types of shows”.

Theme four: The BBC may not be the only solution

The focus groups also indicated there is demand for local public service radio, though not necessarily one provided by the BBC. While some participants thought that each of the seven cities of Scotland should have its local BBC station, the majority felt that the BBC’s reputation as a news provider was too “tainted” due to its shortcomings discussed in theme one, and that there was a need for a public broadcaster that would “have autonomy and not be yet another aspect of the BBC”, which would be close to the Scottish government’s view that broadcasting should be devolved. While overall there was ostensible enthusiasm for some form of local radio, there were also those who thought that radio’s days were numbered: “Online news is the future really. It will all be shifted over to online at some point”.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to evaluate the state of local news provision by radio in Scotland and to explore the possible ways in which to achieve universality of content for BBC radio in Scotland. Our content analyses demonstrated that BBC Radio Scotland covers local news only as an exception, while commercial radio in general includes a relatively large number of local news, but mostly without any in-depth coverage. Our thematic analyses resulted in three overarching themes for the interviews and four for the focus groups. Notably, the two sets of themes overlapped to an extent, providing a more rounded view of the issues at stake. Both experts and the members of public agreed that local radio is important as a provider of local news and facilitator of local democracy.

While the experts highlighted the public service media as the best for the role, members of the public did not have a strong preference for it to be the BBC, voicing unambiguous dissatisfaction with the performance of the national

broadcaster in Scotland. The perceived bias and lack of creativity, diversity, and local content imply that, in the view of Scottish residents, BBC Scotland might be failing to meet its PSB responsibilities of independence, distinctiveness, universality, and diversity, as defined by Banerjee and Seneviratne (2005). The fact that our focus groups felt that local information was vital for their political activity and civic action supports Kernell and colleagues' (2018) notion of civic affairs news as news that empower citizens by informing their political activity. Both focus groups and experts suggest that the BBC model in Scotland should be reformed. Focus groups supported the view that commercial media cannot be an adequate substitute for PSBs because, as Aalberg and colleagues (2010) pointed out, they have a structural bias against news and current affairs. In addition, they felt that the BBC should be replaced by a more autonomous news provider, echoing the view of the Scottish Government that broadcasting should be devolved. Despite some differences between the views of experts and focus groups, a sufficient number of common perspectives has emerged to help us answer our research questions.

Theoretical perspectives on the role of radio outlined above demonstrate a clear need for robust local news provision in democracy. In assessing the state of that provision by radio in Scotland, we looked at the number of stories covered before gathering perspectives on the quality of the coverage. Our content analyses show that public service radio covers more stories and offers more airtime to news and current affairs than its commercial rivals but by and large neglects local news. Our interviews with experts highlight this as an important gap, while our focus group interviews demonstrate both scepticism of the BBC and dissatisfaction with commercial radio.

We conclude that the current provision by the BBC and commercial radio in Scotland is insufficient and that Scotland needs local radio with a strong public service role. Such radio would help keep the citizens informed about local issues and thus potentially engaged in local democracy. Democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed (Aalberg et al., 2010). Studies show that news media with high levels of political content affect knowledge and voter turnout positively (Althaus & Trautman, 2008; Baekgaard et al., 2014; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

In order to achieve universality of content for BBC radio in Scotland so that it includes local news coverage, we propose that the BBC set up a network of local radio stations with opt-ins into BBC Radio Scotland. This would be based on the English model – where currently there are 40 local BBC stations – possibly starting with the expansion of the existing BBC community stations in Scotland (see below), followed by the establishment of new ones. The amount of output per station would vary, and they would all at certain times opt into BBC Scotland, or at night, a national BBC station such as BBC Five Live. Some of our experts suggested precisely this.

Our focus group interviews revealed distrust of the BBC based mostly on its perceived bias. While this is a matter for a separate study, we here note that in the current constitutional setup, the BBC is best placed to provide universal news service to audiences in Scotland. Without the unlikely regulatory overhaul, commercial radio can only play a supplementary role in news provision, while a PSB rival to the BBC, as championed by some of our experts and focus group participants, does not seem to be viable in the current political climate in the UK.

A reformed BBC therefore would best meet the two complementary obligations for PSBs, namely universality and diversity. The BBC with a single national radio station for Scotland, together with a network of local stations, would enable the corporation to achieve more meaningful diversification in terms of the audiences targeted and the subjects discussed, thus reflecting the whole range of current issues in society, especially at local level.

The BBC is a well-established PSB, with sufficient resources to run such a service, provided BBC Scotland is reorganised. According to its annual report for 2017–2018 (BBC, 2018) the BBC raises over GBP 320 million in Scotland from the licence fee but spends about a GBP 100 million less. The rest goes to the central BBC budget. The total spent on radio is just over GBP 22 million (BBC, 2018).³ By establishing a network of local radio stations, the BBC would go a long way towards reaching universality of content in its news coverage in Scotland. However, we consider this option unlikely in the near future. It is clear that in the short-to-medium term, the BBC does not have any plans to invest in a network of local radio stations, as confirmed to us by Gary Smith.

Alternatively, BBC Radio Scotland could continue running a single national radio station, but with more local opt-outs – giving existing BBC community stations more airtime and adding new ones in places where they don't already exist. At the moment, BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland both air a half-hour daily news programme each, while local news and weather bulletins are also broadcast from studios in Selkirk, Dumfries, Aberdeen, and Inverness on weekdays. From the perspective of universality, this option would be in line with Born and Prosser's (2001) argument that the traditional concept of mixed programming is superior to the concept of niche channels. In this scenario, news for different localities would essentially be an integral part of a single BBC Radio Scotland channel. We acknowledge, however, that this option had limited support among our expert interviewees and focus group participants.

At present, the BBC in Scotland provides local news coverage mainly on its website, where Scotland is divided into six geographical areas. This is certainly welcome and can be seen as an essential part of strengthening the reach of public broadcasting. The merits of this strategy – which at the moment appears to be insufficient both in scope and aims – should be examined in a separate investigation. In terms of its capacity to nurture and represent inclusive public dialogue – as suggested by Bardoel and Lowe (2007) in their argument for

transition from PSB to PSM – the website fails, as it does not offer a possibility for discussion of issues.

Conclusion

Through a combination of policy and regulatory decisions, Scotland has been left without significant local news provision by radio. This may not have mattered much in the days of a strong local newspaper market,⁴ but today it creates a worrying gap. This is not to say that radio in Scotland is a failure – on the contrary, BBC Radio Scotland is going strong with a steady audience of around 20 per cent; but we believe its current remit creates a significant gap in relation to its universality obligation.

In the present study, we approached the issue of validity by using triangulation, that is, looking at the issue at stake from two different standpoints: experts' and citizens' (see Wilson & MacLean, 2011). We acknowledge that this study is limited by relying on a small number of interviews and focus groups and the fact that all focus group participants were from Southeast Scotland and hence the views expressed might be primarily representative of this region. Future research could verify the generalisability of the current findings by surveying a larger number of participants from a wider geographical area. The proposals outlined here present a starting point for discussion and further in-depth research that would look at their political viability and feasibility. Future research should also address the state of the current local news provision in Scotland in general – by encompassing print and online media. Given the position of Scotland in the UK and the extent of its autonomy, future research should also look at the possibility of local news provision by public service radio set-up outside the BBC.

Notes

1. Radio listeners in Scotland are also served by a range of community radio stations. Scottish Community Broadcasting Network currently lists 27 of those. Community stations, however, usually lack resources to be able to produce standard news bulletins and news programming, and they do not employ trained journalists. As such, they were excluded from our considerations.
2. Bauer Media runs thirteen stations at eight locations in Scotland, and in quarter 1 of 2018, it had the largest proportion of the market among commercial radio groups (Ofcom, 2018).
3. These figures do not include the GBP 32 million allocated annually for the BBC's new digital television channel for Scotland, launched in early 2019.
4. 57.9 per cent of the British population live in areas not served by a local daily. Rural areas are particularly poorly served, with almost all local daily papers covering major urban areas (NUJ, 2017).

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