



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 January 2012

Session 4

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.scottish.parliament.uk or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 24 January 2012

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	645
BROADCASTING	646

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Boothman (BBC Scotland)

Stuart Cosgrove (Channel 4)

Paul Holleran (NUJ Scotland)

Gordon MacMillan (STV)

Iain Macwhirter

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 24 January 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning. I welcome members to the third meeting of the Education and Culture Committee in 2012. As usual, I remind members and those in the public gallery please to switch off electronic devices—particularly mobile phones—that they may have on their person. Do not put them to silent, as they still tend to interfere with the sound system, as we experienced last week.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to consider our work programme in private at future meetings. Are members content to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Broadcasting

10:04

The Convener: Item 2 is a discussion on broadcasting. Before Christmas, we agreed to have a round-table discussion on broadcasting issues. The main theme of this morning's discussion is output, particularly in relation to news and current affairs, and the public service broadcasting obligations. Members may wish to raise related topics during the discussion. I thank our guests for giving up their time to be with us for the discussion.

The committee has agreed to have an inquiry, which might be a broadcasting inquiry or a kinship care inquiry. Part of the reason why we are having these discussions is to see how we might take such subjects forward. The round-table format is designed to allow us to have some free-flowing conversation. However, the format remains a little bit formal, so I ask people to indicate to me or the clerks when they want to contribute. We will try to stick to the one subject, rather than bouncing about. I will try to ensure that everyone gets in at the appropriate point.

I ask witnesses and members to introduce themselves briefly.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for Central Scotland. I declare an interest as a member of the National Union of Journalists.

Iain Macwhirter: I am a political commentator for *The Herald* and the *Sunday Herald*.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I am a South Scotland Scottish National Party MSP. I declare an interest, in that I write a weekly column for *The Scotsman*.

Gordon MacMillan (STV): I am head of news for STV.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am a Conservative member for Mid Scotland and Fife.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am a Labour MSP for West Scotland.

John Boothman (BBC Scotland): I am head of news and current affairs for BBC Scotland.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands region.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am the MSP for Orkney. I declare an interest as a fortnightly columnist for *The Orcadian*; I also have a brother who is an employee of the BBC.

Stuart Cosgrove (Channel 4): I am director of creative diversity at Channel 4. I declare an interest, in that I also have a radio show on BBC Scotland on a Saturday, but it does not pertain to news and current affairs.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the SNP MSP for Edinburgh Central.

Paul Holleran (NUJ Scotland): I am the Scottish organiser for the National Union of Journalists.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I am a Labour MSP for Lothian.

The Convener: Thank you. As well as being the convener of the committee, I am an MSP for West Scotland.

As I said, the purpose of this item is to discuss how effectively the public service broadcasters in Scotland are meeting their public service obligations, particularly in relation to news and current affairs output. Does anyone have any general comments on current output with regard to public service broadcasting obligations?

Gordon MacMillan: STV's public service obligations are set out in our licences, which are administered by Ofcom—the Office of Communications—on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In effect, we have a contracted licence obligation to produce a certain amount of news and current affairs within our two licence areas in Scotland, which are central Scotland and the north of Scotland. We have no responsibility for the Borders area of Scotland at present.

The Convener: Perhaps John Boothman will give us a bit of background on the BBC's position and say whether he believes that it adequately meets, or even surpasses, its public service broadcasting obligations in Scotland.

John Boothman: I will talk a bit about what we do in news and current affairs at BBC Scotland, a bit about our performance and a bit about how we fulfil our role and remit as a public service broadcaster.

As the committee will be aware, for the past five years BBC Scotland has mainly been based at Pacific Quay in Glasgow—our building there represents an investment in the city of more than £200 million. We have news staff resources not only in Glasgow but throughout the country: in Orkney, where Liam McArthur is from, and in Shetland, Inverness, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Dumfries and Selkirk, as well as at the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. We deliver content throughout Scotland and we work well with our colleagues in BBC Alba, which gives us access to new resources in Stornoway and throughout the north-west. We deliver content to

10 broadly different areas within the BBC: news in Scotland; news in the network; news events and special coverage; business coverage; coverage of politics and elections; sports news; travel and weather; local radio bulletins; investigations; and online.

I think that most people giving evidence today would agree that television news consumption is still high—the biggest audiences for news are in television. Growing numbers are consuming online. I think that it would be fair to say that fewer people are getting their news from newspapers and that a smaller but stable number of people continue to get news from the radio.

On the BBC's overall performance, "Reporting Scotland", which is our main television news programme, continues to do well. Its viewers are up around 70,000 from five years ago, to an average of 530,000 for our 6.30 programme. Our radio news coverage of more than seven hours a day continues to perform well. It has an average weekly reach of more than 450,000 people, which is up by 30,000 over five years, and our online figures are continuing to grow. That is a big success story for BBC Scotland. Some five years ago, we had 800,000 unique users a week; now we are up at more than 2.5 million. When there is a big story such as the weather stories in the past couple of years, the numbers across all those platforms go through the roof.

Our audience numbers are therefore continuing to increase, the number of hours of output across all the radio, television and online platforms continues to increase, and our content for Scotland and our network contribution continue to increase. A lot of that is noted in Ofcom's note to the committee. I saw Alan Stewart from Ofcom in the public gallery.

We consistently outperform the quotas that the BBC trust sets for us. Basically, the BBC trust says that we should broadcast at least 265 hours of news and current affairs a year on BBC 1, but we deliver twice that. The Radio Scotland target is to broadcast at least 43 hours of news and current affairs a week; we deliver 63 hours a week.

However, like everybody else, we are facing challenges. The committee will be aware of delivering quality first, which there has been a lot of talk about around the Parliament in recent times. It is the BBC's plan to deliver quality programmes with the licence fee frozen until 2017, and it means that BBC budgets will be cut in Scotland and elsewhere and there will be post losses. I believe that there will be no loss of hours in BBC Scotland's output and no drop in the quality of it. I am sure that people will want to ask questions about that.

Over the next five years, as a result of the combination of savings in delivering quality first and an existing commitment to savings, the news and current affairs budget will be cut by £2.2 million, from this April until April 2017. That means that, over that five-year period, out of a total of 240 people who work in news and current affairs, we will lose 30 posts, and there will be some changes to our output, mainly in radio, in respect of which we signalled back in October and November and last week following a meeting with the unions that our plans remain the same.

On planning for the future, we are aware of how audience consumption is changing, as I have already said. We are continuing to promote multiskilling and further training for our staff in the BBC, and we are continuing to invest in new technology.

Other challenges in the next few years will include the growth of news consumption on mobile phones and tablets. Investment to deliver bespoke, tailor-made content for mobile phones and tablets will have to be made in order to achieve what we want to achieve.

Finally, there is the question of the referendum, which everyone here is looking forward to, I think. Under its director, Ken MacQuarrie, BBC Scotland has established a high-level, senior group to discuss and plan the coverage of the referendum. Ken MacQuarrie convenes the group, and it includes the head of news in the United Kingdom and global news, the head of political programmes, the BBC political adviser, the head of editorial standards and compliance in Glasgow and me. We have embarked on a series of awareness-training sessions in Scotland and the UK, and today I can tell members that we are opening a new web page at bbc.co.uk/scotlandsfuture that will provide an online hub for all our referendum stories. We will cover tomorrow's statement by the First Minister in the Parliament on Democracy Live, on television and live on Radio Scotland, and the first of what I hope will be many debates over the next couple of years will take place in Pacific Quay in Glasgow tomorrow night. It will also be live on Radio Scotland and will be covered on our live page at 10.35. There will be an audience of 250 people in Glasgow. In the run-up to the referendum in 2014—if the UK and Scottish authorities can decide on that—the BBC will produce a range of debates, documentaries and discussions on the issue.

I am happy to take any questions on anything that I have said.

10:15

The Convener: Thank you very much for that detailed overview of the BBC's current position.

You said that there will be no loss of output or quality. However, given the cuts to staff, particularly producers, that you have announced and the loss of two news and current affairs and political programmes—"Newsweek Scotland" and the evening one at 10 o'clock—many of us are puzzled at how you can indeed maintain or improve both.

John Boothman: Let me give some context to this. With regard to "Newsweek Scotland" and "Scotland at Ten", Radio Scotland is adopting a strategy that focuses on speech programmes during the day and music late at night. The focus of all our news and current affairs efforts is on targeting our resources where our audiences are. The "Newsweek Scotland" proposal is simple: a one-hour programme will be replaced by two hours of output on a Saturday morning. Back in October and again in November, I told BBC Scotland staff that, although the new offering will be called "Good Morning Scotland", it will have a different tone and content to the rest of the week's "Good Morning Scotland" programmes. As I have told a number of people, it will contain the best of "Newsweek Scotland".

I am a big fan of "Newsweek Scotland", which I think is a great programme that covers a range of issues I like. We are producing an offering that is two hours rather than one hour long and there will be a further one-hour news and current affairs offering on a Saturday morning. The content and details of these programmes will be announced well before August, when the new schedules come into play, but at the moment they are still in development.

As for "Scotland at Ten", I have already mentioned Radio Scotland's strategy of having speech programmes during the day and music at night. Our current political output on radio will continue and, in fact, will be augmented with more regular political slots, including a yesterday in Parliament slot in the morning. As you know, "Scotland at Ten" is a half-hour programme that goes out three nights a week and repeats First Minister's questions on a Thursday. Given that First Minister's question time is broadcast live on television, on radio and on Democracy Live, is available on radio and TV players and can be seen in live and recorded form four times over the weekend on BBC Parliament, the fact is that those who want to see it can get it. That is the rationale for both moves.

As for staffing, BBC Scotland has over the years been very good at multiskilling. Instead of working on individual programmes, people will be working

across the output. For example, if you work on "Good Morning Scotland", you will get a break and then work for a lunchtime programme. That model has been tried and tested across the BBC and works for the BBC News channel and a load of other areas. That is the direction in which we are going. Before the meeting, I was chatting to Paul Holleran downstairs. With regard to many such proposals, all of which we will pilot, the point is that the BBC has been good at training and multiskilling our journalists to ensure that these things can happen without any drop in quality. I am convinced that we can do that here.

The Convener: You have raised a lot of issues but, before I bring in other members, I want to pick up in particular on the point about multiskilling, multitasking and staff working on a number of programmes. I am sure that no one objects to multiskilling or multitasking, but do the staff who work on Radio 4's "Today", for example, multitask across a number of programmes or do they concentrate on working on that programme and get in-depth experience in doing so?

John Boothman: Stewart, there are different models in different places. We are at liberty—

The Convener: Is that a yes?

John Boothman: There are different models in different places. We are talking about a model that has been tried and tested across different parts of the BBC, and the responsibilities are devolved to BBC Scotland editorially to decide. That is the direction of travel that we are going in, and it works.

In our universities and colleges, training for the kind of multiskilling that I am talking about is going on all the time. One of my regrets about the current situation is that it is difficult for us to bring in new entrants to broadcasting who can make use of some of those skills across the board. However, it is the direction of travel that everybody is going in.

Joan McAlpine: As I understand it, under delivering quality first, Radio 4 has been protected from cuts as the BBC said that it is the jewel in the crown. Radio Scotland has not had that protection. Is that because Radio Scotland is less valued than Radio 4?

John Boothman: I do not think that at all. Different parts of the BBC can deal with the situation in a different way. BBC Scotland has a budget. Discussions take place within BBC Scotland on the allocation and divvying up of the budget. We have arrived at where we have arrived, and we think that we have a sound proposition.

We have lost four management posts and, ultimately, we are talking about losing eight posts

in Radio Scotland in the next period. That is out of a total exclusively dedicated to radio of 42 posts in Glasgow and about 72 if we take in the local services across the country. That does not include the large number of people who we have in newsgathering—the correspondents, reporters and the people who deliver the news. In effect, it covers the production people and presenters in Glasgow.

Joan McAlpine: Thanks for that information, but I will press you on the issue. According to your own figures, BBC Radio Scotland's budget has been cut by 6.6 per cent. That is twice the cut to the budget of Radio Wales and more than twice the cut to the budget of Radio Ulster. It is also higher than the cut to local radio in England, which is 4.2 per cent.

John Boothman: One of the biggest complaints that the BBC has received over the years in making savings is that it should not salami slice what it does. That is exactly what we will not do for news and current affairs. We are going to target our resources where our audiences are. A growing number of people are consuming output online, a growing number of people are consuming on television and a stable number of people are consuming on radio. We are targeting resources to the places where our audiences are, and we are matching our output accordingly.

The decisions are for BBC Scotland to take. Other parts of the BBC across the rest of the UK can take different decisions, which I think is probably a good idea.

Joan McAlpine: It was encouraging to hear you talk about the importance that you place on the referendum. What representations have you made to the BBC nationally in defence of news and current affairs in Scotland, perhaps to suggest that, given the importance of the referendum, news and current affairs in Scotland are a special case and deserve more protection, similar to the protection that the BBC is giving to Radio 4?

John Boothman: As I have said, we have set up a steering group under the convener's leadership of—

Joan McAlpine: Have you, as head of news and current affairs in Scotland, or has your boss, Mr MacQuarrie, gone to London to say that there is a special case as we have a referendum coming up and that Scottish news and current affairs need to be enhanced and protected and not cut?

John Boothman: Discussions about these things take place routinely.

Joan McAlpine: But you did not go and make a case, did you?

John Boothman: Until we know when the referendum is, we are still in the process. I have no doubt—

Joan McAlpine: But we know now, don't we?

John Boothman: I have no doubt that, over the next period, there will be lots of discussions between BBC Scotland and the BBC network about what output we will have in the run-up to the referendum. As I said, we are starting tomorrow night and we will have a programme of debates in the next period. We have set up a new web page, which will be a hub. I think that we will deliver a comprehensive package of coverage on the referendum, as we do on elections, which will satisfy the audience's needs in Scotland.

Joan McAlpine: I think that your answer to my question is no. You did not go and say that Scottish news and current affairs need special protection.

John Boothman: The answer to your question, Joan, is that if you want to discuss corporate issues, you should invite the director of BBC Scotland, Ken MacQuarrie, to give evidence to the committee. I am happy to take back your concerns to him.

Liz Smith: You said something interesting about colleges and universities and the nature of the people whom you are trying to attract so that you can maintain quality. Are you looking for graduates who come with a wider perspective and subject base or are you looking for greater training for the digital age? What did you mean when you talked about improving the quality of entrants?

John Boothman: We are looking for both. When I speak to my colleagues about any of the issues, I find it remarkable that colleges and universities in Scotland are turning out people with such abilities. If there is a difficulty to do with the direction of travel and some of the things that we and others are doing, it is that opportunities after college do not exist.

Iain Macwhirter: I pay tribute to John Boothman, who has again demonstrated BBC Scotland's extraordinary ability to do something with virtually nothing. What he cannot say, of course, is that there is a long history of underfunding of broadcasting in Scotland—particularly underfunding of news and current affairs.

I spent more than 20 years at the BBC, of which about half was in Westminster and half was up here, so I have worked in comparable programmes. In my experience, network political programmes would have about four times as many staff as comparable political programmes here would have—that is probably a fair ratio.

I once raised the issue with a senior BBC executive, who told me that Scotland has a tenth of the population so it gets only a tenth of the budget and programmes are made at a tenth of

the cost. I tried to explain that that is not how we go about making programmes. There has to be a benchmark; a programme has to be of a certain quality before it is worth transmitting at all. There have been heroic achievements by people across BBC Scotland's news and current affairs and political programmes. Members would not believe how hard to mouth their existence is. They achieve an enormous amount.

Such an approach is no longer acceptable. The fundamental political changes in Scotland make the historical underfunding wholly unjustified. The arrangements were based on the idea that broadcasting in Scotland is local and regional and the big network stuff takes place in London, so Scotland gets funded to a local and regional level. That is not acceptable any more. Scotland deserves a great deal more than a local broadcasting service. If there is a certain standard of funding for political and news and current affairs programmes in London, exactly the same standard should be applied up here. I have never found any justification for making programmes with inadequate budgets simply because they take place in Scotland.

There are two further problems. As I said, things are moving on in Scotland. We will have a referendum. We will have either independence or a move further towards a federal arrangement. Either way, we will have a different political and constitutional environment. I see no evidence that the BBC in the UK is even beginning to recognise that. There has been a demonstration of that in the past few weeks. Because of David Cameron's remarks, the UK media and the BBC in particular suddenly discovered Scotland. Suddenly there was lots of Scottish coverage and a lot of network programmes, which we have not had before.

It is interesting to reflect on the coverage of Scottish politics during the past week or so and consider what happens for the other 51 weeks of the year, when all the network programmes—the bulletins, "Question Time" and the rest—concentrate on a UK political agenda that is often completely irrelevant to Scotland, particularly in areas that relate to health, such as the national health service reforms, and education.

In a way, what we have seen in the past few weeks is what broadcasting should be like in Scotland and what it would be like if the BBC was fulfilling its public service remit, which I am afraid that it is not doing, despite the heroic efforts of everyone in BBC Scotland.

There are some amazingly talented people there who are really dedicated to what they are doing. They get paid miserable amounts of money in comparison with their network equivalents, and they are made to feel in some way second rate for not wanting to go to work in London, because the

career path is all down there. That is why there is such a collapse in morale—which I can tell you is very serious—in broadcasting in Scotland at present.

10:30

The Convener: Thank you for that contribution.

John Boothman: Can I take up some of those points, convener?

The Convener: You can, but I want to bring in some other people and give them a chance. I will come back to you.

Iain Macwhirter started off by talking about benchmarking—or the lack of it—between what is happening in Scotland in news and current affairs and what is happening in London and the national UK network. To the best of your knowledge, has any proper benchmarking exercise ever been undertaken?

Iain Macwhirter: There has not, to my knowledge, been such an exercise—it is possible that there has—but I am not really au fait with the affairs of BBC higher management, which is in a different universe from the people who actually make programmes. I know that the BBC spends a lot of time looking at such things and brings in a lot of consultants and people like that.

The situation is very obvious. That there has been historic underfunding is beyond doubt; there is no question about it at all. You would need to ask the BBC, if there is meant to be parity and if there is quality benchmarking, to compare the budgets of programmes such as “Good Morning Scotland” and the “Today” programme.

Liam McArthur: I want to pick up on the point about regional output within Scotland. There is a danger that we might lapse into an assumption that there is homogeneity within Scotland, in terms of the debate about what happens north and south of the border.

John Boothman said that there would be no salami slicing. With regard to the reach across Scotland that you mentioned, and noting again my interest in the issue, what sort of commitment can you give that the opt-out for programmes such as are broadcast by Radio Orkney and Radio Shetland and similar broadcasts will be maintained? In the context of the referendum debate, or other issues that may supplant it in importance at any point in the next two or three years, will the regional aspect continue to be reflected as accurately as it can be by the BBC?

John Boothman: Following the BBC trust's decision not to allow the BBC to enhance its local services, it has been BBC Scotland's priority to protect rather than to enhance those services. I

can continue to give that commitment in relation to our local radio bulletins and online services for the whole of Scotland.

I went to Orkney and Shetland recently and spoke to the people there. The level of commitment and the expertise that they bring to the local stations are phenomenal. I noted at the time that the BBC Orkney Facebook page was, relative to the size of the population, one of the most popular Facebook pages across the whole of the BBC, which interested me.

Stuart Cosgrove: I have a couple of observations. Channel 4 is a different type of broadcaster, which is a fact that is worth bringing into the debate. For us, the words “independent” and “independence” have all sorts of other—often unambiguous—meanings. Under the terms of its licence, Channel 4 does not make its own programmes; all its programmes are outsourced to or commissioned from independent production companies. Unlike in John Boothman's department, there is no in-house infrastructure to make content or programmes.

That is important in a number of respects, not least because it means that the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the Scottish independent production sector are immensely important now and will be in the future, as we change both constitutionally—if that were to happen—and in relation to the digital universe of which we all, irrespective of politics, are part.

The important thing is that Scotland has many key strengths as a nation, but it also has some very clear weaknesses in terms of its capacity to produce content for the international market and for the national UK networks.

I will dwell on news and current affairs for a moment—that seems to be the direction of the discussion this morning. I should say that Channel 4 is required to provide a news service that is different from the offering of the BBC, partly because our licence requires us to be innovative and to offer an alternative. Traditionally, and through custom and practice, Channel 4 news has tended to be more internationally focused. That is not to say that it does not have an important role to play in the national discourse around politics in the UK—that is often the subject of the lead story—but we frequently cover major events abroad, such as the Arab spring, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so on.

Recently, we have been considering areas that are of pan-UK interest but which are of specifically Scottish origin. For example, Faisal Islam did a really interesting piece on the analysis of oil and gas revenues in the UK and what should pertain to Scotland under international law and what should pertain elsewhere in the UK. Similarly, we have a

service called “FactCheck”, with Cathy Newman, which is largely delivered online but seeps into our broadcast output as well. It challenges, through factual analysis, the statements that are made by politicians and pressure groups that seek to influence politicians. A recent study that it conducted challenged the myths that have built up in the political class around whether people are reluctant to invest in Scotland due to anxieties that the business community might have in relation to the referendum. It found that the idea of there being a fear of investment in Scotland is misguided and that, in fact, after the City of London, Scotland is the area of Britain that is most likely to attract inward investment from new industries.

Those are different services that are offered differently and are independently commissioned, rather than being part of our in-house provision.

I want to make one other observation about production in Scotland. With all due respect to the people who work in the industry, they are often analysing situations that have passed into history. News and current affairs reporting is delivered through all sorts of media. I will give an example to illustrate what I am saying. Channel 4 had a successful world-class programme called “Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields”, which was an analysis of the genocide in Sri Lanka at the end of its civil war. Interestingly, it was produced by a Scot—Callum MacRae—who spent many months working on it at serious and significant risk to himself. Many of you will have heard of Callum, who worked in the Scottish press for many years and has—as Iain Macwhirter said happens—gravitated to London to advance his career. However, the programme also sits within Channel 4’s online and digital news services, which are produced and designed by Realise Digital, which is based in Newhaven, just along the road.

In lots of ways, we are seeing different things happening, and the rise of Scotland’s capability in digital media is disproportionately better than and different to the role that we once played, which involved sending people to London to work in the London-based career network. We must change the debate from its being only about how we cut up the cake of the network spend to its also being about how Scotland enables itself to address a future that is, by its nature, changing.

The Convener: Would Paul Holleran like, from the NUJ’s point of view, to comment on what he has heard and on some of the activities that have been going on recently?

Paul Holleran: It might be helpful if I offer a comparison in terms of what has been happening in parts of England and the rest of the UK as well as Scotland, and also talk about the current

situation with regard to the BBC. People can sift the information from that.

We have problems with the commitment to news provision of ITV and UTV at the moment, but we do not have that with STV, which has a far more constructive approach and wants to ensure that news and current affairs is a major part of its remit. Down south, there are major problems with trying to persuade ITV to maintain its standards in quality and quantity of news provision.

On BBC coverage and the position of and investment in BBC Scotland, I point out that Pacific Quay was held up as a great example of new technological change, with state-of-the-art studios being introduced to Scotland. That was certainly the case, but the move coincided with what I believe was an attempt to introduce what might almost be described as a pilot scheme to drive down staffing levels and to put in place changes to working practices. Although, as John Boothman has said, those changes have resulted in flexibility on a scale that far surpasses what exists anywhere else in the UK, they have, combined with the job cuts that we have taken since 2004, had a massive impact on our members’ health and safety, especially their stress levels.

A few years ago, we carried out a survey to provide evidence for the Health and Safety Executive’s stress management standards. There was a colour chart, one end of which shaded from bright red to orange to yellow and the other end of which—the softer results—went from yellow to green to blue. In seven of the eight categories, the results were in the red zone, which denoted totally unacceptable levels of stress. We highlighted that survey to the management and have tried to work with it on alleviating the problems.

However, there is no doubt that morale is low and, in the latest round of cuts, people were having competitions to guess what its Orwellian title will be. The last round was called “continuous improvement”; this round is called “delivering quality first”. The names are ironic, because journalists and other staff are asking how they can maintain not only the quality of programmes but the quality of working life.

John Boothman said that Ken MacQuarrie and some of the management team are looking at a strategy for covering the referendum and Scottish politics over the next few years. Although it is gratifying to learn that, our view is that the workforce should be consulted on the strategy now, and not after the cuts have been made. After all, we have just lost two experienced editors to “continuous improvement”, which leaves six out of the original eight, and we are looking at a 35 per cent reduction in news and current affairs on radio. I believe that BBC Scotland has to make 16 per

cent savings over the next five years but, as John Boothman has pointed out, that particular area has been targeted. He is right to say that people are flexible and work across departments. Unfortunately, the selection pool that has been set up relates only to news and current affairs on radio, and we believe that that flawed decision will have an impact.

In comparison, Radio 4's political coverage is quite extensive; for example, it has "Today in Parliament", "Yesterday in Parliament", "The Westminster Hour" and "Week in Westminster". People will obviously make comparisons and there will be those at the BBC who will say that we are well served. However, the workforce does not believe that. Certainly, my members are greatly concerned that the cuts are being made at a time when news and current affairs in Scotland should be expanding and when, politically and culturally, some of the biggest questions need to be asked and answered. Of course, we are not laying the blame at the feet of local management in Scotland—the blame lies with central Government at Westminster and the deal that was done on the licence fee—but the question remains whether senior management and the director of BBC Scotland have done enough to fight their corner. As I have said, we think that the current situation warrants an expansion in Scottish news and current affairs.

As a union official, I am worried about the people who are losing their jobs; indeed, there might be a gender imbalance in the cuts, in that there is a particular impact on women. We have evidence of that—we provided a briefing on the subject to Westminster this week and I am more than happy to give the committee some of our findings. We have concerns about that issue.

10:45

We have concerns about the impact on the people who will lose their jobs, but we also have major concerns about the impact on the people who will remain, given the stress levels. The NUJ has a unique relationship with the NHS in Scotland and we work closely with the Scottish Government on stress. I am a member of the NHS umbrella group that deals with mental health and suicide, because of our role in dealing with that in the press. However, our members have also suffered so badly from mental health issues that the NHS's Scottish centre for healthy working lives has provided us with support for counselling for our members. In the past year, we have referred quite a few of our members from the BBC for serious stress counselling. There is a practical problem for people who work there, which will worsen once the cuts kick in.

John Boothman said that rotas and hours would change; we will discuss the rotas with the BBC on Friday. We believe that the changes might lead to people working unsocial hours more and to their being asked to spread themselves even more thinly. There is flexibility on a large scale, but what we are talking about far surpasses anything that exists anywhere else. There is a limit to how far people can keep that going.

Those are our major concerns. As journalists, we are dealing with not just the impact on the workforce—the delivering quality first programme will have such an impact—but the future conditions for staff, which relate to attracting young journalists and people who are leaving college. I dare to say that the BBC will be a less attractive place for people to work, mainly because of the workload and stress levels. Under DQF, moves are being made to reduce redundancy terms and allowances for working unpredictable hours, and to introduce regrading—suggestions are being made about lower pay—and there is a threat of enforcing statutory redundancy terms for new staff. The BBC will be a far less attractive place to work, so it will have more difficulty in attracting and keeping quality journalists. Society in general, and not just the NUJ and the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union, should be concerned about that. If the people who work to produce the goods at the BBC are damaged, the quality of journalism will be damaged—it is as simple as that. There is no differentiation in that.

The Convener: We would be interested to see the research that you said you could make available to the committee. It would be helpful.

Jean Urquhart: I must declare ignorance about the sector in general. John Boothman mentioned the capital investment of £200 million in the new building and all that. At the time, people hailed the removal of programmes such as "Question Time" to Scotland, although there was also controversy about that. What did that really mean? How many jobs—if that is an easy equation to do—were created in Scotland because that programme's production was moved here? Perhaps other programmes that I do not know about have come to Scotland, too.

Our briefing paper refers to "Newsweek Scotland". I travel a lot because of the area that I represent, so I am a radio listener, and I do not have a television. "Newsweek Scotland" is a particularly good programme, which I hear most weeks and make a point of listening to—unlike many other programmes. A bullet point in our paper says that "Newsweek Scotland" will be replaced by a two-hour programme. I would be delighted to have two hours of "Newsweek Scotland" as we know and love it, but what kind of

programme will it become if it changes? Why is that being done? The programme has a large listenership and is one of your most popular and best programmes. If it ain't broke, why are we fixing it?

John Boothman: I will take up some of the general points that have been made first. As Paul Holleran knows, if there are concerns about some of the working conditions in which people in any of the BBC's operations are working, we are always happy to meet the unions to talk about them. It is fair to say that there would not be much disagreement that the BBC has some of the best pay and conditions in the industry in Scotland, some of the best working environments, some of the best health and safety records and some of the best occupational health provision. If there are any concerns about those issues, we are always willing to talk about them and take them on.

I would not like some of Iain Macwhirter's points to rest without answers. Since the 2008 King report, there has been an exponential increase in the amount of material and content that has been delivered from Scotland to the network on the main TV bulletins at breakfast and at 1 o'clock, 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock, on the news channel, on Radio 5 Live and on Radio 4. That did not just happen last week when Michael Moore announced his consultation. It would be very unfair to suggest that. That coverage is not just of politics but of a range of issues.

As for political coverage in Scotland, let us look at the previous general election. BBC Scotland does some pretty innovative stuff. For example, nowhere else in the UK have I seen the sort of debates that BBC Scotland mounted during the general election period in the Edinburgh Festival theatre with an audience of 1,000 people or in Perth concert hall. We do interesting stuff. During the Scottish election, from the close of polling and through the following day, we had 19 hours of live coverage on radio and television and online. That was completely unprecedented in Scotland and in my view—I had something to do with it—it more than matched anything that has ever appeared on the network. There are positive messages about BBC Scotland.

I will address a couple of things that Jean Urquhart mentioned. "Question Time" has moved to Scotland. A tender process for the next period of "Question Time" episodes is under way. The first thing that we are asking for from people who are tendering is that the independent company that gets the contract should be based in Scotland. Some staff jobs have already moved to Scotland, although that happened only recently, and the programme is now run from Scotland.

I think that we can improve our offer on "Newsweek Scotland". I agree with what has been

said. Derek Bateman is a terrific presenter. He is a man of great experience in Scottish politics and he has been around for a very long time; I used to work with him on political programmes. The tone and content of the news and current affairs offer on a Saturday morning will be different from that of "Good Morning Scotland" during the rest of the week. It will carry the best of "Newsweek Scotland" in some of its items and it will be two hours instead of one hour long. In addition, there will be an hour of content in a programme that is still in development.

I am a bit perplexed about some of the criticism that has come in the wake of the "Newsweek Scotland" announcement, to be honest. In my heart of hearts, I cannot see how increasing the output of a programme from one hour to two hours is a cut.

The Convener: Can I just clarify that? Are you telling us that, after the changes, we will have a two-hour "Newsweek Scotland"? That does not sound like the information that is coming out. This might be unfair, but the information that is coming out suggests that we will be getting a watered-down "Good Morning Scotland" on a Saturday morning.

John Boothman: No. I think that the proposition will be different from the "Good Morning Scotland" that you get in the rest of the week. I could not be any clearer: it will also have all the best elements of "Newsweek Scotland". The "Today" programme on a Saturday morning is very different from the programmes that are broadcast during the rest of the week. It has different furniture and different items, and our new programme will have different furniture and different items.

Jean Urquhart: I was not criticising "Newsweek Scotland" in anything but the most positive light. I wish for it to continue. Will it no longer be referred to as a programme and will it become a show? Will it have music in it?

John Boothman: I think that the answer to those questions is no.

Neil Bibby: We are talking about public service broadcasting. I want to raise a general point about public demand and involvement. It is all very well for us, as politicians, to talk about news coverage and so on, but we are probably not the most objective observers in that debate.

I have a general question for everyone around the table about where public demand fits into the debate and what has been done to consult the public on the future of their broadcasting. I know that there was a report from the BBC audience council Scotland in 2010 that showed that young people were particularly concerned about what they called stale comedy output and thought that

some programmes were “artificially Scottish”. What is the balance between those concerns and the concerns about news and current affairs more generally? Where is the public demand in the broadcasting debate?

The Convener: Before John Boothman comes in, I will bring in Marco Biagi, who has been waiting patiently.

Marco Biagi: I want to ask a question that goes in the same direction of broadening the discussion out from workplace disputes in the BBC.

On the general public service broadcasting obligation, I am reminded of something that Iain Macwhirter said earlier about the importance of the health and education debates. The main news programme—as it is presented in most cases—will cover a great deal of material that is not relevant to Scotland. It may preface the stories with the fact that they relate to England and Wales, and the BBC has made great progress in identifying when stories do not apply to Scotland, but those stories are still carried in Scotland.

I wonder whether there is something of the Soviet nail factory about the Ofcom targets. Are they the right targets and do they adequately represent the need in Scotland for news consumption that is relevant to Scotland if we are to have a properly functioning civic body? I am very disturbed by the conceptualisation that Iain Macwhirter described of Scotland as another local broadcaster when we have national decision making in a range of areas—regardless of where we are by the time of the referendum.

The BBC has been very good at the big event coverage when it comes to the Scottish Parliament, and I think that it will be very good for the referendum. However, the issue is cast into perspective more when we look at UK-wide elections. For example, a Westminster election would show up the distinction between the status of the 6 o'clock and 6.30 broadcasts. I know that, a long time ago, there was talk about a “Scottish Six”, which seems to have faded somewhat. I would be interested in views on whether that is a realistic and worthwhile proposition, and not only from the BBC—I would also be interested in the STV perspective.

Gordon MacMillan: I can make observations on the licence obligations—the quotas, as they were described, that are administered by Ofcom. The public service broadcasting obligations are greater in the nations of the UK. In the ITV licence in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we have greater obligations in news and current affairs than do equivalent licences in England. Therefore, the need for debate and discussion within the nations is observed within the framework.

The “Scottish Six” is a project that STV looked at some time ago, and we still have an interest in exploring it. However, the current broadcasting law does not allow us to produce a “Scottish Six”. Our licence requires us to take a live news service provided by the nominated news provider—ITN in the case of ITV—and to take that service with the rest of the ITV network at the same time, which is 6.30 on weekday evenings.

Therefore, while we have an interest in exploring the possibilities of a “Scottish Six”—there is an editorial and public interest in that—we are constrained by the current broadcasting legislation, which does not allow us to make that transition. If we wanted to go ahead and produce a “Scottish Six” on STV, it would require a change in primary legislation.

11:00

Stuart Cosgrove: I will make a different point in response to Marco Biagi’s question. It might also help Jean Urquhart to understand the various ways in which production moves around the UK. Ofcom produces a set of targets by which public broadcasters are measured and, for something to be classified as being produced in Scotland, it has to meet two of three criteria—that the executive office base of the production is in Scotland, that 50 per cent or more of the production’s working budget is spent from and in Scotland and that 70 per cent of the talent that is attached to the programme is based in Scotland. Those are now settled criteria. Most broadcasters work towards them and broadcasters are judged on them. That is the way in which we are measured.

An important “but”, which comes back to Marco Biagi’s point, is that almost all the criteria that public broadcasters are required to meet are quantitative. I have come to similar discussions to today’s two or three times and, every time we have talked about how Scotland can improve, the debate has always been quantitative—it has always been cast around economic development and how we grow our business, the sector or whatever. I fundamentally and passionately believe that that is important and I am not trying to play it down by any means but, in areas such as the arts, news and current affairs—and, I would argue, independent film, where Film 4 is probably the single biggest commercial funder of independent cinema in Scotland’s history—there is another criterion that is qualitative. The quality of our content and its ability to compete with networks across the UK and internationally is fundamentally important.

In lots of ways, our political classes sometimes get a bit confused when they talk about that. It is easy at the end of a year to look at what Ofcom has done and ask, “Are the figures up or down?”

The debate is then about the quantity rather than the quality of our content. At various times, John Boothman has been asked whether the quality of output will improve or decrease according to the length of programmes, cuts, staffing and all those things. We are often asked, “Why don’t you do more in Scotland?” We say that the quickest way in which to do that is to commission more work in Scotland. Scotland is already strong in features as we have a lot of property shows and so on, and we are doing more of those. That would be the quickest way in which to answer the quantitative question, but it would not necessarily address single programmes in the arts, news and current affairs or documentaries.

It would be welcome if the debate became more sophisticated and factored in those two dynamics, both of which are important, and also the fact that broadcasters are increasingly working digitally and distributing their content digitally. That is not easily captured in our Ofcom annual reports, because Ofcom asks us about television transmission hours and not the extent to which we use the web as a distribution platform. There are some important factors that we need to consider as correctives to the debate, which often focuses on quantity and how much of the cake we are getting.

The Convener: I will be the first to confess that it is easier to count the numbers than the quality.

Stuart Cosgrove: Never mind the quality, feel the width.

The Convener: Absolutely. A couple of members want to come in, but I want to widen the debate slightly and take it on from where Stuart Cosgrove led us with his comments on quality.

There are pressures on the commercial operators and on everybody else in the expansion into new media, and there are pressures on the BBC, particularly in terms of budgets. How will those pressures affect the quality of output in the future? We are about to enter—or perhaps have already entered—the phase, over the next two and a half years, of what should be the most important decision that this country takes, and many of us are concerned about the impact of those pressures on output, whether on its quality or its quantity.

Where do people feel we are going in output? How does it impact on people’s daily lives? How do they get involved in the process? How will it enhance their ability to take a choice that is fully informed? That applies particularly to the referendum but also to the wider issue of news and current affairs.

Neil Findlay: Everybody recognises the need for good-quality and varied local, regional, national and international media, whether print, digital or broadcast. However, our discussion reflects the

reality that, until our society accepts that it will be impossible to provide quality public services—whether in broadcasting or any other arena—with a static or declining financial resource, we will continually argue about rearranging the deckchairs. The harsh reality for all politicians is that those debates will never end until we do something about taxation and the resource that we have to spend on public services.

Although I have found the discussion interesting, I wonder how reflective it is of public opinion. My postbag and e-mail inbox ain’t bulging with people busting the door down asking me for more news on the BBC, Channel 4 or any other outlet. Stuart Cosgrove mentioned the political and media classes. It might be a big issue for those people, but it is not the biggest issue for the rest of the population. I may be wrong.

On the quality agenda, some terrific work is going on across different sectors—for example, Daniel Gray’s programme about the Spanish civil war or “This Is England” on Channel 4—but perhaps there is not as much of it as we would like. That is a wider debate.

Joan McAlpine: I have a question about Stuart Cosgrove’s point on quality digital content. He is in a unique position as a United Kingdom broadcaster who is based in and lives in Scotland and has an intimate understanding of both countries. Is it possible to produce content on Scottish material for the network that is properly informative for Scottish people or are the needs of the audiences different?

Stuart Cosgrove: The audiences are different. Iain Mackenzie, who is one of my colleagues, is also here. He deals with the Scottish companies day to day and sees their ideas as they emerge. One issue that often comes up is that the idea might be too parochial, too inward looking or not have taken cognisance of a wider audience. Increasingly, that is a key issue for independent producers. Emergent independent producers, who think of themselves as being involved in an entrepreneurial business, often look to sell their content outwith Scotland, whether to an English network or globally.

The simple answer is that it is possible to make shows that are set in Scotland, are about Scotland and reflect Scotland. Going back to just before “This is England”, one such project that I really liked was called “The Book Group”. It was made by Annie Griffin, an American woman who is now wholly resident in Scotland. She is also the director of “Fresh Meat”, which is a current Channel 4 hit show.

“The Book Group” was set principally in the west end of Glasgow and it was the first time that I noticed a show that engaged with Scotland as an

international cultural place. I think that it satirised the first arrival of football WAGs—wives and girlfriends—into Glasgow. They were all Swedish and Danish and were married to Henrik Larsson and all the others. It was a fantastic, really funny satire on modern Scotland wrestling with all its obsessions, but it also translated well to England because viewers could see that it could be Manchester or Liverpool. I am sure that it could also have been Amsterdam or somewhere else.

It is definitely possible to deal with Scottish subjects. When characters become really big in our culture we can do a lot of stuff. A good example is Andy Murray, who is at the top of his game in tennis, and is therefore of interest, presumably to people all over the world, although perhaps not as interesting as Roger Federer.

In response to John Boothman's point about digital media, I want to say something about hidden success. Channel 4 has its most successful ever play along game—viewers use an iPhone, iPad or tablet to play along with a game on the television. We have two big shows, both of which are to do with winning money. One of them, "The Bank Job", on a Friday night, is a great show—participants need to have general knowledge and rob a bank—and we have just recommissioned it. Invisible to the Scottish audience, however, is that the play along game is produced and delivered by Chunk Digital, which is a Glasgow-based media company. The game mechanics and algorithms for the game that people are playing on their iPads are produced here in Scotland. One of my big bugbears with my dear friends in Ofcom, who are waving from the gallery, is that we cannot count the value of commissioning that game because it is not captured as television transmission. It can be frustrating sometimes that we are not being adequately judged on what we are doing—for good and for bad. I am not saying that to explain why we might be falling short of some of our targets or whatever, but we are in an era in which we need to take a more holistic view of what broadcasters are doing, whether it is in film, digital games or media.

Pioneering work has been done in Scottish higher education. Ten years ago, people said, "We can't get the talent now. They're all off doing things like video games." They bemoaned the decline of traditional subjects in Scottish universities. In fact, they should have been celebrating the fact that the rise in Scotland's digital innovation, innovation more broadly, and technology—which is one of our greatest historical strengths—is now deeply aligned to creativity. That is of huge benefit to Scotland. We did not have a single contract in Dundee when I started at Channel 4 in the early 1990s and now it is in our top 10 production centres. Those changes are

beneficial to Scotland and we should not always cast things as a doom-and-gloom scenario.

The Convener: Is the Dundee situation a fallout from the video games industry that grew up there?

Stuart Cosgrove: A cluster of activities is going on at the University of Abertay Dundee. Abertay has projects such as six to start, and we are working on a number of others. Those spin out, and small games studios are set up, including mobile games companies such as Dynamo Games, Cobra Mobile and Tag Games. Those are all successful Dundee companies trading in the mobile platform market and sometimes working with Channel 4.

We have just taken on a new commissioning editor based in Scotland, Colin Macdonald, who is a by-product of the Dundee games sector. He will commission only games in the next few years, and the principal focus of his budget is Scotland. That will not count towards our TV transmission, but it is a huge innovation for Scotland.

Gordon MacMillan: The biggest challenge that the BBC and all commercial broadcasters face in the current environment is to maintain the quality of our products within very constrained budgets. The answer to the quality issue has three parts: technology, skills and ambition. On the technology side, it is fair to say that television production and transmission technology is moving at such a fast pace that things are possible today that could only have been imagined a few years ago.

What we have done in STV is localise services. We began last year with two distinct regional programmes—one for central Scotland and one for the north. Through the introduction of new production and transmission technology, we have been able to introduce a third separate programme that is based here in Edinburgh. We are now the most locally focused broadcaster in Britain. That has been delivered in part because of some important changes in technology. We went to America to look at new engineering technology, which has allowed us to deliver a service that has been up and running for nine months and has been very successful.

11:15

Another technology issue is journalist's tools. The introduction of new, lightweight cameras and equipment makes it possible to film a volume of content that could not have been achieved before, largely through multiskilling by journalists. STV has invested a lot in training for journalist multiskilling. We have worked closely with Paul Holleran and the NUJ on that. We have been able to introduce a new category of working in STV through the video-journalist model, which is not common in Scotland but is widely used in other

parts of the UK and around the world. It is important to keep up with the potential of new technology.

Investing in skills is important, and we have done that on the engineering front, too, so that we can deliver more programmes within the same budget. What is equally important is the ambition to use that technology to maintain quality at the level to which we all aspire. In some cases, people see new technology and new ways of working as a threat. However, the most positive approach is to convince our staff to embrace the new technology and to train them appropriately to use it in a way that delivers programmes of the quality to which we all aspire.

A point was raised earlier about consumption. It is clear that there is a high demand for news in Scotland. The audience shares for STV and BBC news show that up to half a million people watch each programme and that audience shares have grown over the past year. In STV's case, that is down to the introduction of a third programme. Audience share figures show that more than 50 per cent of the people who watch television between six and seven on weekday evenings, watch one of two news programmes. That speaks very highly of the quality that we deliver and of people's requirements for high-quality news.

There is also interest in current affairs; for an example we can look at the interest in the Holyrood election last year. We had positive viewing figures for our debate series and our news coverage. There is always an assumption that during a six-week election campaign viewers' interest will flag and that the audience share for television news might dip, but in fact the opposite happened, which showed that there was a high interest in what was being delivered.

There is therefore interest in news and current affairs. The BBC and STV deliver a high volume of such programmes, and they are well received by the audience in Scotland.

John Boothman: May I make a couple of points, convener?

The Convener: Absolutely, but I have a question before I bring you in. I know that Iain Macwhirter and Clare Adamson want to come in, too.

I am interested in what Gordon MacMillan said. I recognise the changes that have been made in local programming in the west, east and north, but there is an obvious gap: the south has no programming at all from STV. I am not saying that that is your fault.

Gordon MacMillan: It is not.

The Convener: I am well aware of that, but what have you done to try to progress or pursue

that matter? Clearly, there is a problem in that viewers in the south of Scotland do not get access to any kind of Scottish news on the independent network.

Gordon MacMillan: I recognise all the issues that are caused by the licence ownership situation in Scotland and the fact that Scotland as a whole has a number of licences; it has two full licences and a licence that straddles the border. The truth is that the award of licences is a matter for Ofcom and STV cannot make any impact on that for the Borders. STV's licence is owned by ITV plc, and the programmes that it broadcasts within the constraints of the licence that it holds are a matter for ITV.

During the Holyrood campaign last year we provided the Scottish leaders' debates to Borders Television, which it broadcast later on the same evening on which they were carried on STV. We also provided an overnight feed of the results programme into the Friday morning, which Borders Television took until 6 in the morning. The other issues about news in general outwith election periods are a matter for ITV.

We have introduced our new current affairs programme "Scotland Tonight" from Monday to Thursday, which has been very successful and produces in the current environment an accessible and popular forum for many important issues to be discussed and aired on STV.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

John Boothman: I wanted to say that, like STV, we are investing heavily in technology. We are just about to take delivery of three small satellite-and-editing vehicles; have taken delivery of and are now using 15 new state-of-the-art cameras in the department; are about to upgrade or replace 30 small cameras used by our video journalists; and have just given to journalists around the country about 100 new phones with broadcast capability from the field to increase our news-gathering capacity.

Coming back to current affairs, I wish not to make a political point but to talk about investigations, an issue that has not been mentioned this morning. Over the past couple of years, BBC Scotland has made a big and important investment in the number of investigation programmes that it produces. We are producing 12 half-hour investigations and some programmes for "Panorama"; notably, we have produced documentaries about Rangers Football Club and the Edinburgh trams and a radio investigation into the prevalence of epilepsy in Scotland. We have been keen to expand that area in Scotland but we certainly want to ensure that those investigations are of high quality.

Iain Macwhirter: Looking forward, there is widespread concern and perhaps acceptance that, given the very distinct and different political culture and a new and constantly evolving constitutional relationship, BBC Scotland's institutional relationship to the broader unitary BBC is no longer really appropriate for an organisation that is becoming the country's national broadcaster. You can see it in the quality of the programmes. For example, it is kind of written into the "Newsnight" phenomenon, with Newsnight crashing into the UK programme. This is not a reflection on the people who work on "Newsnight Scotland" or the quality of the programme itself, but the fact is that every single night "Newsnight" seems unable to provide a junction to allow "Newsnight Scotland" to emerge and simply lets it crash into the middle of, say, a Jeremy Paxman interview. That has infuriated and annoyed people for a very long time, and can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the relationship and the problems that exist. I hope that people do not think that I am suggesting that BBC Scotland does not produce very many excellent, high-quality and innovative programmes; I am simply talking about overall coverage. I do not think that John Boothman will disagree that, historically, the general output of Scottish daily news and current affairs programmes has been underfunded.

One historical aspect that has not been mentioned is the fact that, four years ago, the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's report recommended the introduction of a Scottish national digital TV station and that all the parties voted unanimously in favour of the proposal. However, the commission made a mistake in stating that, for the time being, broadcasting should not be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, because it sent a signal to the people in London who control the UK media—not in any Machiavellian sense; that is simply where the centre of British media is—that there was no political problem here and they could just carry on. With that and the lack of recognition of the Scottish Parliament's unanimous vote in favour of the report, there has been no movement on that matter—apart, that is, from the proposal for local TV, which no one around the table has mentioned. City TV is supposed to be the big innovation in Scottish broadcasting over the next decade but I do not know whether anyone is even interested in setting it up. Perhaps I am wrong—I am not that close to the issue any more—but I think that it is a measure of the problem.

If the committee is to consider the question of public service broadcasting, it needs to ask what kind of broadcasting is appropriate for a country like Scotland that is in transition and whether broadcasting should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. After all, the evidence suggests that

without such a move nothing will change. Members should also remember that the Scottish Broadcasting Commission report said that, although broadcasting should not be devolved for the time being, the issue should be revisited. Now is the time to do so.

The Convener: Clare Adamson has been waiting patiently to ask a question.

Clare Adamson: Iain Macwhirter raises an interesting point about the digital station. The Welsh digital station was funded very favourably by the BBC and, when you place that in the context of there being fewer cuts in broadcasting in Wales, it shows the situation in Scotland in an even less favourable light.

There seems to be an understanding that the national output does not serve Scotland's interests well. We have already talked about what is happening in Scotland with regard to the referendum. Is there an expectation that the nominated news providers at a national level will change their approach to their output?

Stuart Cosgrove mentioned engagement and the innovative work that Channel 4 is doing. A disparity seems to have arisen with regard to the ability of Scottish people to engage in the political process: it is possible to comment on national blogs, but not on Brian Taylor's blog on Scottish issues. I would like to hear people's views on that.

The Convener: In the past couple of weeks there has been some comment on the last issue that Clare Adamson raised. It seems that the public are unable to comment on Scottish blogs on the BBC website, such as those by Brian Taylor or Douglas Fraser, but they are able to comment on those by their opposite numbers in London, such as Nick Robinson. The past week has brought the issue to light in a marked way, as Brian Taylor and Nick Robinson were both dealing in their blogs with exactly the same subject—the independence referendum—but it was possible to comment only on Nick Robinson's blog. Why is that the case?

John Boothman: I will make a general point. The BBC news Scotland website is open for comment on a story-by-story basis. There seems to be some kind of myth that BBC news Scotland is not open to comments that people want to post. Last week, 1,600 comments were posted on the main story about Michael Moore launching his consultation.

There are other places on the BBC news Scotland website where people can post comments. There is the BBC news Scotland Facebook page. We take e-mail contributions and tweets on the new, live and very successful pages that we have in relation to a number of political stories—one of which we will put up tomorrow—

and which we put up for First Minister's question time every week.

There has been some criticism about the decision to move some blogs to correspondent pages and not have them open to comment. Those pages have not closed to comments completely. We may open them on a story-by-story basis. Such decisions will be for the editor of those pages. As I said earlier, different editorial decisions are taken in different parts of the country. The BBC is a flexible organisation and it is up to local editors to decide whether to open the pages for contribution. As I said earlier, today we opened a new web index page, bbc.co.uk/scotlandfuture. The stories on that will be open for comments on a story-by-story basis. That is where we are.

The Convener: I am not in any way criticising the notion of editorial freedom or attempting to negate the point that you are making in that regard, and neither I nor anyone else is attacking the idea that people have the ability to comment via Twitter, e-mail and so on, but there is a specific point to be answered. In effect, your comment seems to be, "We, the BBC, will decide when you, the public, are allowed to comment on these blogs." That concerns me, as that is not the case with blogs by the BBC's London-based political commentators.

John Boothman: As I said, it is up to individual editors to decide what happens. We adopt an entirely flexible approach, so different parts of the BBC might adopt different approaches. My concern is that people think that no comments can be posted on any of the political stories on the BBC news Scotland website. That is not the case; they can be.

The Convener: I accept that and am certainly not saying otherwise. To be absolutely clear, I accept what you say about e-mails, Twitter and so on, but it is clear that a different decision has been taken here. As you say, editors are entitled to take different decisions, but people are entitled to ask why you or your editors decide when the public can or cannot comment on particular stories on blogs. That is slightly confusing.

Stuart Cosgrove wanted to come in.

11:30

John Boothman: I am sorry, but we have not decided that anybody cannot comment on particular stories. We decide on a story-by-story basis.

The Convener: Okay. I am sorry, Stuart. You can come in now.

Stuart Cosgrove: I did not want to distract, as things were getting juicy.

I wanted to go back to what Clare Adamson said and make a more general point about regulation that might strike members as odd. The broadcasters around the table are licensed in various ways but are in most cases regulated by Ofcom. There is a presumption that on the web—in blogs and in comments—broadcasters are regulated under the terms of their licence as broadcasters, so issues such as libel, undue prominence, taste and decency are covered. In broadcasting, there is the presumption that things have been knowingly published, whereas the tendency and the culture on the web—for WordPress pages, blogs or whatever—is for a so-called take-down policy to apply: someone can take something down within a certain period of time. Therefore, the regulation that covers free WordPress blogs on the web, for example, is very different from that which covers a broadcaster that has a web page.

One reason why we do not always open all of our website up to comment or user-generated content is the cost of moderation. The moderator would have to be there for 24 hours, and we would have to outsource the work to a company. In the end, it is not worth doing that because of the quality of comments that would be got back.

There is a slightly different debate with respect to the BBC. It is argued that two different parts of the BBC may be engaged in different or apparently different practices. I would love to see either the internet being regulated as fairly and transparently as broadcasting or broadcasting on the web having the same levels of freedom that other branches of the internet have.

Joan McAlpine: I wanted to ask a few questions about digital coverage, but I will pick up on what Stuart Cosgrove said and ask John Boothman a question. Who moderates your blog comments? Where are they moderated from?

John Boothman: The moderation is currently outsourced to a company south of the border.

Joan McAlpine: Right. That was my understanding, but I wanted to get that on the record. Might it be the case that the people who moderate the blogs would not have the information that they needed to make the right decisions in moderating a Scottish blog? Is there therefore a resource issue?

John Boothman: That is not the reason why we took those decisions.

Joan McAlpine: So you took them purely for editorial reasons.

John Boothman: Yes.

Joan McAlpine: Okay.

I want to proceed to wider points about digital coverage, which you understand you are going to expand. In your briefing note, you talk about the number of unique page views across the UK. That number is going up all the time, which is impressive. I speak as someone who has worked for a UK news organisation. The expectations of an editor in London who serves a UK-wide audience are quite different from those of an editor in Scotland who serves a Scottish audience. If an online content editor is always looking at the number of page impressions that he will get across the UK, it follows that that will affect his editorial decisions on the kind of stories that he promotes.

For example, Mr Clegg appeared on “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday morning, and he talked about independence. That story was still leading your online Scottish politics coverage last night; it was leading for 48 hours. Quite a lot of other stories concerning independence and Scottish politics emerged in that 48 hours that were perhaps of more interest in Scotland, but they did not knock Mr Clegg off the top spot. Again, that might be a resource issue, but it is clear that certain qualitative editorial decisions will be made if someone is always thinking about how they can get their page impressions up across the UK. That might not matter in a general, quirky story such as the big man on the train. I am sure that you got a lot of hits for that Scottish story, and it is of interest right across the UK. However, when it comes to politics and how you choose what to promote, it makes a big difference.

John Boothman: There are other considerations. Apart from UK interest in such stories, there is international interest. However, the examples that I am talking about relate to the BBC news Scotland web page. The new page that I have spoken about twice this morning will be run from Scotland.

Joan McAlpine: Who does the editor of the current Scottish pages answer to at the moment? What is the management chain? Do they answer to you or to an online editor in the UK? What is the chain of command?

John Boothman: The online editor in Scotland answers to the head of news and current affairs in Scotland, but there is a relationship between BBC Scotland news pages and the BBC news website; obviously there has to be.

Joan McAlpine: Does the online editor in Scotland present someone in the UK with a news list every day?

John Boothman: They talk regularly about what is on the pages, but the people in London would not tell the people in Scotland what should be leading their news pages.

Joan McAlpine: Okay but, obviously, if you want to get page impressions up, you are going to go for a story that you think has appeal. When the university fee settlement was announced in Scotland, the big issue for Scottish newspapers and broadcasters was whether the universities would have enough money to fill the gap. Brian Taylor blogged on that. However, you chose to lead the Scottish page with the issue for English students and you opened it up to comments, which is unusual for a Scottish story. As a result, the page got a fantastic number of hits from right across the UK. I am sure that you were very pleased with the number of page impressions. However, it was not necessarily the big issue that people in Scotland were talking about.

John Boothman: I understand the point that you are making, so—

Joan McAlpine: Do you see that that is a problem with serving Scottish audiences? Sometimes, the needs and concerns of Scottish audiences will be different from those of UK audiences and, as a Scottish broadcaster, surely your obligation is to make editorial decisions based on what is of interest to Scottish readers.

John Boothman: Yes, and that is what would normally go on the BBC news Scotland website. The priority would be what is of interest to people in Scotland who are going on to those pages. It does not mean that other people cannot go on to those pages.

Joan McAlpine: No, of course they can go on to the pages—

John Boothman: No one would make decisions on the basis of page impressions, to be honest.

Joan McAlpine: Well, you just nodded and said that they did that in the case of the university fees story.

John Boothman: Because I nodded? I am sorry; I do not get your point.

Joan McAlpine: Well, you led the Scottish online news with the issue of charges for English students while every other news outlet in Scotland was concerned about bridging the funding gap for Scottish universities.

John Boothman: Maybe BBC Scotland had a different story. We do not always have the same stories as everyone else.

The Convener: The point has been made so we will move on.

Liam McArthur: We have had a slightly scary insight into the coverage of news during the next two and a half years. If content is being moderated, it is being moderated, and a company from south of the border is as able to determine

what is inappropriate according to certain regulations as a company north of the border. I simply cannot accept that we are in that terrain.

The convener has tried a number of times—I will try once more—to find out the rationale behind editorial decisions being taken on a case-by-case basis. Why does there appear to be a blanket refusal to take comments on, for example, Brian Taylor's blog or Douglas Fraser's blog, while more comment is allowed more often on Nick Robinson's blog and others? Is it because of the type of comment that has been made on Brian Taylor's and Douglas Fraser's blogs in the past? If not, would it not be more sensible to have them all open all the time? Anyone who reads the blogs, and indeed any of the websites, is perfectly at liberty to stop reading at the end of the story.

I suppose that that leads me on to my question. At times, the pattern of programming that invites public participation, which is something that we would all support, seems to creep into territory in which anyone is allowed to make comments that are unmoderated and not put into any context and which, indeed, might even supplant contributions from people whose preconceptions are fairly transparent and can be understood. Is there a risk that the referendum debate, say, will be dominated by those who are most highly resourced, can shout loudest and can put in the most calls to the editorial team before, during and after programmes to ensure that they reflect their views or preconceptions rather than perhaps more balanced editorial decisions?

John Boothman: All that I am doing is advancing a different model from the model that might exist on the network. The BBC wants and is keen to promote debate on any of these issues and we are happy to invite postings and comments on any story on our website that relates to these issues. However, with regard to Douglas Fraser's and Brian Taylor's blogs, we choose to open the correspondence pages on a case-by-case basis. That is our editorial prerogative.

Liam McArthur: It is, to say the least, a widely held perception that the opportunities to comment are fewer now than they used to be, certainly in comparison with the equivalent blogs that are subject to separate editorial decisions south of the border. I appreciate that editorial discretion is being exercised but there seems to have been a change in approach. As the convener said, the editor is entitled to make that change, but we are entitled to ask why.

John Boothman: To be honest, I have answered the question on more than one occasion.

The Convener: You certainly have, John, but I am not sure that we are absolutely convinced by

your responses. We do not seem to have a clear understanding of why the approach has been taken.

Although I am sure that he would be very pleased if we did so, I do not want to spend all day on Brian Taylor's blog. I want to move things on a little bit. Neil, did you want to come in at this point?

Neil Findlay: I just wanted to say that the "Off the Bawl" blog is a more important issue.

Stuart Cosgrove: That is actually a case in point that might offer John Boothman a wee escape clause. The "Off the Bawl" blog does not allow comments because it might attract comments that are inappropriate to the BBC's good governance.

Neil Findlay: That comment, too, is relevant, because I think that there might be agendas at play here. After all, we can predict what would happen if the blog that has been referred to—which, unlike the "Off the Bawl" blog, I do not frequent—were to be opened up. We would have the kind of organised campaigns that we know happen when people make comments in the media, with the people in question being vilified and their characters torn apart. That is what happens. I understand the dilemma of deciding between censoring the blog a little bit and allowing free speech, but I can predict what would happen if you took the second option. I am certainly not arguing for you not to take that course—I am simply pointing out the reality of what will happen.

Clare Adamson: My concern about the Nick Clegg story that led on BBC Scotland and to which Joan McAlpine referred is that, whereas people who tune into Radio Scotland and "Good Morning Scotland" are very well aware that the broadcast is from Scotland, there is nothing online to indicate to the public that the website has been edited down south and that there might be a different spin on the main stories. Indeed, different stories lead on "Good Morning Scotland" and the BBC Scotland news pages. I know that people can get the "Good Morning Scotland" news page in other places on the web, but I think that the situation is confusing for the public.

11:45

The Convener: As we have reached a natural pause in proceedings, I think that we should wrap things up with final comments from our witnesses. We have had an interesting evidence session and a number of issues that concern me and, I am sure, other committee members have been raised, including STV coverage in the south of Scotland, the BBC radio cuts and where we go from here and how the general public in Scotland can get the best possible service with the available resources. Indeed, there is a wide discussion to be had on

that last matter, not least with regard to the vital issue of quality.

Committee members have had many opportunities to speak. Do any of our witnesses wish to make any final comments?

Paul Holleran: Although we welcome a debate on these issues, it needs to be broadened out and go into more detail about the future funding of broadcasting. Neil Findlay said that his mailbag was not bloated with letters on this subject but, believe me, if STV were to fail because of lack of support or if certain programmes were to fall off the edge of BBC Scotland because of on-going cuts, the public would be up in arms. Sometimes people miss something only when it has gone.

Public service broadcasting reflects what goes on in society, in culture and in politics. It is partly educational and partly entertainment. If this debate does not take place, we will end up with much inferior public service broadcasting of the kind that we are seeing across Europe and wider afield. As a member of the International Federation of Journalists, the NUJ is aware of attacks on public service broadcasting in the former Soviet bloc states of eastern Europe that are, in fact, attacks on democracy and the culture of those countries. The issue needs to be seen as important, and we are delighted that this debate is taking place.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. I was going to finish with similar comments.

Over the next couple of weeks, the committee will discuss where it goes from here on this and other issues and decide whether to undertake a formal inquiry or take a different approach to these matters. I thank the witnesses for coming along and giving very interesting, and sometimes even entertaining, evidence.

Meeting closed at 11:47.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

Members who wish to suggest corrections for the revised e-format edition should e-mail them to official.report@scottish.parliament.uk or send a marked-up printout to the Official Report, Room T2.20.

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by RR Donnelley and is available from:

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For details of documents available to order in hard copy format, please contact: APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-4061-8202-6

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-4061-8214-9

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland