



University
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SCOTLAND'S SUSTAINABLE MEDIA FUTURE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

A STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to summarise and reflect on stakeholder views drawn from civic society, the media industries, government and regulatory bodies on sustaining quality media infrastructure in Scotland. These conversations have taken place in the shadow of continued challenges to the financial viability of public interest journalism, public service broadcasting and cultural media in both the public and commercial sectors. The changing needs of Scotland as a political unit within the UK and European media landscapes, and a perceived lack of quality across the Scottish media's output more generally are also key issues. In order to allow for the free and frank exchange of views from various stakeholders, this report was compiled from expert sessions using the Chatham House Rule.

Four expert sessions were held on 9 June 2022 at the University of Glasgow, consisting of roundtables under the guidance of the report's authors. These sessions led the research team to make the following executive recommendations with a view to further collaboration and problem-solving.

Support for Scotland's media

Scotland's media sector faces significant structural issues which are impacting on the industries globally. National data on the scale of investment in media, ongoing job losses, and their overall impact on quality journalism are urgently needed.

Scotland's media are still firmly rooted in older conceptions of print and broadcasting. The increasingly disparate nature of the media sector means that a one size fits all response cannot be appropriate and new forms of support must not perpetuate old working models.

There are diverse approaches elsewhere to non-commercial funding to promote independent journalism. There are lessons to be learned from comparable small territories such as Quebec and Denmark which have invested significantly in their media sectors, with some evidence of sustainability. Research should be taken forward on how to use these models in Scotland and the Scottish Government and Parliament should explore how these might be applied.

Digital regulation and competition

Scottish media operate in a platformised culture in which the content they produce is subject to various forms of national regulation, content moderation and influence. The UK has begun to decouple from the EU regulatory framework and Scotland should seek allies elsewhere in the UK and push for a regulatory settlement that works in its interest at this critical time.

The authority and status of domestically-produced public service broadcasting and its sustainability is in question. A funding model based on the TV license makes little sense to younger generations for whom indirect access to news is highly common and the purchase of communication services is routine in all households. The BBC's branding of its content is increasingly challenged by the diversity of the digital space. Public service broadcasting in Scotland will need a new consensus on funding and structure to maintain service levels. This ought to reflect Scotland's specific needs.

The BBC has to compete with other national news outlets for its credibility with Scottish audiences. It has been subject to sustained cut-backs and re-purposing by successive governments, increasingly challenging its relative autonomy from the state and undermining its capacity to compete with commercial rivals. It is in the interests of the Scottish public that public service media of all kinds are able to carry out quality journalism independent of political interference from either Downing Street or Bute House.



Holding power to account

Large parts of the media in the UK - and in Scotland – have not been effective in their scrutiny of political decision-making in recent years, whether at the level of the state or the devolved institutions, and a culture of political impunity has gone largely unchecked. Political journalism has often focused on process and moments of brinksmanship over policies and often failed to articulate the wider public interest. New research would provide a clearer picture of what is needed to strengthen journalistic standards and investigate legal and financial measures to assist journalists. Emerging independent outlets have had some success in developing models for community-embedded journalism and using social media as a new democratic space to promote a diversity of Scottish voices. However, these remain relatively marginal, and their funding is rarely secure. More research is needed on how this important and growing component of the media landscape can be supported.

Building trust in journalism is a multi-faceted challenge but without addressing it, Scotland's media will not be ready to engage effectively with the possible prospect of radical constitutional change or to address fundamental questions such as the climate emergency, pandemics, and economic crises. There is a powerful case for new research and education through universities along with civic partners to play a key role in tackling these issues.

Alongside building trust, there is also a need to build recognition for the work of journalists as a part of the democratic process and to ensure their safety and freedom from harassment and intimidation.

These broad recommendations will form the starting-point for future research by the University of Glasgow and its civic, professional, industrial and academic partners. They are also an invitation to further debate. A more developed discussion is given in the main body of this report.



INTRODUCTION – WHY WE NEED A NEW FOCUS ON SCOTLAND'S MEDIA

The broader social and political context for Scotland's media is one of turbulence: of change, of challenge and of uncertainty. The establishment of the devolved Scottish parliament in 1999, along with devolution in Wales, represented one of the most significant constitutional changes in the UK in the last hundred years, offering up to the Scottish public a brand-new mechanism for democratic politics. The independence referendum of 2014, however, demonstrated the degree to which Scotland struggles with what might be called its 'dual public sphere'¹ (an often uncomfortable hybrid of UK-rooted institutions and both established and emerging Scottish players and priorities often with radically different perspectives on key social and political issues). The constitutional question continues to dominate public debate, creating a sense of a country stuck in limbo between two contending conceptions of nationhood and statehood.

The wider Brexit context, underpinned by a 'Global British' ideology adopted by successive Conservative administrations, is affecting policy in relation to media and regulation, as well as problematising the fair representation of a Scottish public. In 2016, irrespective of the question of independence, a clear majority of Scotland's voters wished to stay in the EU and also express other political attitudes that diverge from the rest of the UK. The dominance of a London agenda in the UK-wide media is ever more apparent and contraction of the Scottish media's scope appears to have led to a further skew towards perspectives from south of the border.

The global picture is one of instability: threats of climate catastrophe, war in Ukraine and the ongoing impacts of the pandemic have produced a series of economic and social shocks. Meanwhile, in some quarters the pursuit of 'culture wars' through public discourse has focused on questions of race, gender, sexuality and how to engage with history. The interaction of these challenges and threats underpins much discussion in Scottish public life and the Scottish media have not always been able to handle them in a constructive and responsible way.

Scotland's media sector faces significant structural issues and is by no means alone in this. There has been a variety of responses in the business models adopted to deal with this, not least regarding how to face up to the competitive challenges posed by the major platforms. Although there have been some promising examples of innovation, as a whole, Scottish media have struggled to adapt. The Scottish Parliament and Government have been reluctant to spearhead a reform agenda for myriad reasons including finance, the devolution settlement's complexities regarding media regulation, and deep divisions contingent on constitutional politics.

In the wake of Brexit, the UK has begun to decouple from the EU regulatory and legal frameworks with consequences for democratic freedoms that need both examination and debate. This has increased the need for transparency from Westminster and created new questions about the Scottish Parliament's role in regulation of the media.

Scotland is also part of a UK media scene that has continuing strengths in the audio-visual sector which has been both a key contributor to the viability of the creative economy and, through its cultural impacts, at the heart of the soft power of the British state. Scottish broadcast media in particular are heavily entangled with the wider British scene and their future is driven by UK policy decisions.

A funding model based on the TV license for public service media makes little sense to younger generations in an economic culture where the purchase of multiple communication services is routine in all households and where device usage is hard to regulate in a comprehensive way. The BBC's branding of its content, and that of other public service broadcasters, is increasingly challenged by the diversity of the digital space where indirect access to media is highly common and content is widely shared and redistributed.

¹ Schlesinger, P. (2020) 'Scotland's Dual Public Sphere and the Media'. In ed. Keating, M. *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*. Oxford Handbooks Online.



In light of these wider questions, the workshop discussed the broad structural issues facing the Scottish media and attempted to look beyond the narrower questions of media and constitutional politics. Informed debate in Scotland has been hampered by the lack of national data on the scale of investment (and disinvestment) in news media, the scale of job losses and the impact on the journalistic skills base, and the overall impact of constraints both on the press and broadcasting on the quality of journalism. It was widely agreed that sustained investigation into the structural picture in Scotland was urgently needed.

It was also apparent that lessons might be learned from looking into comparable small territories such as Quebec and Denmark, both of which have invested significantly in their media sectors, with some evidence of sustainability. In the Republic of Ireland, which provides a mirror for Scotland in many ways, there is pertinent debate on how to handle the future of media that warrants attention. Within Scotland, the Public Interest Journalism Working Group created by the Scottish Government has made a number of important recommendations but these have mostly been kicked into the long grass, and there is a significant role for academic research to further investigate and inform debate about media reform in Scotland.

The report that follows sets out the discussion in more detail. The workshop that forms the basis of this report is intended to be a starting-point for a much broader and deeper discussion. If this can be a spur to a new debate well-fitted to our changed times, then it will have served its purpose. We have sought to portray the key issues addressed and the terms in which they were discussed by our expert contributors. Of course, as the workshop's organisers, we set the terms of reference and while we have sought to remain true to the course of the conversations that took place, we accept full responsibility for how this account is framed.



SCOTLAND'S MEDIA SECTOR IN TRANSITION

The disparate nature of Scotland's media landscape in respect of form, content, and funding models and the distinctiveness of the challenges and responses by different outlets and sectors is of central importance. The language used to describe journalism and media in the public space is changing – 'media' is a term used to refer to an increasingly broad range of institutions, companies and practices. It is becoming all the more difficult to distinguish 'digital media' from media in general, as digital technologies have fostered a revolution across all modes of content production, distribution, consumption and social engagement. The failure to develop digitisation as a matter of public interest has impaired Scotland's ability to produce quality journalism across platforms.

From the workshop's discussions some clear differences emerged, some of which relate to historic practices. Even within what are often referred to as 'legacy media', for example, there are local and national press titles which are published both in print and digitally. Some of these are historically rooted in Scotland and some are British titles publishing Scottish editions. Broadcast media, in the form of television and radio, are also streamed digitally and include publicly regulated commercial channels such as ITV, STV and Channel 5. The BBC is a public corporation with distinctively Scottish television and radio outputs, and Channel 4 is also presently a public service TV network although it does not provide Scotland-specific content. Among their sources of content, broadcast media in Scotland are supplied by a range of independent media companies within Scotland in addition to network-produced UK material. In Scotland, there is also a small if growing alternative media base operating on a wide variety of funding models and which includes co-operatives, free community newspapers and blogs, the self-titled 'fifth estate'.²

However, it is important to take on board that Scottish media organisations operate within an increasingly globalised digital culture, with a rising reliance on digital platforms, especially for audience reach. This means that as their content moves through the wider media ecology, it is subject to the shaping influence of digital platforms, their algorithms, human content moderation, and collective and individual users' reworkings and responses. Scottish media do not simply serve or engage with Scottish audiences or users, but are also part of an unevenly distributed global conversation influenced by external actors well beyond their control. The public, and especially younger generations, now go to platforms and social media first for news and other forms of content. This radically shifts their expectations, consumption habits and ways of assessing information, as well as their perception of the national media ecology. It was a strongly held view by workshop participants that the Scottish media – and in particular legacy media – had not yet reconciled themselves to what is in essence a revolutionary transformation of their role and purposes as well as in their business models.

² <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2021/02/25/bella-caledonia-poor-things-and-the-fifth-estate/>



SUSTAINABLE FUNDING MODELS

Scotland's media sector faces a number of structural issues which impact on the industry globally. Discussion in the workshop addressed what Scotland might learn from media funding models, policy, and strategies for sustainability across three comparable small nations and territories: the Republic of Ireland, Quebec and Denmark. Some developments in these territories have been consistent with the experience in Scotland and a key challenge has been the transition from print newspapers to digital distribution and how to get readers to pay for online news in a competitive global market. In Quebec, for example, a number of regional dailies ceased printing completely with significant job losses and this led to major structural reform as profit-making actors exited the market. In Denmark, the print media diminished significantly in volume and influence but the same brands moved toward digital products and platforms with a combination of government subsidy and private innovation.

Scotland has grappled with the same digital transition, but we lack knowledge of the scale and nature of the job losses in the local and national press, and the range and depth of news that is covered. One publication, *The National*, focused on a pro-independence readership, has found a market niche but is reliant on the resources of its parent company and does not provide a model for sustainable journalism able to produce wide-ranging and well-resourced reporting.

Looking at overseas comparators, in Quebec, government subsidy has helped the media to navigate some of the most extreme years of industry contraction. A significant group of privately-owned daily titles no longer profitable to their owners was able to form a co-operative, and this has been replicated in other areas of the media industry. Reforms to media law in Denmark include the provision of financial support to titles to maintain quality digital journalism for which readers are willing to pay and evolving existing models of support for the print industry. The Danish sector has managed to stave off global competition through an emphasis on a homegrown perspective on international affairs and larger cultural questions, giving the Danish media a more distinctively highbrow character than what is available in Scotland. Scotland's 'indigenous' press has faced long-standing competition by London-based media and, in an under-resourced sector, there is a tendency toward a lack of innovation for fear of losing core markets.

In 2021, the Scottish Government set up the Public Interest Journalism Working Group, an indication of the value placed on journalism's democratic role and a recognition of the need to respond to these challenges.³ Several participants in our workshop had been members of this group and brought their experiences to the table. As with other small territories, the need for some government support was emphasised, with priority given to diverse, local and public interest journalism. One suggestion was to give local titles charitable status. It was argued that the sustainability of the sector – as well as needing to secure independence from powerful influences – required diversified revenue streams: for instance, philanthropic funding, crowdsourcing, and the sharing of resources through co-operatives to move beyond a commercial/non-commercial dichotomy.

The government's response to recommendations made by the Working Group was published in June 2022.⁴ The Culture Secretary stated the government's wholehearted support for a Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute as recommended. However, no funding was immediately committed and a loose commitment was made to a government-sponsored steering group, with the need for journalistic independence offered as an immediate explanation.⁵ This differs from the Danish model where state money is allocated to provide journalistic independence from vested interests. In the workshop, it was felt that any new model of patronage involving journalists and the state must be approached with great caution (with similar reservations regarding funding by Big Tech).

³ <https://www.gov.scot/groups/public-interest-journalism-working-group/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-governments-response-recommendations-public-interest-journalism-working-group/>

⁵ <https://theferret.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Scottish-Government-Response-to-the-Public-Interest-Journalism-Working-Group-Report.pdf>



Some argued that funding was often directed at 'the usual suspects': concentrating on already visible outlets. A key point of agreement was that good quality journalism, and in particular investigative journalism, is very expensive and requires investment for the longer term. The ability to maintain such levels of long-form discursive journalism not only in print but also in the form of podcasts or data journalism has been one of the features of the Danish and Québécois approaches, meriting further investigation.

It was also agreed that a one size fits all approach was not going to work, and Scotland could not simply mirror models operating elsewhere as it has its own distinct challenges, and exists in particular socio-historical and policy contexts. Radical and innovative thinking is thus required. Significant state support – at a considerable distance and with strong, transparent safeguards in place - should be part of that, it was argued. The demand for credible news is as intense as ever – and there is very much a public and moral case for facilitating this.

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MODELS OF REGULATION AND CONTROL

The processes and tools of media regulation embody public interest policy objectives and delimit the parameters within which media content can be produced and consumed. In an era of platformisation, media have been subject to a so-called 'regulatory turn' – a post-TechLash reappraisal of the scope and nature of regulation.⁶ There is now an international repertoire of policy measures across Europe – including the EU's Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act – but the exercise of sovereign power as well as national political and legal cultures remain centrally important. In the UK post-Brexit there is an attempt to use regulation as a form of soft power to increase global influence and assert the UK as a national security state safeguarding its position in the global digital space.

The two key policy objectives at the international and national levels are online safety and competition. Global platforms with 'strategic market status' (such as Google and Facebook) are a significant target. Such entities are often embroiled in data privacy scandals and questions of market dominance. There is a political dimension too, as was clearly exposed by the scandals around Cambridge Analytica, which collected users' data without consent for political campaigning.⁷ Participants at the workshop highlighted the pressing need to address the power of platforms in relation to both states and publics. The tech giants have however been relatively successful at dissuading governments from regulation that would harm their commercial freedom.

In 2003, Ofcom was established to regulate broadcasting and telecommunications in the UK and has since extended its portfolio to oversight of the BBC and, more recently, platforms. There is a continuing commitment to 'due impartiality' in the regulation of broadcasting. It remains the case that in regulatory terms the explicit performance of impartiality is seen as key to engendering public trust. However, in a divided polity, not for the first time, whether impartiality is being achieved by public service broadcasting has become a hot topic and a matter of political pressure both on the regulator and broadcasters.

Ofcom has an Advisory Committee for Scotland⁸ and, since 2018, has had a Scottish member on the regulator's main board, giving Scotland a voice at that strategic level. The move to platforms has led to a significant shift in how regulation works, with the growth of new systems and processes to monitor platform media and a greater focus on the distribution of content and its impacts. Questions of compliance have moved centre-stage, although internationally models for dealing with the novel complexities involved are still at an early stage of development. The adaptation to platforms is having important effects on UK regulation, which is growing in scope.

Probably the most complex challenge for regulators is to set the balance between online safety, data protection and privacy, and freedom of speech in a digital landscape. There is also the challenge of how to regulate competition between digital platforms. The UK Government's Online Safety Bill⁹ still lacks clarity regarding definitions of acts that might be classified as 'legal but harmful'. For example, where do, criticism and trolling end and abuse and harassment begin? In the case of fake news and disinformation, it is a moot point how to judge whether dissemination has harmful effects, or alternatively represents the expression of a social critique otherwise not aired in the public sphere. How these questions are handled is exceptionally important for the sustainability of a digital media sphere in Scotland in which the public can speak freely and safely and in which a diversity of journalistic outlets is visible.

The way in which values are weighed against abusive uses of communication is also a key question at the heart of present debate. In light of influential criticism and extensive parliamentary debate, the Online Safety Bill is presently in limbo. The other major innovation expected, statutory underpinning of the Digital Markets Unit set up to regulate competition, presently awaits implementation. There is still much to play for in the shaping of the UK's regulatory space and the need for wider engagement in identifying, organising and articulating Scottish interests within regulatory reform process is crucial.

⁶ Schlesinger, P. (2022) 'The neo-regulation of internet platforms in the United Kingdom'. In [eprints.gla.ac.uk](http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/265150) · 265150

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

⁸ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/how-ofcom-is-run/committees/scotland>

⁹ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3137>



THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

Public service media (PSM) in Scotland have been in the firing line for some time, coming under pressure both from Conservative voices in Westminster and pro-independence commentators, as well as disaffection by sections of the public in Scotland. Some of the political critiques often fail to understand the way in which public service journalism is conducted, and misdiagnose where the problems may actually lie. This often leads either to a knee-jerk defence of the status quo or calls for root-and-branch change: these have been obstacles to the legitimate and imaginative discussion of the challenges to public service media in Scotland.

Questions of journalistic independence, models of funding, and competitiveness within a globalised, interdependent digital media ecosystem are particularly acute in discussions of the sustainability and future of public service media. In the UK, this refers most notably to the long-established model of the BBC, although public service rules still apply in varying ways across the other terrestrial players, in Scotland represented by STV, Channel 4 and Channel 5.

Whilst any debate concerning the license fee is often framed as an attack on the very existence of the BBC, in the workshop it was argued that alternative approaches that might be more sustainable in the changing technological and political context should be considered. From a demand point of view, the principle of universality, so central to the current model, has been undermined in the digital age, with many seeking out BBC content without recognising that they need a TV licence. This has also provoked a debate about what the BBC's core functions should be and how, in a world of over-supplied content, it should attempt to increase its own supply to reach the UK's audiences. Indeed, the BBC's historical evolution and present status is increasingly misunderstood by politicians and its users alike. There is currently debate in the Republic of Ireland on replacing the license fee with a broadcasting charge that applies to all households.¹⁰ The Irish proposal emerged primarily as a response to a long-term funding crisis threatening the existence of national broadcaster RTE. The Irish Future of Media Commission has recommended that in future PSM be funded from general taxation as part of the core expenditure of the state as a form of civic infrastructure.¹¹

Another issue is the prominence of PSM on the interface between the viewer where apps and social media (rather than the traditional electronic programme guide [EPG]) are increasingly the dominant gateways to content. It is hardly surprising that terrestrial channels argue that in a digital TV ecology high-level prominence on smart TVs is needed for their survival. Since its launch BBC Scotland's distinctive output has not been presented at the same level on the conventional programme guide as the five main network channels.

The consumption of publicly funded content within a platform-led media environment – where attribution is less visible – is similarly a challenge for the BBC. In the workshop questions were posed as to how people would know they were watching BBC content if it were not branded authoritatively beyond the current policy of 'watermarking'. Support for the BBC is dependent on public trust and knowledge of the services it provides. The visibility of the BBC and its Scottish output are critical to maintaining its audience north of the border. Public support for any reform of PSM funding that strengthened the BBC's role would be dependent upon effective political campaigning and awareness-raising, likely to provoke concerted resistance from some commercial media competitors.

As mentioned, the BBC's often fraught relations with those holding political power have led to weakened public support. Progressively undermined in its negotiations with successive governments, the corporation is operating at a reduced capacity to provide services. This limits its ability to provide the sort of independent critique and impartiality the public needs and expects. It also strains its capacity to generate high-end content that can compete with the highest quality offers of the streamers. But when BBC journalism does find the courage to tackle government corruption and incompetence it is threatened with further sanctions. A series of UK Culture Secretaries has sought either to curtail the BBC's role by a combination of economic cuts and enhanced regulation or, latterly, set out to undermine it altogether. There is a notable lack of political will across the parties at Westminster to protect the future of public service media. The proposed privatisation of Channel 4 is a key index of the present drive to whittle down their scope and in particular to reduce impartial news and current affairs coverage.

¹⁰ <https://www.rte.ie/news/2022/0125/1275890-licence-fee-model/>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ccae8-report-of-the-future-of-media-commission/>



BBC Scotland has its own challenges in this respect – trust in the corporation dipped significantly among Scottish audiences after the 2014 independence referendum, with public doubts aired about its impartiality.¹² There is however a lack of comprehensive research data on the BBC's output in Scotland in this regard, and more detailed study is desirable ahead of potential further independence votes. The BBC has attempted to more accurately reflect the needs of its Scottish TV audiences by setting up the BBC Scotland Channel, launched in 2019.¹³ However, BBC Scotland television has struggled to maintain a significant audience share – a result, in part, of its lack of prominence on the EPG and also by failing to position itself as the main opt-out from BBC One.¹⁴ Despite these setbacks, the channel and in particular, its flagship news programme *The Nine*, do offer something distinct from its UK counterpart. Like Ofcom, the BBC has a Scottish member on its board. In many ways, the creation of the current channel can be seen as a delayed response to the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, following a model of autonomy in some areas and resource-sharing in others.

Despite its challenges, the BBC still enjoys significant trust, and there is public support for its continuing existence. A new consensus on its reform is increasingly necessary in a hostile political environment, and this should be done in a representative and non-partisan way, with a role for research in informing this process. In 2018, the UK Media Reform Coalition's recommendations focused on the democratisation of BBC governance, devolved to nations and regions.¹⁵ To date, however, in the UK discussion of the funding and purposes of public service media has lacked engagement by the wider public – the key users of the services. Within Scotland, debate is urgently needed on an innovative digital strategy to sustain our public service media, tailored to the country's needs and priorities.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/aug/18/scottish-viewers-bbc-news-impartiality-independence-referendum>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/bbc-scotland-launch-audience-figures>

¹⁴ <https://www.scotsman.com/business/bbc-scotland-channel-reaches-18-audience-2977883>

¹⁵ <https://braveneweurope.com/tom-mills-three-d-issue-30-draft-proposals-for-the-future-of-the-bbc>



THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN SCOTLAND'S FUTURE DEMOCRACY

Since devolution in 1999 Scotland has evolved a distinct political sphere within the UK, and despite disagreement over the prospect of independence there is a broad social consensus on the importance of self-government and of Scotland as a distinct democratic polity. Politics ought to be responsive to the specific needs of the Scottish electorate across a range of policy questions.

In a changing media landscape, workshop participants emphasised the need to address what news currently looks like as well as considering the normative question of what it should be like. This raised questions about what objectives should drive news production. A continuing ideal shared by journalists across sectors is the idea of media as constituting a 'fourth estate' whereby journalists facilitate democratic life by 'finding stuff out' and informing the public on key political and social issues. Information is widely understood as a public good and many journalists say they should serve the public not those in power. The role of the BBC in respect of the communication of public health advice during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated its importance as a public service broadcaster, and there was some frustration in the workshop about how readily alternatives promoting misinformation were regarded by some commentators as more free, democratic or challenging than mainstream journalism.

However, in spite of a shared normative vision for journalism, the mainstream media in Scotland, in part reflecting their immersion in and responsiveness to the wider British media, were seen as weak in holding the state and other forms of power to account. This was reflected in the perspectives articulated and the stories told. For example, some thought that coverage of the independence referendum in 2014 was ideologically rooted in a form of liberal unionism. Only one national newspaper title across the Scottish landscape – the *Sunday Herald* – had then aligned itself with the growing campaign for independence. Most of the mainstream media struggled to adapt to the disruption in power and authority that the 'Yes' campaign represented, with the independence-oriented blogosphere reflecting a positive experience of the campaign experienced on the ground by sections of the public. Those media rapidly grew in size to attract tens of thousands of readers despite their mixed quality and sometimes questionable journalistic integrity.¹⁶

More generally – and this was a broadly held view – there is a growing culture of political impunity at the UK level, where the government has been cavalier about the rule of law or sought to undermine it.¹⁷ Such concerns are also relevant to Scotland's governance. Politicians are seen as increasingly hostile to, and censorious of any criticism. The Scottish Government has developed a reputation for intense media management and distrust of journalists. A growing resistance to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests – central to the work of independent outlets – is an obstacle to investigative journalism seeking to expose abuses of power and corruption. This stands in the way of journalists' key responsibility to report on the services on which the public rely, the committees, meetings and activities of government, and the relations between government and business. The Scottish Government's stated commitment to sustaining journalism in its essential democratic role and the establishment of the working group is a start. However, this rhetorical stance does need to be held to account and any practical measures actually taken tested in the public space. The current lack of routine inquiry and searching political scrutiny is a significant weakness of the Scottish media sector, and any strategy for sustainability must reckon with and counter this deficiency.

¹⁶ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2021/05/rise-and-fall-wings-over-scotland>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bill-of-rights-to-strengthen-freedom-of-speech-and-curb-bogus-human-rights-claims>



DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION

The question of diversity in respect of engagement, representation and media personnel also emerged as a key theme: this represents both a challenge and an opportunity. In the context of over a decade of austerity policies and a shrinking public sector across the whole of the UK, with economic impacts compounded by Brexit, the effects of the war in Ukraine and the pandemic, the gap between the very richest and the rest has increased, and life expectancy in Scotland and in the UK generally has stalled.¹⁸ A majority of the Scottish public has rejected the current UK government's policies at the ballot box, with opposition parties collecting 70 per cent of the vote in the 2019 election and an even higher figure in the most recent Scottish parliamentary elections, although divisions over the constitutional question remain profound.

A key theme aired in the workshop concerned widespread public feelings of powerlessness. News avoidance – an inability to cope with bad news – affects the lower socio-economic groups disproportionately.¹⁹ Journalists and commissioning editors are operating in an environment where political disengagement is a constant challenge. There was a consensus that news that is relevant, engaged and connected to people's lives is needed to counter public disaffection.

Political diversity is one key dimension of this challenge. In Scotland the mainstream media generally took a sceptical approach to independence in coverage of the 2014 referendum, despite significant pro-independence leanings in the population and an interest in critically examining the issues arising.

Localism and engaging directly with communities is another relevant issue. Independent journalism outlets such as *The Ferret* and *Greater Govanhill Magazine* have embedded themselves in communities to identify the important stories, a trait shared by other smaller publications in Scotland such as the *West Highland Free Press*. The voices that resonate in these approaches are not those of politicians, corporate CEOs, lobby groups or elite journalists but rather those subject to the effects of damaging policies or the dismantling of public services, what some scholars have called 'journalism from below'. The routine tendency of the mainstream media to embed Twitter narratives in their own reporting means that the interests and the priorities of those already most politically, economically and culturally prominent are elevated over those without a platform or the resources to effectively make use of social media. It was argued by some in the workshop that a distorted construction of the 'public interest' has been fostered by those in the political class and commentariat who see mileage in 'culture wars', as well as in the elevation of certain perspectives that have little public support.

Some argued that an emphasis on diversity across class, gender, ethnicity, and geography beyond the Central Belt, and the recognition of marginalised groups needed to be a priority. Recent controversy over sexism in Scottish media as manifested at the Scottish Football Writers' annual dinner reflected an industry still very white and very male.²⁰ Unfortunately, despite our invitations to a wide range of participants, no senior women from the mainstream media came to the workshop. Women in the independent media sector were much better represented, perhaps reflecting their distinctive engagement in promoting marginalised voices and a wish to ensure that such perspectives were heard. At present, no studies of the extent of diverse employment in the Scottish media exists. Nor is there a clear picture of how Scotland's diversity is represented in media content.

¹⁸ https://www.gcpb.co.uk/assets/0000/8723/Stalled_Mortality_report_FINAL_WEB.pdf

¹⁹ Lindell, J. & Bage, E. M. (2022) 'Disconnecting from digital news: News avoidance and the ignored role of social class,' *Journalism*: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14648849221085389>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-61379507>



SCOTLAND'S PUBLIC SPHERE AND MEDIA LITERACY

The relationship between the media and the Scottish public has been transformed in recent years due to the potential for access and engagement afforded by social media platforms. For some, this has opened up new avenues for content production and distribution beyond traditional journalism and has provided an opportunity for holding power to account in new ways.

Social media were seen by some participants as opening up civic spaces to facilitate key elements of democracy such as petitioning, protesting, organising and activism. The most prominent recent example named was the public protest in Kenmure Street in Glasgow's south side against the removal of two men by the UK Border Force, which convened a supportive crowd via social media alerts.²¹ In public discussion, this event is often perceived as the product of a distinct Scottish public sphere where there is concern with social justice and grassroots activism, although the degree to which Scotland is exceptional in this sense is difficult to assess.

It was also noted that the right to protest and freedom of speech are both under threat in the current UK political environment, with a series of bills passed at Westminster that threaten established democratic rights. There is presently a widely-based challenge to the view that social media necessarily offer a 'safe space' in which to engage. Not least, as noted, that is because the range and forms of expression in social media may justifiably raise questions about what needs to be regulated.²² Relatedly, the tendency of algorithmically-driven platforms to promote controversial, sensational or provocative content was seen as directly counter to the aims of decent journalism, although this kind of excess was not novel as sections of the press have engaged in such 'yellow' journalism for over a century.

The importance of media literacy was emphasised by journalists, regulators, policymakers and academics, but currently there is limited knowledge on which interventions actually work to improve media literacy. In the media industries, discussions of media literacy have often emphasised the need for audiences or users to identify the origin and veracity of sources and claims. The Scottish Government Working Group's recommendations included a proposal to improve public knowledge about sourcing trustworthy information and how journalism is produced. This entails recognising the importance of quality journalism to democratic processes and an informed *polis*.

The academic community, meanwhile, has emphasised the complex ways in which diverse media are navigated and processed. Studies include consideration of information overload, emotional responses and assessments of trust and credibility. There is also academic work looking at how social media shape public knowledge and democratic decision-making.²³ A key point discussed was that 'fact checking' and 'fake news alerts' have had limited impact in raising awareness of the workings of the whole media ecology. This includes identifying how different categories of media do different things, how news content is produced, and the ways in which algorithms influence the delivery of content to individuals and groups. Strategies to broaden the scope of the content accessed and the avoidance of echo chambers were also discussed. Since it was set up, Ofcom has been tasked with fostering media literacy in the public, although relative to the scale of the issue funding for this purpose is limited.²⁴ A much-broadened conception of media literacy rests not just on binary depictions of reliable and unreliable news but also on understanding of the forces that shape media production.

²¹ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/crime/kenmure-street-police-order-release-of-men-after-deportation-raid-standoff-in-glasgow-street-where-residents-blocked-uk-border-agency-3235254>

²² <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/the-policing-bill-what-you-need-to-know/>

²³ Happer, C. & Wellesley, L. (2019) Meat consumption, behaviour and the media environment: a focus group analysis across four countries, *Food Security*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-018-0877-1>

²⁴ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research>



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scotland is undergoing change in many areas of public life. Although at this time of writing, there is plainly considerable resistance to constitutional change in Scotland in the UK's major parties, we cannot exclude that significant political change might result in further devolution, and possibly full political autonomy. A resetting of the country's relations with the British state is on the agenda, although the outcome is far from clear. The media, in all forms, are among the bedrocks of a functioning democracy: at best, they reflect the country as it is, and also contribute to shaping what it may become. Irrespective of any constitutional preference, quality media with the resources to engage in critical analysis and reporting are crucial to representative democracy. In the Scottish context, being for or against constitutional change should not be a block on arguments for reform of the media ecology as part of a drive for wider democratisation of the political culture.

Trust is centrally important. The erosion of trust in mainstream media over time is rooted in a much broader and deeper crisis of trust in public institutions. Renewed trust in journalism will depend on Scotland's media better representing the diversity of the Scottish public. There is a pressing need for political diversity and a shift from a centralised agenda, often set in London but also Edinburgh and Glasgow. This entails elevating voices and perspectives that emerge from a wider range of Scottish communities as a counterweight to those that dominate in the corridors of power, and public life, with disproportionate presence on social media. Paramount is the need to scrutinise political decision-making that impacts directly on people's lives. There is a need to counter the effective monopoly control of information by an 'insider class' to which the Scottish media routinely turn. More research is needed into relationships of media, power and lobbying in Scotland in particular.

The Scottish Government's Working Group's recommendation to establish a Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute was an initiative broadly welcomed by participants at the workshop. However, there is still no current independent research into, and knowledge of, the Scottish audiences that media serve, their consumption habits, the construction of political knowledge and views, and of what people in Scotland want and need from media. Such research needs to be well-funded and ongoing, and robust enough to provide a broad base for building a better media in Scotland, and informing a democratic political culture, in coming decades.

For Scotland's media to thrive in the 21st century they need a diverse and significant funding base. International comparison suggests some routes ahead which may be of use, with models from elsewhere of how funding and regulation can promote robust media playing a key role in Scotland's debate on future sustainability. There is an important place for new research and knowledge to produce innovative ideas to inform change both in media businesses and non-profit organisations. Such informed work is needed without delay.

This report is merely a first step in highlighting some of the challenges we face and some of key the actors presently in play. It is intended as a spur to discussion and action across academia, government and the media themselves. The common aim, surely, is to give Scotland a quality media in line with its civic and democratic aspirations.



NOTES TO PRESS

Further information

The Glasgow University Media Group is an expert research group based in the Department of Sociology at the University of Glasgow. Its research director is Dr Catherine Happer.

The Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow is one of Europe's leading cultural policy research groups, presently conducting research on media and communications regulation and the media industries alongside a wide range of work on cultural and creative industries policies.

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