
Devolution in Policy and Practice: A Study of *River City* and BBC Scotland

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Abstract

After eight years of a devolved UK, broadcasting in Scotland remains the preserve of Westminster jurisdiction with the Scottish Executive reluctant to take part in any discussions on broadcasting policy or practice. An overview of recent cultural and creative policy reveals that it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the lack of devolved policy as the increasingly convergent nature of media and attempts to profit from the creative industries make it almost impossible to do so. Using *River City* as a case study, the article explores how policy and non-policy factors determine and shape the type of Scottish national media that BBC Scotland makes available, supports and sustains. The soap is explored as an example of how BBC policies in relation to devolution have influenced the output of BBC Scotland. The article reflects on the implications of the BBC's move of several key genres to Salford and simultaneous move of BBC Scotland to Glasgow's Pacific Quay.

Introduction

In 1997 the incoming Labour government held a referendum on devolving the nations of Scotland and Wales in the United Kingdom. The positive result of this referendum provided the basis for creating the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales in 1999¹. The Scotland Act (1998) outlined the structure for the new Scottish Parliament at Holyrood and created an institution which is semi-autonomous from that of the UK. The Act specified the difference between reserved and devolved powers. Reserved matters, such as foreign affairs, defence and national security, remain under the control of Westminster, and are issues on which the Scottish Parliament cannot pass legislation. Devolved matters are presided over by Scottish Members of Parliament (MSPs) and include education, health, agriculture and justice. In addition, MSPs have discretionary

tax-varying powers. Crucially for this discussion, broadcasting is an area which is reserved to Westminster. The first part of this article explores key policy debates on broadcasting since devolution. This concentrates particularly on the period since 2003 when the First Minister Jack McConnell made renewed claims for Scottish culture to be central to the policy agenda. The policy overview shows how BBC Scotland is often tenuously positioned within the BBC and examines some of the problems that are raised by the lack of devolved media policy. There is a brief comparison with the broadcasting situation in Wales, another nation without a state. The second part of this article examines what the BBC Scotland production *River City* tells us about the creative economy in Scotland and how the institution has responded to devolution. The soap has achieved a consistent and committed audience and is explored in relation to its ability to be used a training and skills base and as an example of BBC Scotland responding to a culturally diverse national audience. The achievements of *River City* were due to increased funding from the BBC which enabled the full exploitation of local creative talent, knowledge and networks. *River City* has consequently made a significant contribution to BBC Scotland's share of audiences in Scotland. Finally the article reflects on the BBC's proposed move of several key genres to Salford, and what this may mean for broadcasting in the nations and regions.

Scottish Devolution and Broadcasting Policy

In November 1997, the Secretary of State for Scotland set up the Consultative Steering Group on the Scottish Parliament (CSG). Chaired by Henry McLeish, the Scottish Office Minister for Devolution, the CSG reported on the 'operational needs and working methods' of the Parliament and made proposals for its rules of procedure. Its main report 'Shaping Scotland's Parliament' was published in January 1999 (Consultative Steering Group 1998). Although the Steering Group established an 'expert panel on media issues', this was predominantly concerned with how the media should interact with the Scottish Parliament. This debate has been covered in some detail by Philip Schlesinger *et al.* (2001). The impact of devolution on the media in Scotland received limited public attention and remains notably absent from sociological and political discourses of the nation (Ibid, 10), but some attempts have been made to redress this. One of the most significant studies was a rolling report of the Constitution Unit at University College London (UCL). From November 1999 to date, research teams across the UK have produced quarterly reports on developments in devolution policy and the institutions of devolution (available at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/publications/devolution-monitoring-reports/index.html>). This devolution monitoring programme targeted the media as one its key areas of investigation. A number of works have also gauged the impact of devolution on the media industries, media policy, regulation and representations. Together these works contribute to a larger corpus examining the role of the media in shaping, creating

and sustaining national identity. Within this body of literature, there are relatively few explorations of specific instances of creative policy discourse in devolved institutions in Scotland. BBC Scotland is not a devolved institution although since 1999 it has operated as a national broadcaster within the BBC, as opposed to the pre-devolutionary position when BBC Scotland was a 'national region' within the unitary corporation (Scottish Parliament Information Centre 2002). Although there has always been some antagonism between the BBC and BBC Scotland, since devolution these tensions have best been exemplified in the disputes over whether Scotland should opt-out of the BBC six o'clock news bulletin (Schlesinger *et al.* 2001). This conflict over the 'Scottish Six' was viewed by former Director General of the BBC John Birt as 'a bitter battle to prevent the BBC being split apart by the fissiparous forces of devolution', with a separate news bulletin resulting in 'dire consequences for the BBC, and unintended consequences for the United Kingdom' (Birt 2003, 479-482). Those who felt that a 'Scottish Six' was necessary pointed to the jarring effect of news bulletins relating to cricket and education, which simply did not fit within the Scottish frame of reference (Kiely *et al.* 2006, 488). Birt felt that the lack of a single, unified news broadcast would have a domino effect on broadcasting, the Union and the BBC which would result in the BBC becoming 'a weak, federal institution' (Birt 2003, 482-483). This concern that devolving powers over the media will 'lead inevitably to separatism and the collapse of the union' (Schlesinger 2005, 222) has been a recurring feature in discourses of media regulation in Scotland. In response to the public consultation on the BBC Charter Review, the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) re-opened the 'Scottish Six' debate in March 2004, with the publication of a report into consumer satisfaction with BBC news reporting (Scottish Consumer Council 2004). Although the SCC concluded that there was a 'large minority' who were not happy with the current situation, the survey was not so definitive: 51% of the 916 people asked were quite or very satisfied with the current situation of broadcast news, while responses to another question framed favourably toward the 'Scottish Six' found 69% in favour of changing the status quo. Perhaps more importantly the survey also found that respondents in the lower socio-economic groups felt generally less well-served by the BBC, although BBC Governors remained adamant at the end of 2005 that the six o'clock news hour was more successful in Scotland than ever.

In 2000 'A New Future for Communications' made several recommendations in relation to broadcasting in a devolved UK, reiterating the need for public service broadcasting to maintain its regional and cultural plurality and recognising that the BBC set its own targets for regional production against the background of its Charter obligations (DCMS and DTI 2000, 35-37). The Paper also required that Ofcom review the regional obligations of the independent television licences and suggested greater consolidation of the ITV network (Ibid, 37-41). As broadcasters looked to independent production companies outwith London, significant growth

opportunities for the regional independent television sector were created. The following year, the Scottish Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons began an inquiry into the effects of devolution on news and current affairs broadcasting in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) issued a briefing document for the Committee which examined the likely areas for the focus of this inquiry (Scottish Parliament Information Centre 2002). The SPICe report once again examined the relationship between media and Parliament that had been the focus of the CSG, and found that media attention was focussed increasingly on the workings on Holyrood, sometimes at the expense of Westminster. Meanwhile a report by the Scottish Consumer Council attempted to put media audiences back on the agenda, noting that although the onset of the digital revolution was being heralded, many of Scotland's population remained excluded from broadband and other digital technologies (Scottish Consumer Council 2002).

Recent debates on the role of broadcasting and Scottish culture find a starting point in the First Minister Jack McConnell's St Andrew's Day speech of 2003 which put Scottish culture at the forefront of the national agenda (McConnell 2003). Central to McConnell's speech was the influence of New Labour's focus on the creative industries, as creativity and culture were championed for their ability to 'set the country on a course for economic, social and cultural renewal.' This collapsing of culture and creativity has been the focus of much academic attention. Stuart Cunningham (2004) and Nicholas Garnham (2005) have noted the change in terminology from 'cultural industries' to 'creative industries' under New Labour, with a twofold consequence. Most frequently the industries are situated within ideas about economic profitability, most vigorously seen in the Creative Economy Programme. Creative industries have also been harnessed for their capacity in nation building, fostering a sense of identity and re-branding Britain as a unified and cohesive territory. This strategy is undertaken in the face of perceived divisions brought about by the devolution of the UK's nation-states and bringing Britain under the direction and polity of the European Union. The ensuing 'Britishness' is again ultimately marketable, most evident in the 'Cool Britannia' strategy. While claims about the economic validity of the creative industries have been disputed (Creigh-Tyte 2005; Garnham 2005), the figures are nonetheless officially endorsed. Although it is extremely difficult to define the creative economy in national terms, 'culture' is increasingly becoming lost in a drive to reap the financial rewards that creativity may bring. The increase in creativity rhetoric that followed New Labour is similarly evident in the BBC Scotland annual reviews. 'Creativity' doesn't exist as a concept in 1999, but merits ten mentions by 2005, and becomes one of the six new purposes of the BBC following the Charter Review in 2006. As BBC Scotland reviews use the BBC objectives in order to monitor progress the mantra of creativity is inherited from New Labour rather than derived from the Scottish Executive.

In a response to the First Minister's speech, the Scottish Executive set out a Cultural Policy Statement promising to 'acknowledge the full cultural ecology of Scotland' including areas such as broadcasting which were outwith the scope of the devolved settlement (Scottish Executive 2004, 18). The Executive announced that it would establish a Cultural Commission to investigate the institutional infrastructure of the creative industries, considering the relationships between institutions; public, private and voluntary sectors; and to 'consider the designation 'national' and how it might be more appropriately determined' (Ibid, 18). Although a 'reserved' matter, the Commission was explicitly charged with investigating the screen and broadcasting industries with its remit. When it arrived a year later, the Cultural Commission report began optimistically, claiming:

We stand on the verge of one of the most radical, and exciting, policy shifts in our lifetime. If the First Minister is supported in his aim of placing culture at the heart of government, Scotland will lead the world. (Cultural Commission 2005, 13)

Although the main body of the report focused on the arts, an appendix put BBC Scotland at the heart of Scottish culture, and the Broadcasting Council for Scotland at the heart of the BBC. But the report also acknowledged that while as an institution the BBC played a central role in Scottish culture, the structure of the television industry had not changed and as such, was 'not calibrated in line against the changes in Scottish society but in line with BBC corporate policies' (Ibid, 323). Of all the documents examined in this discussion, the Cultural Commission is the one which most explicitly recognises that while the media and politics intersect in an important and meaningful way in the transmission of political affairs, it is nonetheless necessary to consider the implications of broadcasting and its impact on national culture more widely. The Commission made some bold comments in relation to improving the talent and skills base, advocated 'disobliging those who have tried but have not made enough of a mark', and called for more quality programmes, particularly drama, to serve the Scottish audience. (Ibid, 325) Most radically, the report called for 'an element of devolution in broadcasting' and establishing at least one channel in Scotland in order to increase the possibility of a strong indigenous television production industry (Ibid, 326). The Commission suggested that the Scottish Executive should continue to lobby for further commissioning to be based in Scotland and that it should explore the feasibility of using Scotland as a test bed for digital broadcasting. In the same month Ofcom published their statement on programming in the nations and regions (Ofcom 2005), which once again emphasised news and current affairs. The report set out the minimum requirements for regional and non-news programming, allowed national licensees to broadcast regional rather than network current affairs and allowed a further reduction to minimum non-news requirements from 2012, after

the first digital switchover in the Borders. Respondents to the Ofcom review felt that local services had the opportunity to provide a more dynamic and compelling prospect than regional television, and called for Ofcom to transfer resources from regional broadcasting to local services. Many respondents also found that the Nations were under-represented in network programming and argued for the introduction of quotas in order to rectify this. Ofcom rejected these proposals in preference of voluntary action, subject to a further review in 2007. In 2006 'A Public Service for all: the BBC in the Digital Age' responded to the demands for regionality that had been evident in the run up to the Communications Bill three years earlier (DCMS 2006). The Bill set out the requirement that the BBC should engage 'the views of those whom the BBC's relationship requires most development' (Ibid, 19). It also opened up the 'window of creative competition' (WoCC) in proposing that 50% of programming would be reserved in-house, 25% allocated to the independent sector and the remaining 25% subject to open competition. It was assumed that this would lead to greater input to network programming from the nations and regions.

In January 2006 the Enterprise and Culture Committee requested an overview of the media and creative industries in Scotland and a briefing was produced for the Committee that May (Herbert 2006). The overview was requested with a view to growing the creative industries sector, although the report also briefly acknowledged that the media played an important cultural role. At the end of the year 'Scotland's Culture' was published in response to the findings of the Cultural Commission (Scottish Executive 2006b). While the Commission had been charged to investigate the screen and broadcasting industries, the Executive almost wholly disregarded its suggestions, commenting that, 'broadcasting is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport' (Ibid, 43). The report made very little reference to television, film, or digital media although watching television remains the nation's most popular leisure pursuit (Paterson *et al.* 2004, 146-147). It rejected outright the recommendations to establish a separate TV channel in Scotland on the grounds of cost. Instead, the Executive concluded that resources were best allocated to ensuring the future of Gaelic broadcasting, increasing indigenous television production and 'encouraging broadcasters to improve coverage of Scottish issues on existing channels' (Scottish Executive 2006b, 43). As an arm of Britain's largest single public service broadcaster, BBC Scotland was tasked with meeting these goals. The draft legislature responding to the process of the Cultural Commission and indeed to the First Minister's 2003 speech was published in December 2006 and is still under consultation (Scottish Executive 2006a). The only reference it makes to broadcasting regards the powers of Scottish local authorities to broadcast information to the people in their area about their services. The proposed legislation notes:

Broadcasting legislation is in general reserved to the UK Parliament, so the Scottish Parliament cannot give local authorities a power to apply for broadcasting licences. But the UK Government is aware of the Scottish Executive's proposals and has agreed to propose this change too, once the Scottish Parliament has made the change that it can make. Once both changes are made authorities in Scotland, like those in England and Wales, will be able to broadcast television and radio to provide information to the people in their area about what they are doing to fulfil their responsibilities, should they wish to do so. (Ibid, 13)

The socio-political changes over this eight-year period coincide with significant technological changes as the media becomes ever more convergent. The change of emphasis in public service broadcasting brought by the Peacock Committee (1986) has continued to hold sway with attempts to investigate market-led and consumer-led solutions to the issue of public service funding. There are constant questions as to how the BBC can justify its licence fee at a time when audiences are fragmenting in the face of a growing number of channels, convergence shrinks the divide between consumers and producers of media, and the sale of spectrum offers increased opportunities for local television. Analyses of the relationship between the nation and digital communications point out that it is no longer relevant to think of the UK as a cohesive, single communicative space (Schlesinger 1997; 2000). As Glen Creeber has argued, 'Perhaps the age of television is not over, but the age of a centralised, state-run media monopoly is'. (Creeber 2004, 35)

BBC Scotland and Devolution

Although there have been some useful attempts to examine how broadcasting in a devolved nation might work, to date the Scottish Executive have been unwilling to engage in these debates on the basis that it is an area reserved to Westminster and so is best left off the policy agenda. Holyrood does in fact have the capacity to debate matters that are within Westminster's jurisdiction, although as Schlesinger (2005) has noted, this is a role that is rarely used. Concerns over the validity of this hands-off approach to discussion is often evident at public meetings on the state of broadcasting in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre have also acknowledged a demand from the industry that the Parliament at least engage in a dialogue with the sector, although the Enterprise and Culture Committee have as yet to comment (Herbert 2006). On the rare occasions that discussion has come to the forefront of the policy agenda attention has focussed on how news and current affairs programming has been affected by devolution. To some extent this is inevitable; in a small country such as Scotland the media have a disproportionate role and are intricately caught up with politics (Schlesinger 1998; 2000; 2004; 2005; Schlesinger *et al.* 2001). The Scottish news media have often been seen as playing a key role in enabling a distinct articulation of national identity alongside the 'holy trinity' of the distinctively Scottish church, legal system and education (Kellas

1989). Nevertheless there has been relatively little regard paid to fictional representations and the uses and purposes of entertainment media as a whole.

The reluctance of the Executive to consider the possibility of a devolved broadcasting regime or to evaluate the relative merits of Scottish broadcasting within the current broadcast establishment often means that policy debate is left in the hands of major interest groups (Schlesinger 2005, 227). In other circumstances, debates about media policy and regulation become polarized between unionist and nationalist positions, where nationalists speak in favour of wholly devolved broadcasting and unionists favour a unified institution (Andrews 2006). Schlesinger (1998) notes that adopting these oppositional stances have often led to a position where the Scottish National Party (SNP) are unable to address the consequences of full nationalism, under which circumstance the BBC would cease to exist as a single institution. What is certain is that the peculiar positioning of broadcasting within the UK's legislature means that 'Scottish solutions for Scottish problems' (Dewar 1999) are not always possible. The divides which exist between devolved and reserved powers, and on a wider scale, UK and European Union (EU) policy, frequently skew the policy discourse and lead to a 'confusing cultural infrastructure' (Scottish Executive 2006b, 9). This is further complicated by the broadcasting terrain, which sees BBC Scotland television principally operating on an 'opt-out' basis, while BBC Scotland radio provides news and current affairs programming which is produced in Scotland and serves more of an agenda-setting role. The divides also do little to address the necessarily convergent nature of digital media which impacts on production sectors and changes the means of delivering content. The resulting tensions between devolved and reserved powers have both cultural and economic implications.

While it has become accepted wisdom to suggest that the BBC is a well-regarded and valued enterprise (Kuhn 1985), BBC Scotland has never enjoyed the same audiences or approval ratings that the BBC has in the rest of the UK. The BBC, it was argued, espoused a 'particular view of the nation-state' resulting from a narrowly defined set of attitudes and opinions which did little to reflect cultural diversity (Creeber 2004, 30). It was anticipated that negative feelings toward the BBC and BBC Scotland would only be exacerbated by the socio-political changes brought about by devolution. But in fact, many of the debates over nationality and identity had taken place prior to devolution, pervading the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention, the CSG and the working practices of the new Parliament (Paterson *et al.* 2004). Since devolution, defining 'Scottishness' has held a relegated position on the Executive's agenda, although has played an increased role in the schema of BBC Scotland. Approval research undertaken for BBC Scotland three years into devolution noted that audiences felt that BBC Scotland could make improvements in the way it represented Scottish culture (BBC Scotland 2003, 3). Attention then focused on how to reflect Scottish identities as it

was felt that; 'A stronger and more relevant sense of 'Scottishness', itself vague and ill-defined, would greatly enhance the self-esteem of the Scots'. Viewers of BBC Scotland, it was found, had little knowledge of the structure, role and nature of the organisation, and wanted programmes which 'would provide an accurate portrayal of Scottish society with which they could identify and which gave them pride' (BBC Scotland 2004, 6). BBC Scotland was therefore tasked with doing more to 'champion Scotland and its people at grass roots level, preserve Scottish culture and portray a modern multi-cultural country within a European context' (Ibid).

Consequently, while it could be anticipated that policy debate in broadcasting from the beginning of the 21st century would be influenced by devolution, BBC Scotland's policy initiatives are complicated both by the positioning of BBC Scotland within the BBC and the positioning of Scottish media regulation from Westminster. While debates about Scottish identity had largely vanished from the Scottish Executive's agenda, the BBC's policies reflected the London perception of what the current issues were in Scotland post-devolution. Because broadcasting is not a devolved matter, the governmental policies that were formulated over this period can only be seen as representative of UK responses to a devolved Britain, rather than generating from a Scottish perspective. The connections between UK and Scottish levels of creative industries policy are consequently an uneven and disputed terrain (Schlesinger *et al.* 2001). BBC Scotland is not a devolved institution but a 'branch' of the BBC and the changes in UK governance have therefore not resulted in any changes to the funding, structure or regulation of BBC Scotland. This lack of devolved policy – and it is difficult to see this non-intervention as anything other than a policy decision – has led to continuing difficulties between the BBC in London and BBC Scotland which add to the already well documented disputes between the two arms of the one institution. Although histories of BBC Scotland are relatively scarce, Alastair Hetherington's (1992) account of his tenure as Controller, BBC Scotland in the 1970s offers a revealing glimpse into the machinations of the corporation, while Bill McDowell also offers a history of BBC Scotland which details the complex inter-relationship in which Scotland was seen as a problematic 'national region' (1992, viii). Histories of the BBC in Scotland are more readily available, with significant contributions from Asa Briggs (1961; 1979); James Curran and Jean Seaton (1985); Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff (1991); John Ellis (2000b); Andrew Crisell (2002) and Georgina Born (2004). Many of these works acknowledge the way in which the BBC has largely centralized its processes of funding, production and transmission, and represented the nation through key unifying moments of shared national history and identity, also recognised by Jane Sillars' (1999) work on the television industries in Scotland. The publications also outline how the shift of broadcasting power and production has rarely moved beyond the south east of England and regional production facilities have remained dependent on network commissioning. Scannell and Cardiff (1991) note that a shift from local to national

programming in the late 1920s resulted in an unequal distribution of control between London and the nations and regions, while Christine Geraghty and Ian Goode's (2004) interview with John McCormick, former Controller, BBC Scotland, also examines the administrative and managerial relationships and incompatibilities between London and Scotland in the 1990s. Former Director General, BBC, Greg Dyke notes that BBC Scotland only 'became a serious and well-respected player within the BBC' in the first half of the 21st century, when a substantial increase in funding to the nations resulted in double the amount of network production (Dyke 2004, 196). Both industrial and personal histories of the BBC make it clear that conflicts between BBC Scotland and London were and remain commonplace (Hetherington 1992; Birt 2003, 479-487; Dyke 2004, 195-197). These have variously been about structures, funding, regulation and personalities. Paterson suggests that UK state agencies such as the BBC actively encouraged personnel to be 'self-consciously Scottish' (Paterson 1994, 24-6), and it is clear that some key figures in the industry have got on well with each other. John Birt credits McCormick with leading a 'cultural renaissance' in the industry (Birt 2003, 480), lifting annual turnover at BBC Scotland from £60 million in 1992 to £170 million in 2004 (Geraghty and Goode 2004). Others have endured a more strained relationship, as when Alistair Hetherington outlines the 'battling, bickering and back-stabbing that seemed to be endemic within the upper echelons of the BBC' (Hetherington 1992, 87). More recently, claims that the BBC has an anti-devolution agenda have been hotly refuted (Williams 2006), although members of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland (now the Audience Council Scotland) acknowledge that the BBC has some way to go before it adequately reflects devolution within its national programming (BBC 2005). The formation of the BBC Trust and decision to have a BBC Trustee from each nation may meet its aim to more adequately represent devolution within the corporation (DCMS 2006), but doubts have been raised as to how representative the Trust are of the Scottish public. As it stands however, BBC Scotland has a limited amount of autonomy to pursue its own needs.

Part of BBC Scotland's continuing remit is an aim to connect with audiences, but Scotland's audience differs from that of the UK more generally. Scotland's total area, with a substantial body of mountains, islands and lochs and dispersed rural population makes for a difficult broadcasting terrain. Scotland has a wider division between wealth and poverty than anywhere else in the UK, an older populace, and a population which has just reached stability after many years in decline. This demographic impacts on access to both media and education and has wider resonances for issues of social exclusion (Paterson *et al.* 2004). The unique diversity of the Scottish cultural landscape also poses some problems. As Gerry Hassan and Douglas Fraser (2004, 4) note, a few regional areas of Scotland have a very distinct identity, evidenced in the urban areas and collective, if often antagonistic, identities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Other areas are imbued with a 'special status' which

wins them specific institutions, as is the case with the Highlands and Islands. Yet other areas lack this distinct identity – mid-Scotland and Fife have little to distinguish them as a specific regional entity. Jonathan Gardner and Andrew Oswald (2001) also note concerns that the digital divide in the country is pronounced and becoming more so. Recent reports by Ofcom suggest that Scotland has the highest availability of terrestrial digital television but a lower than average take-up and overall, television viewers in Scotland watch more satellite digital television than the rest of the UK (Ofcom 2006). Consequently, the current spread of digital television in Scotland means that audience assessments of the BBC are often made on the basis of its terrestrial output alone. Sillars argues that one of the effects of devolution has been that Scottish production tends to explore national differences from the English, while differences within Scottishness have remained largely neglected (Sillars 1999, 252) Although BBC Scotland has repeatedly stated that reflecting Scotland's diversity of population and geography is a key aim of the organisation, it is widely speculated that in a digital age commercial narrowcasting may be more able to reflect this level of cultural diversity more comprehensively than a traditional model of public service broadcasting (Hartley 1999, 177-188; Creeber 2004, 32).

Before examining how BBC Scotland has made some concerted effort to address a specifically Scottish audience in the light of devolution it is worth making a very brief comparative note on the broadcasting situation in Wales, another nation without a state. This has been usefully and thoroughly outlined by Leighton Andrews (2006). In making their case before the Scottish Parliament, the Cultural Commission (2005) drew on the Welsh experience, noting that S4C had a government subsidy of £85 million which had enabled the facilitation of a significant television production base. Having a strong minority language and difficult broadcasting terrain has provided Wales with a relative abundance of public service provision (Andrews 2006, 193), and the Welsh Assembly has had a higher profile in broadcasting policy than Scotland (Davies and Osmond 2003). Andrews sees this relationship as developing in a consensual fashion and resulting in a specifically 'Welsh media agenda', although he notes that a lack of Welsh national press has resulted in a disproportionate focus on the role of broadcasting in fostering a sense of national identity (2006, 199-203). Scotland by contrast has a strong national press, as identified by Liam Connell (2003); Alex Law (2001); Richard Kiely *et. al.* (2006) and Michael Rosie *et. al.* (2004). Ofcom (2005) have concluded that consideration should be given to alternative funding models for Welsh broadcasting, including reviewing possibilities for a Welsh Public Service Publisher funded partly by the BBC's licence fee revenues. In recent years BBC Wales have had significant success with the *Dr Who* and *Torchwood* series, and Cardiff is now counted among the more significant creative cities of the UK. BBC Wales also has its own Welsh language soap opera *Pobol Y Cwm*, which, established in 1974, is now the longest-running soap opera on the BBC. Even from this brief

comparison it is clear that BBC broadcasting in Wales is more fully developed on both an industrial and representative capacity than that of Scotland.

A Scottish Soap: *River City*

BBC Scotland has nonetheless made some concerted effort to address a specifically Scottish audience in the light of devolution. One of these efforts was concentrated on the establishment of a soap opera which would reflect contemporary Scotland. *River City* was the direct result of an extra £14 million in funding awarded to BBC Scotland in 2000 for drama and entertainment programming for audiences in Scotland (BBC Scotland 2001). Traditionally, drama has been costly to develop and so has largely remained within the London control base. This in turn ensured that regional production facilities were dependent on network commissioning (Curran and Seaton 1985). In creating a Scottish soap, BBC Scotland could show a commitment to a steady, regular output which would more accurately reflect the cultural diversity of its audience. A scheduled peak time broadcast on a terrestrial channel would ensure it was available to the entire Scottish audience. The regularity of a soap format would offer BBC Scotland the chance to meet many of its other objectives, such as a commitment to a long-term project and a proved interest in developing the Scottish creative industries. Finally *River City* can also be seen as being situated firmly within the new discourse of creativity which pervaded the debate about the role of public service broadcasting and supported Greg Dyke's attempts to fit the BBC for the 21st century (Born 2004). As Ken McQuarrie, then Head of Programmes, BBC Scotland stated in relation to *River City*, 'You've got to give things a go. You've got to take a risk and Greg Dyke is right behind the theory that to be creative you have to take chances' (Ford 2002).

River City follows the lives of around forty characters in the fictional urban neighbourhood of Shieldinch. It was first shown in September 2002 in a twice-weekly format on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After some problems with audience figures for the Thursday slot, the soap now has a regular schedule on BBC1 Scotland at 8pm on Tuesdays and 8.30pm on Fridays, with an omnibus edition on Sunday afternoons. NTL Digital customers in the Greater Glasgow area can also watch episodes of the soap 'on demand' for up to one week after transmission. *River City* has never been shown on network television south of the border, although subscribers to Sky and NTL Digital can access it on BBC1 Scotland at its normal time. *River City* had increased media coverage in the UK in 2005 when BBC Radio 1 DJ Scott Mills ran a word of mouth campaign in order to 'bring *River City* south'. This campaign centred around the sometimes doubtful quality of the acting and sets and jovial debates about whether the Glasgow accents would be intelligible to an English audience. An independent research company commissioned by BBC Scotland has monitored the soap's performance since its

inception. In the following, *River City* is examined in three ways; as a training and skills base for new talent; as an example of audience engagement with a Scottish programme and in terms of its wider importance as a flagship programme for BBC Scotland.

As a single production, *River City* plays a crucial role in allowing BBC Scotland to achieve creative success, sustain growth, attract future network commissions and act as a training facility for on and off-screen talent. At the launch of the soap, Ken McQuarrie saw *River City* as the first step in 'developing a star factory' that would work for the long-term benefit of the creative industries and creative economy in Scotland (Ford 2002). The soap has indeed provided 'training slopes' intervention for a host of actors, writers and production crew. Many of the cast have gone on to further roles in UK network television after using the programme as a springboard for developing their skills. This has not only furthered their individual careers, but has also increased the range of Scottish talent seen on network television and contributed to the Charter Review calls for a greater variety of voices and accents on the BBC. Most recently BBC Scotland regular Barbara Rafferty who appears in *River City* as 'Shirley', has achieved some acclaim for her role in *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). *Shieldinch* is filmed on a set built especially for the show in Dumbarton, Glasgow, consisting of four tenement blocks, a pub, a boatyard, some shops and a subway exterior. Location filming additionally takes place around the city. Having a set of this size greatly contributes to BBC Scotland's ability to not only equip staff with necessary skills, but also acts as a factor in attracting future network commissions and has added economic impact on the local support economy.

Although research findings suggested that audiences in Scotland were initially supportive about the prospect of a home-grown soap, *River City* was slow to engage audience approval and loyalty (BBC Scotland 2003). A high-profile publicity campaign helped the first episode in 2002 to achieve a 45% share of viewers but audiences were irregular throughout the first year (McBeth 2003), peaking at 23% of viewers for the Tuesday evening programme (BBC Scotland 2003, 15). The Thursday slot proved more problematic, and was moved to a new schedule on Friday evenings in January 2005 where audiences stabilised. Both performances benefited from following established BBC soap *Eastenders* in the schedule (Ellis 2000a). An omnibus edition of the show was added to the Sunday afternoon schedule in 2003. Over the last five years viewers have steadily become more regular and increased in numbers, and while it is especially popular with young women it also draws a significant older audience. By 2005 the soap was firmly established with viewers in Scotland alongside *Eastenders*, *Coronation St.* and *Emmerdale*, and was the only soap that year to increase its viewing statistics. A BBC study into audience appreciation found that by 2006 *River City* was considered to be the 'most valued' soap in Scotland (BBC Scotland 2006, 8-9). Following a shaky

start when it was at the mercy of many detractors (Adair 2003), the soap has also begun to garner some critical acclaim, receiving its first Scottish BAFTA nomination in 2006 for Best Drama. It eventually lost out to *Low Winter Sun*, a disappointment for those who had hoped that a BAFTA win would 'bury the series' lacklustre reputation from its early years' (Cornwell 2006).

River City has also helped BBC Scotland achieve some of its other objectives, being variously cited as an example of how the institution is connecting with audiences, enhancing the BBC's reputation and offering portrayals of realistic social diversity. Over the years of its production, a series of public events have included educational exhibitions on the making of *River City*, the cast have appeared for 'Children in Need' charity appeals and Asian characters and characters with disabilities have helped to meet BBC Scotland's targets for reaching all audiences. In response to findings that the soap was particularly popular with 16-24 year olds, screenwriters targeted several storylines aimed specifically at this demographic, many of which were developed in conjunction with another BBC Scotland multimedia initiative, *Teen Commandments*. Social issues such as drug use, teenage pregnancy, bullying, racism, domestic violence and suicide have been credited with being handled in a realistic and sympathetic way. Helplines for viewers that may have been affected by the storylines are broadcast at the end of particularly sensitive programmes and the web site offers further advice and information on the issues raised. Like all BBC Scotland programmes, *River City* is accompanied by a web site which offers background information about the characters and actors, behind-the-scenes information on the filming of the show, frequently asked questions (FAQs), interviews, competitions and gossip about forthcoming episodes. It also offers people the chance to audition for a part on the show and to visit the set in Dumbarton. *River City* is unlikely to be a successful export along the lines of *Monarch of the Glen*, but this was never its intention. As a distinctly Scottish soap, it has achieved a consistent and committed audience who are able to see a plausible and representative portrayal of themselves on screen. Although it was slow to attain an audience, the eventual success of *River City* must be attributed to a number of factors. Careful monitoring of the soap's progress by an independent body, a stringent process of editorial review and a willingness to respond to diverse and evolving audiences demonstrate a real commitment to making it a long-term project. This is similarly evident in aspirational production values which have gone from strength to strength, achieving improved authenticity, in-depth characterisation and a more filmic quality to the programme. *River City* has not only had a profound impact on training and skills for Scotland's creative industries but has also made a significant contribution to BBC Scotland's share of audiences in Scotland. The success of *River City* may be seen as an indicator of what the First Minister meant by culture playing a role in creating a confident nation (McConnell 2003). Ultimately it is a flagship programme for BBC Scotland. However, its success has also highlighted some drawbacks. The recent news that Anne Mensah,

Head of Drama, BBC Scotland, was looking for a drama commission to rival *River City* were seen as a welcome production possibility in some quarters, but a heavy threat to *River City's* chances of growth in others. It is clear that the high production values ascribed to *River City* had a negative impact on the development of new drama projects (BBC Scotland 2003). Is there room for two Scottish soaps on the national network, or can the Scottish creative economy only sustain one?

Concluding Remarks

BBC Scotland is the largest single contributor to the creative industries in Scotland, spending £106 million on television production and £26 million on radio production in 2006. In 2007 BBC Scotland began its move to new premises at Glasgow's Pacific Quay, sparking enthusiasm for the possibility of developing a significant creative hub in the area. With BBC Scotland, SMG and Film City fast becoming established at the new base, and seventeen of the twenty four Scottish TV production companies based within a five mile radius (David Graham & Associates 2003, 40) there are renewed opportunities for collaboration with a range of interested parties and convergence of delivery platforms. Pacific Quay looks set to become a confident creative cluster. However, the peculiar positioning of BBC Scotland within the BBC as a whole means that it struggles to address a particular Scottish polity. It is impossible to look at BBC Scotland policies, because they don't exist. It is often suggested that an increase in indigenous television production would necessarily equate to a more representative vision of the nation. The diversity of Scottish culture suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, it may be fair to say that in representational terms, the broadcasting interests of Glasgow would be better served by an institution based in London than one based in Stornoway, however Scottish the latter may be. But although two urban communities may share more similar experiences than 'Shieldinch' does with 'Glenbogle', it is also clear that indigenous production offers substantial creative, cultural and economic benefits beyond any representational value. Retaining television production in Scotland is crucial to sustaining the creative economy, and a diverse skills base that results from a programme like *River City* is required to underpin creative talents for the whole of the UK. Recent estimates suggest that film and television productions alone have contributed more than £58 million to Edinburgh's economy over the past decade (Vallely 2006). The knock on effects of indigenous productions therefore go significantly beyond any question of whether the output produces positive, negative, stereotypical or subversive representations of national identity. Any representation is after all, a starting point for discussion over what national identity is.

The diverse nature of Scottish society and the things which make Scotland relatively unique make the country a good starting point for testing how BBC's public service broadcasting and publishing might look in the digital age, a test bed

which is instigated by the Borders being the first area to go for full digital switchover. Creative approaches to broadcasting in and for Scotland are likely to be achieved through a greater collaboration of interested parties and the convergence of delivery platforms. The BBC's proposed move of several key genres to mediacity, Salford may soon bring the BBC closer to Scotland but make it increasingly distant from any real power, destabilising its visibility as both a nation and a region. As BBC Scotland and stv begin their relocation to new premises at Glasgow's Pacific Quay, it remains to be seen whether the development will form a collaboration which can challenge Salford's mediacity as an out of London creative cluster. It will certainly bring some useful economies of scale although recent disputes over whether creative activity is best confined to Edinburgh as the capital city, Glasgow as the media base, or other areas of Scotland which may be better placed to represent the cultural diversity of the nation more fully, are divisions which may yet serve to upset the applecart. As decentralisation becomes increasingly a way of life for both 'old' and new media, it may just be that the creativity has been spawned at the BBC, is sufficient to go forth and prosper alone. Given that Ofcom have limited ITV's requirements to regional broadcasting, it will be interesting to see the extent to which the discourse of creativity that Michael Grade stressed at the BBC will follow him to the nations at his new institution. BBC Scotland is examining variations on a basic model of public service broadcasting for their applicability to a digital age. But these developments will soon be contested by the sale of spectrum which may well mean an increased possibility for Scottish local national terrestrial television services. It is important to question how the public can continue to access nationally relevant public service broadcasting and publishing. These processes will affect not only Scottish commerce but also Scottish culture.

Note

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