



# Nation Speaking Unto Nation: Does the media create cultural distance between England and Scotland?

by Douglas Fraser

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## About the author

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## ‘The Future of the Union’

This paper forms part of a series of commissioned research papers for ippr north and ippr's ‘Future of the Union’ project. To mark the 300th anniversary of the Acts of Union, ippr is exploring the state of the Union today, the challenges it faces and its future. We are looking at the economic, constitutional, social and cultural aspects of the Union, as well as changing public attitudes towards it.

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## Introduction

The BBC's motto borrows from the Bible when it states that 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation'. Born when peace across Europe, or a lack of it, was the dominant issue of the day, and when British national identity was near its peak, it is unlikely that Lord Reith had in mind relations between England and Wales or his native Scotland. But British national identity is now at the centre of political debate, and the question is not whether the nations of Britain speak peace unto each other, but whether they speak to each other at all.

Much of the debate about the future of the Union between England and Scotland has focused on the political and constitutional questions. This interest has intensified since the election of a minority Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Scotland in May 2007 – a party that is committed to achieving independence for Scotland. However, the Union is more than just politics and government. An important part of it is made up of the cultural links between the two nations, plus Wales and Northern Ireland – the cultural union. It is this relationship that we seek to explore in this paper, using the media as a lens through which to view the health of the cultural union.

### Role of the media

Cultural links throughout Britain are strong, at least across language, popular culture, music and television drama, and infused, of course, with the same American influences that are pervasive across much of the world. But the question that is of interest here is how much we actually know of what is happening in each other's countries, and what our media tells us about where we belong and with whom.

The media – both print and broadcast – play an important part in giving us a sense of our identity and the community or communities to which we belong. It defines our common culture, and expresses it through a shared conversation. But who is sharing in this conversation? Can we claim to have a British national conversation and what impact has devolution had on it?

The future of the United Kingdom hinges on these questions, far beyond Gordon Brown's personal and party interests in emphasising Britishness, and will last long after he has left the scene. There are questions here about how much an awareness of diversity helps boost the cohesion of the British nation, or if a focus on the potential negatives, such as unequal distribution of resources, could undermine it. Perhaps a bigger threat would be growing ignorance of each other and an indifference towards each other.

In England, questions of cohesion are often played out in discussion of community politics, questioning the success and appropriateness of multiculturalism. There is also a growing focus on an inter-generational disconnect. But what is less remarked upon is a national (and regional) dimension, where growing difference and divergence between the nations and regions of the UK offer opposing forces of growing together and pulling apart.

This is not an abstract concept. For journalists, it is addressed, at least implicitly, every day, and the results are there – or, more significantly, *not* there – for newspaper readers to see. Newspapers deliberately decline to print what is happening in the different parts of the country in which they do not have leadership strengths or do not circulate at all. Devolution has increased divergence and added to the ragbag of anomalies that make Britain British. But it has also combined with technological change within the media industry to pose a serious challenge to the continuing national conversation that defines Britain, with implications for national and regional identity and power that impact far closer to London than Edinburgh or Belfast.

### **Structure of the paper**

The first section looks at the print media, the development of a Scottish national press, and its role in facilitating a national conversation in Scotland. It considers the trend for London-based newspapers to 'put a kilt on' and editionise their Scottish output, and the implications this, and corresponding technological changes, have for the UK's ability to hold a national conversation.

The second section looks at the broadcast media, and especially the BBC, which finds itself in the paradoxical position of being both an influential promoter of Britishness, and having played a key role in building a sense of Scottish identity. It also considers the current debates about the devolution of broadcast powers to the Scottish Parliament, the establishment of a 'Scottish Six' news programme, and again the role that changing technology plays.

Finally, the paper considers the implications of these trends for how nation speaks unto nation within a London-centric United Kingdom.

## 1. The press

The printed press forms a crucial part of the dialogue between policymakers and citizens, and it could have a key role in mediating a *British* 'national conversation'. For this to be the case would suggest that newspapers across the UK reflect the diversity of public life and public policy that exists within the UK. But the notion of a single 'British press' is a mistaken one (Leverhulme Trust 2006), and different constituents of the UK increasingly have their own national conversations, with reporting concentrating on the nation in which the newspaper is sold.

This national focus in part reflects increasingly diverse public lives and policies, particularly since devolution, and may reinforce the notion that Scotland and England in particular are increasingly foreign to one another. But if the idea of a British national press is a misconception, the idea of a Scottish 'national' press is not new, and neither is it the result of devolution.

Scottish newsstands groan under the weight of consumer choice. Where else can you find 12 newspapers on sale every weekday morning, each describing themselves as 'national', with a further 12 on a Sunday? However, this national press long preceded devolution to the Scottish Parliament. Instead, the industry in Scotland grew out of city-based morning dailies: the *Scotsman* for Edinburgh, the *Herald* in Glasgow, Dundee's *Courier* and the *Press and Journal* for Aberdeen. The latter two do not circulate nationally and take a more traditionally local approach to news. But the *Scotsman* and the *Herald* have long pedigrees in Scottish, national and international quality journalism, which they share with their Sunday stablemates.

The *Herald* is the longest established English language daily in the world, having brought news to Clydeside of the later stages of the American Revolution that ended the city merchants' protected tobacco trade. The *Scotsman* was first published in 1817, specifically to protect Scotland's distinct identity and institutions against the risk of becoming merely North Britain. The papers' circulation was built on a strong educating tradition, feeding high literacy rates and engagement with the wider world. And while London's papers had to be printed in London and sent north by train each night, Scottish papers had the advantage of being able to provide readers with the previous night's football results. Separate sports institutions, especially football leagues, have long been a sure way of giving Scottish-based papers an edge in their home market, and the battle to establish credibility in that field has been a key part of the incursion into Scotland of London-based titles.

A generation ago, the dominant issue around Scottish newspapers was ownership, and the question of whether proprietors outside Scotland could undermine the strength of these national institutions. That case was strengthened by Nationalist complaints that a major strand of political debate was not represented in the editorial stance of any newspaper. That debate is no less relevant now, but the Nationalists today enjoy editorial support, while the more general argument has become less salient and distinctive, primarily because the London media has had so many foreign owners, most notably Rupert Murdoch. Globalisation makes foreign ownership and remote headquarters a factor and a concern in almost every sector of the economy. But proprietors can also find that too much meddling in the local character of their titles is no way to further their commercial interests – a factor that can affect them anywhere around the world.

It was long assumed that newspapers would benefit from devolution. Indeed, cynics suggested the widespread editorial enthusiasm for the creation of a Scottish Parliament was commercial self-interest for the companies that owned the papers, and journalistic self-interest for those who anticipated the consequent jobs. It has not worked quite like that.

But first, it is worth noting the extent to which the Scottish media was the forum for debate about Scotland's constitutional future, a vital means of building up a powerful sense of national identity, and then a competition between titles to be the most enthusiastic cheerleader for devolution by the time of the September 1997 referendum. Only the *Daily Mail* refused to get behind the Scottish newspapers' campaign for a 'Yes-Yes' vote. Contrast that with Wales, which has a much smaller 'national' media, and where the case for devolution was harder to win with the public. Even more so,

one of the key reasons for why the referendum on setting up an elected regional assembly in North East England hit such a sour note with the electorate was that few regional newspapers were campaigning with any enthusiasm for devolution, and such media had limited clout when set against the collective curled lip of the London-dominated English news media.

The enthusiasm for devolution in Scotland quickly hit its own sour note. Between September 1997 and the first elections in May 1999, the editorial mood in Scotland had swung to take on a sceptical and strongly negative tone. Partly, this was the not-so-noble tradition of Scottish national self-flagellation, with a strand of belief that anything home-grown must be sub-standard, and hence the Members of the Scottish Parliament were labelled 'numpties'. The Scottish Labour Party was notable for obligingly selecting candidates that fitted that stereotype, while blocking more independent minds from entering Parliament under its party flag.

There was also the journalists' habit of constructing story narratives by building up institutions and people in order to knock them down again. Paradoxically, that reflected the influence of London-based papers. The *Scotsman* and *Daily Record* (the latter then a clear market leader in the red-top market) were taken over by journalists who saw London journalistic practices as superior and wished to shake up what they saw as Scottish complacency and consensus. Under new ownership, the *Scotsman* took a perverse pleasure in systematically alienating each of its core readership blocks, and the *Record* then recruited the *Scotsman's* editor, who had come from the *Daily Mail*, demonstrating how papers were crowding into the middle market to combat circulation problems – as, indeed, they were tending to do in London also.

The relationship between the new Parliament and newspapers became considerably worse over the repeal of Section 28 (confusingly also known in Scotland as Section 2A), which had, since 1986, banned the 'promotion' of homosexuality from school classrooms. Several tabloids – mostly the *Daily Record*, the *Scottish Sun* and the *Daily Mail* – weighed in with extraordinary ferocity on the side of social conservatism. They were seeking to use their clout to bully the inexperienced members of a young parliament. Ultimately, they failed and the repeal was passed by a wide margin. But it created an unpleasant climate for journalists and politicians to work together in this supposedly new Scotland.

Given this context, London-based newspapers have long eyed Scotland warily. While they have circulated in Scotland, their presence has long been well below the market penetration they enjoy in England, again undermining the idea of a unified *British* press. According to a recent article in the *British Journal of Sociology*, the *Daily Express* had been dominant in the 1960s by running a Scottish edition, but both it and the *Daily Mail* retreated south of the border in the 1970s and lost substantial market share. This left the way open for the Glasgow-based *Daily Record* – a sister paper of the *Daily Mirror* – to dominate daily circulation throughout Scotland for more than 30 years (MacInnes *et al* 2007).

However, technology has changed the market substantially. From the 1980s, London-based papers were able to print at remote presses around Britain, not only allowing them to print later in the day, but to vary their content for regional editions. Weakening of print unions and the development of production software made such edition changes increasingly easy. This was the cue for the London press to enter the Scottish market with tailored 'Scottish' editions.

News International was at the fore in running a Scottish edition of the *Sun* and then the *Sunday Times*. The *Sun* in Scotland arrived with its distinctive breezy and brash style in 1987, and through its story-getting, sensationalism, price-cutting, its consistency when compared with the *Record*, and by aligning itself with its target readership's growing sense of Scottish identity, it overtook the *Record* as the market leader during 2006.

Ahead of the 1992 election, it had realised that its appeal to the *Sun* readers who formed the backbone of the English Tory vote was out of tune with anti-Conservative sentiment in Scotland, so, bizarrely, the *Sun* became the first national newspaper to endorse the Scottish National Party. There were inevitable editorial contradictions for the few who bothered to read editions north and south of the border, but by the 1997 election, owner Rupert Murdoch had decreed that his titles, including the

*Scottish Sun*, would back New Labour, and it has since been loyal to that brand, even to the point of portraying the SNP symbol as a hangman's noose on the day of the 2007 Scottish elections.

The *Sunday Times* ran a Scottish edition ahead of the launch of *Scotland on Sunday* (in 1987, as the *Scotsman's* stablemate) and the *Sunday Herald* (in 1999), and sustained a modest edge in circulation through most of that period. In other newspaper groups, the Scottish edition of the *Daily Mail* made significant inroads into the Scottish indigenous papers' circulation, currently running at around 120,000. This process was clearly underway years before the arrival of the devolved parliament in Edinburgh, but that accelerated the trend for several papers.

The *Daily Telegraph* demonstrated the most obvious change of gear, recognising the arrival of devolution by running a Scottish edition that changes three or four news pages. It has since been run by a Scottish editor and political columnist – Alan Cochrane – noted for his hostility to Scottish home rule. The *Times* stepped up its coverage, editionising heavily, and new Scottish presses in 2007 have given it a new platform on which to step up its challenge to Scottish indigenous titles. The *Daily Express*, seeking to find a niche in this competitive market, began to shift in December 2007 towards a position of being strongly sympathetic to the SNP.

However, the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Financial Times* have refused to run tartan editions. They sought to serve their Scottish readers with minimal coverage of the country, often days or weeks after others had covered it, though the *Financial Times* recognised there was a parallel growth in Edinburgh's position as a financial centre. It spoke, at least implicitly, for other London-based titles, when it recruited its Scottish correspondent from its ranks of foreign reporters, coming to Edinburgh from a posting in New Delhi.

To the latter three papers, Scotland had become a far-off country of which they knew little. Devolution had changed things, it was clear, but as with much foreign coverage, news desks could only latch on to two or three narratives about Scotland at any one time – the 'heroin and haggis' approach, whereby anything other than grim urban grit or Highland whimsy was unlikely to get coverage. This limits the understanding of Scotland, its public life and public policy, by those reading the London edition of newspapers. Newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Independent* continued to give the same cursory coverage of Scotland that they tend to give the regions of England. But the papers that had invested money and effort in editionising were taking the opportunity to strip out almost all their Scottish coverage from editions sold in England.

The result has been increasingly separate conversations and limited coverage of events north of the border. It continues a trend that began in the late 1980s, rather than being purely a consequence of devolution, but the existence of a new 'Scottish' institution to cover undoubtedly sped up the process.

### **A distorted view**

The combination of devolution and editionising technology has had a profound effect on how Britain understands itself. Those in England who learn about their country from their morning papers will have very little knowledge, and even less understanding, of the fundamental changes in Scotland. They will know of the controversies: over the cost of the Holyrood parliament building, and the collapse of Henry McLeish's leadership in 2001. They will remember the sudden death of Donald Dewar a year earlier. They might be aware that Scotland had an indoor smoking ban a year before England, and judging by the few news reports and columnists who play to London commissioning editors' prejudices, they are likely to have the impression that the Scottish Parliament wasted its early years on banning fox hunting, the Section 28 row, and reforming the law on land ownership in a 'Mugabe-style land grab' (a Conservative MSP's claim that was widely used). But of so much else going on in Scotland, the English public will remain oblivious.

More recently, there have been developments in devolution that could have a major effect on England, yet they are pigeon-holed as Scottish and do not make it into English editions. For instance, Gordon Brown announced in a BBC interview in February 2008 that he was giving his support to the setting up of a review of devolved powers, explicitly acknowledging the case for the Scottish Parliament to balance its spending powers with more financial accountability for raising money. The

profound implications that could have for taxation and the distribution of Treasury funds throughout the UK were not reported in English editions of the *Times* or the *Telegraph*, while, in that case at least, the story was to be found in all editions of the *Guardian*.

Later that same month, when ippr north published a report recommending that the government needed to address the position of England within a post-devolved UK as part of its plans for future constitutional reform (Kenny *et al* 2008), it made front-page news in Scotland, but received much less media attention in the country at which it was targeted. The Scottish media see even England's constitutional politics as being of relevance to them, and many London-based editors often seem happy to go along with that, leaving the issue north of the border. This is of considerable political significance. Newspapers are among the means by which politicians communicate with each other, as well as with their electorates. It was a source of frustration for Labour's former First Minister Jack McConnell when he could be reported in Scottish editions of the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, but could not communicate through the editions of these London-based papers being read in Whitehall.

It is not just a question of what is not covered but also what editors choose to cover that could have a potentially fundamental impact on Britain's cohesion. After years of the Scottish media wondering when the English would wake up to the apparent public spending-per-head bias in Scotland's favour, Gordon Brown's rise to the premiership at last lodged that firmly in the minds of English editors and increasingly, one assumes, their readers. There are complexities to the statistics and to this debate that are rarely reflected, including the significance of the Prime Minister's announcement on Holyrood's tax powers in February 2008; but for London news purposes, it is enough simply to assert that Scotland is a subsidy junkie, dependent on so-called 'English taxpayers', and that while Gordon Brown can inflict cuts on a troubled National Health Service in England, his Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituents are being feather-bedded with higher health, education and transport spending, an absence of student fees, provision of long-term care of the elderly, and access to expensive drugs the English do not have. A country that has long been accused of having a grievance culture is now the subject of grievance from editors based in London.

Tellingly, neither the editorial response nor that of English MPs was to say the Scots are right to adopt an approach to public services that is more universalist than the targeting approach of the Whitehall administration. The SNP's response to this was to highlight a poll carried out by ITV's *Tonight* show in January 2008, which found a large majority of the residents of England's most northerly town, Berwick, would prefer to 'join' Scotland so that they could benefit from Scottish public service standards.

While the editionising of news allowed Scottish news to be stripped out of English editions, it also offered the opportunity to run articles not intended for Scottish readers, from the jingoistic coverage of England's football World Cup campaign in 2006, to those hostile to Scots such as Ann Leslie in the *Daily Mail*. She wrote in March 2000 that Scotland was on course to become 'some tiny, relatively unimportant nation, on a par with Finland', its identity defined by shortbread tins and tartan souvenirs and that the 'auld enemy, England, was, in fact, their saviour, and – but for the chattering-class posturing, could still be so now' (quoted in *Sunday Herald* 2000). Wisely, this was stripped out of the *Mail's* Scottish edition and replaced by another column, illustrating that editionising is not a one-way street of keeping the English in the dark about Scottish attitudes.

Such coverage can make the two nations seem increasingly distant from each other, but can also actively create cross-border tension. For example, by the time of the 2007 Holyrood election, even arch-Conservatives in the London press, such as *Telegraph* columnist Simon Heffer, were coming to the view that independence for Scotland was to be welcomed, arguing the Jocks clearly needed a harsh dose of reality (Heffer 2007). The new SNP administration had an interest in encouraging the attacks, as it fuelled the English nationalism that helps their cause of driving a wedge between the countries. Furthermore, the spending review in autumn 2007 produced a much tighter budget constraint than in the first eight years of devolution. This combined with different political parties in power in Westminster and Holyrood to raise the political temperature, with little sign that London-based newspapers have any interest in moving beyond the most simplistic of understandings.



But do Scottish newspapers do any better in enhancing this conversation with their coverage of England? The answer is probably, yes. England, and London in particular, shapes the agendas of news editors throughout the UK. Stories running in the UK broadcast media are often picked up as being of interest to Scots. The entertainment and celebrity staple of much that fills the news pages is dominated by what happens in London, for the Scottish media as much as England. But reducing staffing levels on Scottish newspapers has reduced the numbers based in England. Indeed, they were only ever based in London. The Scottish media's view of the English regions has long been mediated through London, and if London judged Birmingham to be provincial, it rubbed off in the Scottish coverage.

Likewise, Scotland's view of the world has tended to be through a London prism. While the foreign pages are shaped by what is available through the news agencies, the indigenous media has sought to highlight different commercial interests for Scotland, particularly on business pages. The Scottish media has failed, however, to establish a successful pattern of reporting European institutions that affect Scottish domestic life directly. Europe has not been a successful area for the London-based media either, as it struggles to report on the politics of institutions that progress by building consensus – the reverse of Britain's tradition of robust debate and disagreement. But for Scotland there are now no Brussels-based correspondents, which contrasts markedly with the Spanish region of Catalonia, which had seven at last count.

In many senses, the question at the heart of this paper should not be so much whether the media is contributing to England and Scotland seeming more culturally distant, as whether *London* and Scotland are drifting apart. And if the trend is towards Scotland seeing the UK through London eyes, that is even more so the case for England's regional press. For example, the floods of summer 2007 put Sheffield, Gloucester and Oxford in the news, but missed Hull. The Humberside town commissioned a PR firm to change that, and its analysis of the identity problem facing such northern towns is that the old industrial stereotype is gone, but London news desks are not sure of what has replaced it (*Economist* 2007).

Indeed, reducing editorial resource could be having a profound understanding not only of the country in which the more local media operates but also in its knowledge of local patches. A study at Cardiff University found that local papers are increasingly taking national stories and giving them a local spin, rather than going out of the office to find local stories. Analysis of 30 local newspapers based in West Yorkshire found a shift in election coverage so that three-quarters of it was about local candidates, issues and constituencies in 1987 but by 2005 such coverage represented barely a third, the remainder being versions of national stories (Franklin 2006).

Of course, the biggest change in the media over recent years, and particularly over the eight years of devolution, has been around the growth in online media. Scottish newspapers have become more difficult to find on English newsstands, but very easy to read online from anywhere, as is the BBC's online reporting, down to city level. For those who wish to read about Scottish news, it has never been easier to find and in great detail. But that throws up a problem experienced by all news media in the internet age: it shifts any sense of community we might have from being defined by geography to being defined by common interests, many of them very narrow in scope. If this is reduced simply to the elements in which we know we are already interested as consumers of news, then we will be unlikely to find out about things we did not know might interest us. Even if nation is speaking unto nation, that does not count for much if no one can be bothered to listen.

## 2. Broadcast media

The broadcast media too can have a powerful influence on how we understand ourselves. Take, for example, John Swinney, former leader of the Scottish National Party and now a senior Cabinet minister. He explains that he was switched on to the nationalist cause in his mid-teens, around the late 1970s, when watching sport on television. A victory for a Scottish athlete was billed a British victory, but a loss was Scottish. Little did David Coleman realise that he might be contributing, decades later, to the break-up of Britain. Any Scot watching sport from that era will remember it, though not everyone let it become the dominant theme of their adult lives.

### The BBC in Scotland

The British Broadcasting Corporation in Scotland represents a paradox. Here is the most pervasive and influential institution of Britishness, entering most homes in the land daily. Yet the Corporation is also the institution that has, arguably, done more than any other to build a sense of Scottish identity. It is partly that *Good Morning Scotland* on BBC Radio Scotland sets the political agenda for the day, in the way Radio Four's *Today* programme does for the Westminster political village. The programme's news bulletins have long brought into homes a reminder of the distinctiveness of Scottish life. There are reports from the Scottish courts, others about the Scottish education and health systems, on Scotland's separate local authority system, occasionally its churches.

Documentary features on Radio Scotland run on Scottish history and language, there is Gaelic-language programming for the few who understand it, and radio has been a vital way of building an audience for Scottish traditional music. This has moved it on from the kitschy teuchter singalongs of yesteryear, giving airtime to a reworking of Celtic music with influences from country music to salsa, while helping to put Gaelic into the UK charts.

Since its founding in 1976, Radio Scotland has grown to become an important part of the nation's conversation with itself, often trying to please too many audiences, occasionally too parochial and subject to outbreaks of Caledonian cringing, but essential, over time, to cementing the national story as the dominant one. By contrast, the BBC during the 1970s was setting up small local radio stations in England that were deliberately parochial and did far less to build regional identities. The Corporation could have created BBC Radio Edinburgh alongside BBC Radio Glasgow, which would have made for a very different conversation, and played to stereotyped competition between the cities. But that division of markets was left to commercial radio.

Clearly this all predates devolution, but one effect of devolution has been for broadcasters, especially the BBC, to take greater care to end the confusions about which education or health system it was describing on its UK news bulletins. It has also sought to achieve greater sensitivity to national identities among its sports commentators, often by offering different commentaries to matches where that most matters.

The confusions, or the causes of mild offence, are now less frequent, with English stories or English and Welsh stories being more clearly badged as such. But there has been a parallel to the newspapers' retreat from covering Scotland for an English and Welsh audience. If the UK media were covering Britain equally, population share would suggest that every tenth story about education or health would be about Scotland, but the reality is far from that. Such a quota calculation is anathema to news editors anyway. They are seeking stories that are of interest to their audience, and Scotland is judged to be of interest only when it reflects or impacts on the majority population. Hence, newspapers and broadcasters gave prominence to the incoming SNP administration's decision to end Scotland's graduate endowment scheme – which itself was a rowing back from tuition fees in 2000 – not because it was of interest to Scottish viewers, or because it affected their lives, but because it could be expected to get a reaction from those in the rest of the UK who face £3,000 annual tuition fees and higher to come. However, concern about the issue is great enough that the BBC Trust has commissioned a Nations' impartiality review in response to their Audience Councils raising questions about insufficient coverage of the devolved nations on news and other factual programmes (BBC Trust 2007).

## The 'Scottish Six' debate

Given its power in communications, we might expect the BBC to be the main vehicle for a British national conversation, but in reality the BBC has found itself awkwardly caught between its British and Scottish roles, most prominently over plans to create a 'Scottish Six'. This was a broadcast equivalent of newspaper editionising. It would have meant an hour-long programme at 6pm on BBC1 in Scotland, mixing international, UK and Scottish news to a running order that suits a Scottish audience. The Scottish Six would replace the long-established pattern of a half-hour of UK and international news followed by half an hour of regional news programmes, including *Reporting Scotland* (national Scottish news) at 6:30pm. Under current arrangements a major health or education story about England can run on the UK news, without any explanation of its lack of relevance to Scotland, while an important Scottish news story runs after UK sport and weather.

The mix of international, UK and Scottish news sought by supporters of a Scottish Six has long been possible on the radio, but the technology allowing BBC Scotland at its Glasgow headquarters to have access to UK and international TV reports only became available in the past ten years. Senior figures in BBC Scotland and its advisory council favoured planning for a Scottish Six programme, but it faced opposition from BBC headquarters in London and also from Westminster. Scottish MPs had been stung by the sharply reduced attention given to them and to Westminster in the wake of devolution, and argued that a Scottish Six programme would give undue prominence and status to their Nationalist rivals. Indeed, the memoirs of BBC director-general John Birt showed he had lobbied Tony Blair himself to win Downing Street support for blocking the Scottish aspiration for a Scottish Six programme – an extraordinary and unparalleled breach of the Corporation's independence from political party interest (*Sunday Herald* 2002a, 2002b).

The cause of the Scottish Six has totemic value. Behind it is an assertion that Scotland wants to see not only itself, but the rest of Britain and the world, through its own eyes rather than those of editors in London. By this argument, the education systems of France or Denmark could be as relevant to Scottish viewers as those of England. For those who oppose it, it is equally symbolic of the unionist wish for the state broadcaster, however independent, to retain a flagship daily news broadcast. That line of argument is tied in with the nostalgia for the era, until the 1990s, of no more than four TV channels. The lack of choice forced viewers into at least an awareness of the national conversation that was represented by their news and current affairs output, and occasionally a shared national experience in front of the Great British television set – starting with the Queen's coronation in 1953, building the giant audiences for the soap *Coronation Street*, and peaking with the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Specials* of the 1970s. From that viewpoint, nothing should be done to encourage a fracturing of the traditional 6pm BBC1 news slot.

The Scottish Six idea has been raised again by the new SNP administration at Holyrood, using it as part of the argument to have broadcasting powers devolved from Westminster (Scottish Government 2007). This makes an implicit connection between the prospects of Scottish politicians having devolved responsibility and politicians making direct programming demands on broadcast schedulers, which is reason enough to be concerned about further devolution of power over broadcasting. If Scotland were to have broadcasting powers, with some influence over the BBC and commercial broadcasting, it would be important to absorb conventions built up in London of regulation and influence at a very long arm's length. It would, meanwhile, be a challenge to figure out how this would be exercised by dual controls in Edinburgh and London, particularly if it faced resistance in London.

A new digital channel in Gaelic from 2008, which has backing from the Westminster government, points towards the Scottish Six debate being rooted in the broadcasting environment of the late 1990s and overtaken by technology. How long before BBC Scotland, and other parts of the UK, have their own digital channels, offering viewers the option of either a Scottish Six or the Six O'Clock News from London? Cable television already offers viewers throughout the UK an option over which of the BBC's regional opt-outs they want to see. It would be strange for this one area to be denied the extension of consumer choice. However, if it were to happen and join in the multi-channel cacophony, it would be merely one more example of the impact of technology fracturing and dispersing the audience, so that any national conversation is similarly disrupted.

### **A sector in poor health?**

In 2007, following the Holyrood elections, a lively debate began about the problems within Scottish broadcasting more broadly. The most obvious issue is the poor health of the television production sector. Ofcom's figures showed that the four licensed broadcasters, BBC, ITV, Channel Four and Five, halved their spending on production in Scotland (Ofcom 2007). In 2004, Scottish productions accounted for 6 per cent of the total investment in UK originated material, and by 2006, that had fallen to 3 per cent, while population share would suggest there might be a 9 per cent share.

It is a pattern that runs contrary to the pressure to send TV production out of London, which was intended not only for other parts of the UK to benefit from the creative industries, but also so that programmes could be made with an alternative, non-London viewpoint (Thompson 2004). The reality, even for those network productions made in Scotland, is that London technical crews are often sent to Scotland to make them. While many Scots go south to work there, there is not a critical mass of expertise to sustain the industry in Scotland. This is no way to ensure a non-metropolitan viewpoint is reflected on the airwaves. And a new threat to regions and nations comes paradoxically from the BBC's current strategy to devolve more spending outside London than ever before. This involves pouring resource into its Salford centre, which could be great news for broadcasting and the creative industries in Greater Manchester, but not so good for other nations and regions, Scotland included.

### **Attempts at revival**

A response to this, and particularly to the fall in share of production spend, has been the setting up by SNP First Minister Alex Salmond of a Scottish Broadcasting Commission, headed by a former head of BBC Scotland news, Blair Jenkins, with appointees from opposing parties including former First Minister Henry McLeish (Scottish Broadcasting Commission 2007). Nationalists see this as a means of making the case for gaining devolved power over broadcasting. While the Commission could argue the opposite, its interim report suggested that, as a political manoeuvre, it was proving effective. Even before the Commission's work was under way, its impact was reflected in a speech by BBC director-general Mark Thompson, at the opening of the new BBC Scotland headquarters in Glasgow. With Prime Minister Gordon Brown also attending, reminding the BBC of its Britishness, the corporation's boss set ambitious targets for Scotland's share of production to grow, without making clear how these would be achieved (Thompson 2007).

Alex Salmond returned to the issue in a Royal Television Lecture at Scottish Television headquarters in early 2008, with an attack on terrestrial broadcasters for failing to win the right to broadcast Scotland's qualifying matches in the football World Cup, saying the only such matches they could see would be for the English team. This is more than sport, he argued. It is about a cultural bond within Scotland – a point conceded at Westminster with the creation of 'Crown Jewel' events, including the Wimbledon Tennis Championships, the Grand National, the FA and Scottish FA cup finals, which are required by UK law to be reserved for terrestrial broadcast.

A report published by the Commission on 26 March 2008 backed that sporting theme with a poll showing 84 per cent of people wanted such matches on terrestrial TV. A previous publication by the Commission had highlighted the extent to which the BBC was badging productions as being Scottish when they had neither Scottish content nor the benefits to the country of production facilities being located north of the border. *Waterloo Road*, a BBC 1 drama set in Rochdale, was the most obvious example, designated as Scottish because its commissioning producer had an office in the BBC's Glasgow office. The Corporation's management acknowledged the issue, promising to redefine the way it counts its regional and national share of production, though Mark Thompson also pointed out that Scots should not assume all productions in Scotland should be about Scotland.

Broadcast may prove to be a key battleground in the developing relationship between England and Scotland. But the debate from the 1990s has already been superseded by technology, and that will continue to be the case. Any attempt to construct and control a national conversation through legislative and regulatory control of broadcasting is likely to be overtaken by multiple channels and online provision targeted at niche audiences, and as such would be seen as an anachronism in the fractured media context of the 21st century.

### 3. Conclusion

Journalists sitting on the newsdesks of the nation – whatever nation – do not spend much time intellectualising about what they do. They are trained to recognise a good story when they see one, rather than being able to explain why. Deadlines demand their attention, they are processing a vast amount of information, and being required to think and justify what they do could paralyse the process, let alone some of the individuals concerned. A set of common news values determine what makes the news priorities, but these are rarely discussed, reviewed or reflected upon, except in the pub afterwards, and then only to note how cynical or callous they can be.

Yet it is on these newsdesks where much of the national conversation is defined, telling us in print and on the airwaves what we have in common, what matters to us collectively, and about the people with whom we share a common bond. News values assume that the prospect of the Lockerbie bomber being returned to Libya matters deeply in Scotland but has little resonance in England, and that flooding which represents a major crisis in England is of only limited interest in Scotland, at least until insurance costs go up. There is less interest in the debate on multi-culturalism or an archbishop's views on sharia law, and while fear of gun crime stalks English city streets, Scotland's interest is in airguns and knives.

Technological change has had a profound and multi-faceted effect on the media, forcing us to ask how it is possible to have a national conversation and develop a common set of values when the audience is fracturing. This is an issue for geographical cohesion but also for demographic or generational links. Newspapers already struggle to find people aged under 30 willing to buy a copy (Curtice and Mair 2008). That same age group is finding its news online – if not ignoring it – effectively creating an individualised news service.

So the question of geographical conversations being broken up, and the way the media portrays them, is part of a much wider challenge to a sense of a shared national culture, playing into the debate being led by Gordon Brown on Britishness (Ministry of Justice 2007). Scotland is a test bed of how the new media, new technology, new politics and new devolution create or destroy a national conversation and a common British culture. The lessons from devolution, and from 40 years of growing Scottish identity, also have a lot to say about the regional future for England, at a time when – if the early indications from Gordon Brown are to be followed through – localised and devolved power is moving to become a focus of Whitehall thinking.

The resounding 'no' to devolution in North East England should have sparked a thorough review within government, not only of what went wrong, but of what institutions and cultures are required for devolved power to go right. A limited regional media was a crucial part of that story. And the reason why the North East has such a limited sense of its own identity, and its own 'regional conversation' (which deserves to be put in quote marks, because it seems such a strange concept in England), is perhaps the dominance of London as the focus of England's media.

More than in any similar large country, the national conversation is mediated by people who do not get out of its capital city enough. Is it possible that London, in establishing itself as the most cosmopolitan and outward-looking of world cities, suffers simultaneously from a metropolitan myopia about its own hinterland – English as well as Scottish? What else could explain the disproportionate national coverage of the London mayoral election in 2008, to the exclusion of other issues being handled by English local government with the ballot on the same day? And could it be that disdain for the provinces, the regions and 'the sticks' is infected by a commercial interest for London-based newspapers and London-based broadcasters in stifling regional aspirations, where new sources of news could stimulate regional media?

Devolution in Scotland has not delivered for its indigenous newspapers as much as many had expected. But for the London-based media trying to put a kilt on their titles, it can be an expensive nuisance, often winning them fewer readers than their sales even outside the UK, and they are unlikely to want to repeat that in regions around England.

It is not yet possible to say if devolution, divergence and difference have underpinned the UK's union or undermined it. The media plays a major role in defining questions of identity politics, but in doing so, this has become confused with commercial pressures and technological opportunity. The forces of both separation and cohesion are evident in the debate and in developments around the media. And so it should be, if Britain is to function as a coherent nation. A healthy balance between diversity and unity are surely desirable within any community.

But the early years of devolution have shown division to be more apparent than unity, and ignorance of each other to be a bigger factor than increased interest. Thus, Gordon Brown's assertion of shared British values may only serve to highlight them as being at risk. Does this matter? Yes, and beyond Anglo-Scottish relations. The question of how a nation has an understanding of itself and its shared values at a time of a fracturing media and political disengagement leads to pressure on politicians to seek nationalistic solutions to provide the glue of their nation's cohesion and foundations for the powers of the state. For some, that can be xenophobic. For Gordon Brown in his *Governance of Britain* Green Paper it has meant an artificial and unconvincing emphasis on symbols of Britishness and a quest to find 'common British values' (Ministry of Justice 2007). But his Britishness does not so far seem to be about celebrating diversity. He wants to honour armed forces veterans rather than celebrate Britishness in either a Hindu temple or the Welsh Assembly. In fact, the subject of devolution is conspicuously absent from the Green Paper. It is telling that this one-time champion of devolution has only visited the Scottish Parliament for private Labour Party meetings and an appearance with Microsoft's Bill Gates.

An innovative approach to Britishness would be to plug it into the evolving distribution of power, particularly outside London, and celebrate diversity and the ragbag of anomalies that make Britain British. Challenged by its own internal pressures, the media is sure to play a role in that, though not necessarily a positive one. One of the things that will be most interesting to watch is not only how Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast relate to London, and how Newcastle, Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham define changing relations with their capital's institutions, but how these national capitals relate to each other and to English cities in forming alliances and having their own conversations as a counterweight to London's dominance.

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