

# **Submission from Angus Dixon, Senior Lecturer in Broadcast and Online Journalism at Glasgow Caledonian University, Programme Leader of the BA Multimedia Journalism course and leader of the TV Production module.**

## **Scottish Broadcasting**

I have presented papers at MeCCSA 2023 and the Media Industries conference in 2024 and have a forthcoming journal article on the changing nature of both TV production and the workforce. These are based on my own research and my personal experience of over 20 years as a freelance journalist and TV producer. I am also supervising Ph.D research into the BBC's out-of-London commissioning.

My brief observations on the focuses of the inquiry:

- Broadcasting market in Scotland and the implications of new technologies and changing regulatory and market environment on broadcasting across Scotland.

TV production in Scotland is particularly vulnerable to recent changes as it has traditionally relied heavily on volume production of daytime and mid-market 'formatted' or 'unscripted' programmes and I would cite two programmes I've worked on as evidence of that.

Location, Location, Location has been made out of Glasgow since 2000 first by Ideal World, which then merged with Wark Clements to become IWC before being bought over by RDF Media in 2005, which became a subsidiary of Zodiak Media in 2010 and was then bought by the French company Banjay in 2016 This pattern of consolidation from a small, flexible, locally owned independent created in the aftermath of the 1990 Broadcasting Act to a small outpost of a foreign owned media conglomerate is fairly typical of how the UK's independent sector has evolved. Although recently recommissioned it's position as a schedule mainstay for Channel 4 has been under threat recently as the sort of mid-schedule mid-market programmes it typifies are those being hit hardest by the move to streaming. The production costs are too high to be met by advertising and streaming sales beyond the UK are of limited appeal.

Antiques Roadtrip has been made by STV Productions since 2010 and broke the mould of Scottish TV production in that it was the first programme made for the BBC by the in-house production arm of the rival commercial network. It has since made over 32 series including a celebrity version. It suffers from a similar problem with streaming but its cheaper budget and the resilience of daytime TV's older audiences' loyalty to scheduling means it continues to survive. But as the older audience diminishes and also moves, albeit very slowly, to the streamers, it too is under pressure and with ITV has announcing a radical shake up of its daytime TV output, the BBC may have to eventually follow suit.

There are two other threats to these programmes; AI means the standardised division of labour production for these kinds of programmes are increasingly susceptible to automation in an effort to drive down labour costs. The strict formats of the programmes means that increasingly a rough edit of the programme can be made in much quicker time reducing the need for editors and edit producers.

Secondly, the overall threat to PSBs from falling advertising and reductions in license fee income means that broadcasters' commitment to out-of-London commissioning is going to be sorely tested. As it is, there has been anecdotal and increasingly, empirical evidence that broadcasters' commitment to the policy has been less than ethical and the laudable aim of increasing skills and developing the workforce in Scotland has been often circumvented by importing staff and also productions (and their IP) into Scotland.

There is an irony in the major UK broadcasters worrying about Netflix dominance pushing out British stories and relocating British IP to the US, when the Nations and Regions of the UK have seen a similar process for nearly twenty years.

Increasingly shows on Youtube and the streamers are moving towards what looks like traditional TV, the 'broadcastification' of online video as it's been termed. But the issue is funding, unless you have already monetised a following online the initial costs of making a factual programme are prohibitive. Branding and corporate content are now seen as a growth area for TV production as they have the money to fund content but the downside is the resultant loss in independent editorial control and a loss of critical and investigative reporting. Anecdotally in Scotland, with over 50% of the TV workforce not having worked in a year there's been several freelancers getting this kind of work and production companies now increasingly pitching for this kind of work.

- The development of the screen sector, PSBs and the Scottish Government's role in this.

Although the Scottish government through Creative and Screen Scotland has been involved in funding film production, thanks to the devolution settlement its role in broadcasting has been limited. STV did controversially receive funds in 2010 from the Scottish government towards a literacy programme, but Holyrood most recently

ruled out any funding for news in the beleaguered commercial sector. There is a proposal for a Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute but currently the Scottish government has no plans to fund it, despite the Welsh government giving £50,000 to a similar scheme.

There is the Broadcast Content Fund, worth about £4m and offering individual grants of £10,000 - £500,000 though that covers both drama and 'unscripted' productions. It has tended to fund feature length documentaries rather than TV production.

Perhaps, in the spirit of the original 1990 Broadcasting Act, a wiser approach for government funded agencies may be funding genuine Scottish independent TV companies (not offshoots of large media conglomerates) to investigate how they might monetise digital content straight to consumers and provide development money for potential ideas.

In Europe, increasingly governments have been more willing to regulate to protect broadcasters against streamers (in France Netflix has agreed to carry live French state TV to try and increase their subscription base) and the European Broadcasting Union has called on digital platforms to keep a focus on output reflecting local cultures. However, as stated above it's hard to see how, under the current reserved broadcasting set up, the Scottish government can have much influence on this.

- Skills development in the screen and broadcasting sectors.

In traditional film and TV production, I don't believe there is a skills shortage but there is a labour surplus. The workforce in Scotland is skilled and more importantly flexible, leading to in TV Production to what has been called 'the Scottish CV'. Over their career most producers and directors will have worked across a wide variety of formats and subject matters. Personally speaking, I've worked on live politics and sport, history docu-dramas, blue light observational documentaries, childrens' programmes and consumer rights programmes. The workforce in the South East has been able to specialise because of a higher volume of programmes in specific genres but conversely the workforce maybe less flexible than in Scotland.

Past attempts to specialise certain types of production (and their skills) in Scotland like the now defunct BBC Scotland Childrens' and Specialist Factual departments, have ceased as production levels have declined and the creation of BBC Studios has meant closing internal departments to reduce overheads.

The perception by commissioners that regional talent wasn't sufficiently skilled, particularly at senior levels (series producers and execs) in these specialist areas was often disputed by those who worked with imported senior production staff. The criticism was it was a lot more to do with informal relationships (a mainstay of TV recruitment) than objective levels of skill. However, there have been several schemes to develop skills for these roles in the regions but unfortunately there's now not the productions to hire them on.

One of the frustrating recent developments is the announcement of several training programmes which implies the reason work isn't coming to Scotland is a weakness of the workforce, when the reality is that there isn't the same amount of money to fund programme making, and the programmes that are being made in Scotland, like *The Traitors*, are not employing Scottish talent in the spirit of the out-of-London commissioning policy. So you can offer as much training as you like but it's pointless if the jobs aren't there. A side issue to that is that historically there was no onus on commissions to go to genuine Scottish based companies, so productions were parachuted into Scotland through brass plating, along with the senior talent and then the talent and the IP would disappear when the production ended. This has meant, that as money has got tighter there has been even less willingness to gamble by hiring Scottish talent.

There are two other issues with training, one is that a lot of it is on the job training, therefore it's a route to cheap labour and as stated before the chances of meaningful employment beyond it are very limited. And secondly any recent trainee is entering a workforce where much more established workers are often taking pay cuts and downgraded roles in order to keep working. The money being spent on training would arguably be better used to put into production budgets to allow to hire more staff or pay better wages to those who are working. Or fund development of how those in traditional TV might move into expanding areas like digital content creation.

- The BBC Charter and Framework renewal process: what should a future BBC deliver for Scotland, particularly in reference to the above points.

I think the most obvious point is to stick to the spirit of out-of-London commissioning. A simple rule like to receive funding, all production companies must have their main office in Scotland. I suspect it's a bit late for that but had that rule been introduced and enforced 10-15 years ago the production sector up here would be much more resilient to the current downturn. I think other rules like the majority of senior talent must be based in Scotland would also help. Even just Ofcom policing the current system properly would help.

Despite the fallout of non-license fee payment from the independence referendum, there is still over £300 million pounds of license fee revenue raised in Scotland. The BBC claims £297 million is spent in Scotland but research being funded by my department raises serious doubts over that figure. So a closer gap between what is raised and what is spent would be helpful.

I would also recommend closing the BBC Scotland channel and putting that money directly into programming through either better funding of existing programming on the opt-out slots of the UK wide channels, and/or putting those programmes straight onto the i-player. With the slow death of the schedule putting money into high volume low cost programming where, as my research has shown, workers work exploitative long hours in stressful conditions with limited creative outlet seems anachronous and unnecessary. There will arguably soon be no schedule to fill, so a move to lower

volume, better funded programmes for streaming on the i-player will mean potentially a smaller (though that looks inevitable anyway) but better paid, higher skilled and more fulfilled workforce producing quality programmes more likely to compete against international streamers.