

## Possible models of local news provision by radio in Scotland – a mixed methods study

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### Abstract

Scotland does not have any public service radio on a local level, except for a few bulletins or programmes offered by BBC Radio Scotland on an opt-out basis. Scottish commercial radio stations do cover local issues but within brief hourly news bulletins, without any in-depth coverage, while community radio by and large lacks resources for any news coverage of its own. Through a review of the existing literature on the role of media in democracy, and in particular the role of local radio, interviews with stakeholders and experts and history, and focus groups with ordinary people, the present study formulates several possible solutions for future local news provision by radio in Scotland.

**Keywords:** local, radio, public, service, news, regulation

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As Robins and Cornford noted some 25 years ago, despite all the abstract forces of internationalism and globalisation, local and regional media seem to offer possibilities for creating, or recreating, a sense of community on a human scale. From this perspective, local and regional media are seen as fundamental resources of both democracy and identity (1993). That is because local media cover local news or, to put it more broadly, offer local programming. But what exactly is that? Scholars make a distinction between 'place-based' and 'content-based' programming (Ali 2017, p18). The former refers to programming which is 'substantively produced and presented within the local community', while the latter shifts the emphasis from the production source to the nature of the program's content (Smallwood and Moon 2011, p39). While this distinction still allows for some overlap, in this study the emphasis will be on the latter - what Stavitsky calls the social dimension of localism (1994).

### Media and Democracy

As Esser *et al* point out, the functioning of democracy relies on an informed citizenship (2012). News media use is expected to influence political participation by affecting knowledge about current political affairs, which then impacts on beliefs in one's capability to act on this knowledge (Andersen *et al* 2016). Citizens who pay close attention to news about public affairs and politics should not only be able to cast more informed ballots and hold elected officials accountable; they should also be more supportive of democratic processes and procedures (Goidel *et al* 2017). As Zaller (2003) points out, the media play a central role as the citizens' primary source of information about political issues. Thus, the media can in general be expected to have an indirect effect on political participation through knowledge and efficacy, with knowledge preconditioning efficacy (Andersen *et al*

2016). That, though, does not imply by default that simple existence of news media is enough to create informed citizens, as coverage of local democratic institutions and local public services is often limited by the tendency to focus on local crime and human interest stories (Harrison 2006).

The second equally important function of the media is in facilitating participation in deliberative processes. Carpentier *et al* say that the media sphere serves as a location where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices (2013). This concept is of particular importance to the present study as we believe that local media - and local radio in particular - play a key role in facilitating public participation in democratic processes. Local radio's role is to bring to the fore issues relevant to the local communities it serves. Through its staple - the phone-in - as well as other speech-based programmes, radio facilitates mediated public discussion around those issues.

### **Digitization and de-regulation of radio**

Radio has entered a new phase which at the same time looks promising and threatening for its future. One development has been key to this paradox - digitization. The ability to turn a radio signal into bytes has contributed to the popularity of the medium which can now be consumed online - live and on demand - without the need for an actual radio device. On the other hand, the promise of the benefits of digital radio has only partially been fulfilled. At the beginning of the digital revolution, audiences were promised more choice, more democracy and more interactivity. More interactivity certainly there is, but are there more choice and democracy?

Hendy says that ever since the late 1970s, the creation of more choice has been pursued by applying the principles of market capitalism to the broadcasting industries, while deregulation was seen as leading the way to a competitive marketplace, which, in turn, would allow the emergence of the most cost-effective delivery of the most wanted radio services. The most direct and intended effect of deregulation was to increase the total number of radio services so that true niche radio becomes a reality, and so that the space for meaningful public choice and more local participation is created. What then happened, according to Hendy, was that instead of more specialized programming chasing a niche audience - smaller in size but consisting of listeners of the right kind for a particular segment of advertising revenue - broadcasters opted for the safety and predictability and ended up producing a clustering of formats around a few recurring programming styles (Hendy 2000a). This is in line with Glasser's (1984) observation that within a market a station will duplicate an existing format rather than produce a unique format if its share of the audience for a duplicated format yields higher profits than the profits generated by the entire audience for a unique format. Similarly, a study by Rogers and Woodbury into whether a newcomer onto the market would choose between adopting a new format and sharing an established format with other stations concluded that format sharing is more profitable than format pioneering (1996). Scottish commercial stations' schedules reflect this, with programming based on light entertainment and DJ-driven shows dominated by chart or popular music (n.b. each station's schedule is available on its website). This is important

because in broadcasting in Scotland, it was commercial radio which has been the main provider of local news ever since its arrival in 1973. But of course, the story of radio in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, begins some 50 years earlier, with the BBC.

## Radio in Scotland

The BBC started broadcasting in Scotland almost immediately after it was founded in 1922, though a fully stand-alone Radio Scotland - as we know it today - only came into being in 1978 as part of an initiative which saw the establishment of similar stations in Wales and Northern Ireland. The output of the Scottish station was designed to cater for the whole of Scotland, not local areas (McDowell 1992). And so, BBC Radio Scotland became a national station for Scotland, supplemented by a very limited amount of area broadcasting. The first local radio station in Scotland did not appear until December 1973, and it was to be a commercial station - Radio Clyde in Glasgow.

Commercial radio in Scotland (Independent Local Radio - ILR - as it was known then) has benefitted from the absence of BBC local radio on the English model (Blain and Hutchison 1993). ILR stations were guided by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to produce a full range of speech content, including hour-long documentaries, regular features, extended news programmes and phone-ins. This form of programming continued during the 1970s and the 1980s until the Broadcasting Act 1990, which signalled the start of deregulation (Street 2002). A number of constraints were removed and the majority of stations chose not to continue with speech programmes, preferring to focus on music formats for target audiences (Wray 2010). In light of these changes, the public in Scotland tended to turn to the press for news of local or Scottish events, but preferred broadcasting for information on UK matters of interest (McDowell 1992). Now, however, local press is in decline (Frazer 2017; Mayhew 2018), while local radio is de-regulated and largely devoid of news programming (see station schedules). At the same time surveys show that for radio listeners in Scotland, local news coverage is the second most valued type of content, after music (Ofcom 2018a). This indicates strong demand for local news.

At the moment, the radio market in Scotland offers a mixed picture. At 88.3 per cent, radio in Scotland has lower reach than in other UK nations (Ofcom 2018a). More people in Scotland - 67 per cent - listen to commercial radio than to BBC radio - 58 per cent (Ofcom 2018a). While the reach of local commercial stations is 37 per cent, that of BBC Radio Scotland is 20 per cent - five percentage points higher than the aggregate reach for BBC local services in England (Rajar Q1 2018, cited by Ofcom 2018a)<sup>1</sup>. An overview of the radio market in Scotland is provided in Table 1.

BBC	Commercial	Community
BBC Radio Scotland, with	35 local stations	25 stations: all FM and

<sup>1</sup> Rajar does not collect data for community radio.

regional opt-outs (FM, AM, DAB, Online)	34 UK national stations	one AM; with a further eight preparing to launch at the time of writing (Ofcom Scotland 2018)
BBC Radio nan Gàidheal: Gaelic-language network		
11 BBC UK network stations (FM, AM, DAB, Online)		

Table 1: Radio station availability in Scotland (source: Ofcom 2018a)

In spite of the importance of local news for democracy and community, its provision in Scotland seems to be insufficient. The BBC, as the only public service broadcaster (PBS) in Scotland, does not cover local news, apart from opt-outs in certain areas. Commercial radio stations, in turn, offer brief news bulletins, which, due to regulatory requirements, include some local news coverage. These requirements are by no means prescriptive in terms of the ratio between local and other news, which is why it is important to establish how this plays out in the day-to-day output. Radio listeners in Scotland say they place a high value on local news. It is unclear, however, whether that means they are satisfied with the current provision or are asking for new models. While the extant literature in the field outlines the factors that have contributed to the current situation, including digitisation and deregulation, it fails to explore the role and the future of the radio in local news provision in Scotland. The current study aims to address this gap by measuring the extent of local news coverage by radio in Scotland and exploring the views of experts and stakeholders on the current service provision and the ways to improve it. Thereby, we aim to answer three research questions:

RQ1. To what extent does radio in Scotland cover local news?

RQ2. Is local radio - with a strong public service role - needed in Scotland?

RQ3. What are the options available to policy makers and regulators to create such radio?

## Methods

### Design

We employed a mixed methods design, using quantitative methods to obtain quantifiable measures of local news coverage, and qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups to obtain in-depth views of experts, professionals, policy makers and Scottish residents. Triangulating different perspectives and methods of data collection in this way will make for a well-rounded view of the issues at stake, as well as strengthen the validity of the findings, as outlined by Fossey *et al* (2002).

### Procedure

The study received ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier University and was undertaken in four consecutive phases: (1) interviews with station and news

editors; (2) content analysis of news bulletin scripts; (3) interviews with experts; (4) focus groups. The findings from each phase informed the design of the subsequent phases in the following way.

*Interviews with station and news editors*

First, station or news editors at BBC Radio Scotland, Bauer Media and a community radio station were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured approach to gain insight into stations’ editorial policies and their output. These interviews informed our decision which stations’ content to analyse.

*Content analysis*

Content analysis used to obtain a numerical measure of the extent to which different radio stations in Scotland cover local news. Bauer Media runs thirteen stations at eight locations in Scotland and in Q1 2018 it had the largest proportion of the market among commercial radio groups (Ofcom 2018a). Our content analysis looked into categories of news stories covered by four Bauer Media stations between 25 and 27 September 2017. The analysis was based on news bulletin scripts provided to us by Bauer Media. BBC Radio Scotland was eliminated from the content analysis as interview data and station’s service licence (BBC 2016) demonstrated that local news is not within the station’s remit. Community radio was eliminated as the interview data and survey of stations’ schedules revealed that it does not offer news coverage in the traditional sense, with news bulletins and programmes produced by professional journalists.

*Interviews with experts*

Once we established the state of news provision by commercial and PSB radio in Scotland, we interviewed six experts in order to put those findings into perspective and obtain ideas for ways forward. Those were in-depth, structured one-to-one interviews. The six academics were chosen on the basis of their extensive knowledge of media history, policy and regulation in Scotland, or more general expertise on radio and its public service role. Five interviews were conducted by email, and one face-to-face.

A complete list of all interviewees is in Table 2.

<b>Station or news editors</b>	<b>Regulators and Policy Makers</b>	<b>Experts</b>
Gary Smith, Head of News, BBC Radio Scotland	Ofcom Scotland	Neil Blain - Professor Emeritus of Communications, University of Stirling
Lorraine Herbison, Head of News and Sport, Scotland, Bauer Media	Scottish Government	David Hutchison - Visiting Professor in Media Policy, Glasgow Caledonian University; author, with Blain, of <i>The Media in Scotland</i> (2008)
Jim McMillan, Station manager, Sunny G, Glasgow		David Hendy - Professor of Media and Cultural History, University of Sussex; author

		of <i>Radio in the Global Age</i> (2000) and <i>Public Service Broadcasting</i> (2013)
		Peter Schlesinger - Professor of Cultural Policy, University of Glasgow, former member for Scotland on the Content Board of Ofcom
		Peter Lewis - London Metropolitan University; co-author of <i>The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio</i> (1989)
		Chris Frost - Professor, Liverpool John Moores University

Table 2: Interviewees

### *Focus groups*

The findings from content analysis and interviews with editors and experts were then used in focus groups to inform the design of the interview schedule. The focus groups were used to obtain more insight into ordinary citizens' views on the importance of local news and local radio. Three focus groups (N=17) were conducted in a quiet room, after the participants signed an informed consent. Scottish residents aged 18 and above were eligible to participate, provided they had resided in Scotland for more than a year and did not work in radio, so as to avoid conflict of interest. Keen interest in local news or local radio was not prerequisite as we aimed to capture general attitudes of Scottish citizens to local news provision. Participants were recruited through an invitation sent to members of Edinburgh Active Citizenship Group ([edinburghactivecitizens.wordpress.com](http://edinburghactivecitizens.wordpress.com)) and Edinburgh Napier University, and also through snowballing. The former group was approached on the basis that its members are ordinary citizens with a keen interest in public affairs, and by implication might be interested in the topic of local news provision.

### **Data analysis**

Both the interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. This is a flexible approach which allows not only for identification of key patterns (themes) in the data, but also for their interpretation in relation to the research questions (Clarke and Braun 2014). It was particularly suitable for our study as it allows for themes to be identified in a 'top-down' way, where the data can be used to explore particular theoretical ideas (Braun & Clarke 2013).

## Results

Between 25 and 27 September 2017 we looked at news output by four commercial radio stations, all owned by Bauer Media and listed in Table 3. All stations listed broadcast hourly news bulletins, on weekdays from 6am- 7pm.

Station	
Clyde 1 (greater Glasgow area)	FM and DAB (2mins each)
Clyde 2 (greater Glasgow area)	AM and DAB (2mins each, 5mins at 1pm)
Radio Borders (Scottish Borders and North Northumberland)	FM
Radio Forth (greater Edinburgh area)	FM and DAB

Table 3: Commercial radio stations included in the content analysis

A breakdown of the four radio stations' news output over the three days in September is listed in Table 4.

Type of story	Station		
	Clyde 1 and 2 (combined) Total: 49	Radio Borders Total: 47	Radio Forth Total: 50
Local	11	17	12
Regional	13	6	5
National	9	12	17
International	2	4	3
Sport	7	3	9
Human interest	2	0	0
Business	1	2	1
Science	2	1	2
Art and Entertainment	1	2	1
Other	1	0	0

Table 4: Types and number of stories covered by four commercial radio stations

The above analysis demonstrates that in relative terms, commercial radio in Scotland covers a substantial number of local stories. However, those stories are covered in brief only, as the stations listed here do not go beyond the two-minute news bulletins on the hour, extended to five minutes at 1pm on AM stations only (which serve an older audience).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The amount of news coverage is similar on other commercial stations, as established in our survey of schedules.

## Interviews

In our interviews with media experts, three themes emerged: 'Radio stimulates public participation in democratic processes', 'Radio is important for local news provision' and 'Different visions for future local news provision in Scotland'.

### **Theme 1:** 'Radio stimulates public participation in democratic processes'

All expert interviewees agree that local radio is important in stimulating public participation in democratic processes. They, however, emphasise different reasons as to why that is - from providing a platform for democracy to be heard, to providing a counterbalance to the centralised politics in the UK.

The key characteristic of radio is that one hears the voices of people "thinking out loud", we HEAR democracy in action. [d]emocracy is not about voting or referenda, but about a process of deliberation - that is listening, thinking, and being open to changing one's mind on the basis of detailed discussion. (Hendy)

Democracy in the UK is astonishingly centralized. Democracy nearly everywhere is more localized than in Britain. Whatever the media can do to compensate [that] has to be good. The importance of any sort of localized news provision for democratic purposes is invaluable. Even localities deserve media ecology. (Blain)

Our interviewees highlighted that, in spite of the social media offering a popular platform for debate, local radio, thanks to its mediated nature, is still better suited to this function:

Given the increasing use of social media which provides an infinite variety of spaces for selective discussion, the public space of radio is still the likeliest place to find what approaches a local 'public sphere' for debate. (Lewis)

### **Theme 2:** 'Radio is important for local news provision'

In addition to radio, local news is available to people in Scotland via printed press, a variety of local online news sources and the BBC Scotland's website. However, our interviewees point out that radio's advantages for local news provision include its reach and availability (Blain), accessibility (Schlesinger), and perceived - and mandatory - lack of bias (Hendy).

The most consistent local reach is by the local press, but its viability is constantly threatened. Commercial radio in Scotland isn't sufficiently focused on news, and [BBC] Radio Scotland is tasked with covering the whole nation. A central problem with community media is resources - as we keep repeating: facts are not only sacred, but expensive. It's clear that deficiencies in the Scottish media overall have propelled some growth in online, as with Wings, Bella Caledonia and Common Space, but these sites don't seem



significant in terms of local reach. So, [...] it seems likely that radio remains a viable delivery platform for local news. (Blain)

[M]any local newspapers have a consistent if subtle reactionary standpoint from which they report. Radio, at least in theory, is more bound by guidelines on impartiality. (Hendy)

There are significant listening audiences and it remains the case that listening is combined with other activities most of the time (work, domestic tasks, driving), and yet still a very accessible way of keeping up with the latest news. (Schlesinger)

I'm not sure that many local news websites, attached to print newspapers - themselves often weekly - can replicate the immediacy of reaction of a local news report, let's say some local threat (natural disasters, industrial disasters, terrorism, and of course traffic). Radio is in essence a very cost effective, stable and flexible medium, especially of course if protected by the licence fee. (Blain)

### **Theme 3: 'Different visions for future local news provision in Scotland'**

Our interviewees suggested a variety of ways for future local news provision in Scotland - including preservation of local press, a 'rethinking' of public provision by the BBC, and a possible new network of non-BBC PSB stations.

Preserve as much as possible of the local press. I'd also like to see online resourced as close to the ground as possible. I think both radio and press need to think a lot about online. Demographic question again - a lot of kids and young people don't read newspapers, don't listen to radio except maybe music, and probably won't get the habit. They do mostly everything, including getting news, on social media. Whatever happens at local level needs to be pitched at social media. (Blain)

[T]he issue increasingly is how to design and market content that will appeal to younger demographics without an entrenched habit of radio listening. But that needs to be balanced with attention to existing radio audiences. It's time to review Radio Scotland's model. It is hard to see what change could come about in the commercial sector, where the scope of localism has shrunk. Community radio offers a different prospect but like all voluntary activity it faces inherent problems of sustainability as well as scope. (Schlesinger)

[I]t's not impossible to envisage a network of local stations [...] financed out of a fund set up specifically to finance local radio, outside of the BBC. But there would have to be enthusiasm for it and in the current economic situation, never mind the broadcasting aspect, I think it would be quite difficult. It's a pity we don't have public service local radio because it would do things which the commercial people are unlikely to do and Radio Scotland has difficulty doing without being accused of parochialism. (Hutchison)

We believe that alongside the current opt-outs, audiences would also welcome dedicated services from the BBC offering high quality news and current affairs from the distinctive perspective of Scotland's regions (Scottish Government).

## **Focus group**

Thematic analysis of the focus group revealed three dominant, interrelated themes: 'Function of local radio', 'Need for local news provision' and 'Future of local radio', which overlap to an extent with the themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **Theme 1: 'Function of local radio'**

Participants felt that local radio can play an important role in democracy by providing 'information about, say, political candidates and political campaigns' (LS), or 'scrutinising local politicians' (GM). Facilitating 'civic engagement' (LS) and fostering a sense of community were seen as other important functions of local radio:

It would be great to have a local radio to which you can identify with presenter, or content, or have interactive shows, that sort of stuff. (LR)

Participants generally preferred PSB radio for content, although some highlighted perceived strengths of commercial stations: 'they can be fun to listen to' (RA) and 'It's more chatty when they are discussing an issue' (AZ).

### **Theme 2: 'Need for local news provision'**

Most participants expressed great interest in local news and regret that 'it's not out there' (GM) or that 'if it's covered at all, it's not in depth' (LS). Informing and being informed was perceived as a civic duty and the purpose of local radio is to facilitate this:

I think there's a need for it to be there. I think we have an obligation to present issues, and I think we should have that obligation so that people can be aware of what's going on locally or have an opportunity to engage. (GW)

Participants highlighted several areas of particular interest: 'council spending' (LW), 'feel-good stories, when somebody does something good in the community' (PM), 'transport and infrastructure' (AZ) or 'stories about schools and education' (RA). Nevertheless, they were under the impression that they received information only if they made an extra effort:

I did a thing a couple years back on wind farms, and the number of things that were going on, you know, to get wind farms, that the people in the area didn't know nothing about that they were gonna suddenly have, you know, big turbines slapped on the horizon. They just didn't know. (SN)

### **Theme 3: 'Future of local radio'**

Three different visions for local radio were voiced. Some participants did not see a bright future for the radio as we know it as 'it will all be shifted over to online at some point' (LR). The idea of BBC-provided local radio received qualified support with one participant saying: 'I think I would listen to it if there is a local Edinburgh BBC station' (RA), and several feeling let down by the BBC:

I very rarely listen to Radio Scotland now because of the really obvious political bias it has, it's not even subtle now, it's just awful. And I would think even if the BBC did introduce a range of local channels, for me personally, as a brand that's so tainted I wouldn't really be interested. It would have to be something so radically different and controlled completely in a different way for me to have any interest to listen to it at all. (LS)

An alternative network of non-BBC PSB stations was considered too, with some support for it: 'There would be a following, I think, for people wanting an equivalent to the BBC' (PM). There were also reservations about its objectivity: 'I think it'd be really difficult to start a big organization like that and not be politically biased' (RA); 'there may be a lot of political stuff attached to something that is Scottish based' (DT).

### **Discussion**

Our RQ1 was: *To what extent does radio in Scotland cover local news?*

Our content analysis shows that commercial radio offers local news coverage, albeit in a rather limited way. While we found evidence that a substantial number of local stories are covered, given the duration of news bulletins and lack of other news programming, we conclude that commercial radio does not offer any in-depth coverage of local news. BBC Radio Scotland's news policy, as explained by its Head of News, Gary Smith, dictates that local stories are included in news bulletins or programmes only if they are considered by editors as to be of interest to the wider Scottish audience. Such stories often fall into the categories of crime, traffic and human interest. More local news coverage by the BBC exists only on opt-outs in some parts of Scotland. BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland broadcast a half-hour daily news programme each, extend to a full hour in winter months, while short local news and weather bulletins are also broadcast on weekdays from studios in Selkirk, Dumfries, Aberdeen and Inverness. This leaves other parts of Scotland, including large cities such as Glasgow, Edinburgh or Dundee, without any local news coverage. Furthermore, community radio's local news coverage - as evidenced in our interviews with station managers - is patchy, irregular and somewhat unconventional, as community stations do not employ professional journalists but instead rely only on volunteers with limited resources. This leads us to conclude that there is a significant gap in local news provision by radio in Scotland.

Our RQ2 was: *Is local radio - with a strong public service role - needed in Scotland?*

Based on the theoretical perspectives on the role of radio outlined above, as well as interview and focus group findings, we conclude that Scotland needs local radio with a strong public service role as such radio would help citizens be better informed about local issues and thus potentially engaged more in local democracy. Democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed (Aalberg *et al* 2010). Studies show that news media with high levels of political content affect knowledge and voter turnout positively, whereas news media with low levels of political content have no effect (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). Both the experts and focus groups participants agree that local radio is important as provider of local news and facilitator of local democracy. Furthermore, the experts highlighted public service media as being the best for the role, citing PSBs' mandatory impartiality as their major strength. This is illustrated in theme 1 in our interviews, where experts say that local radio allows us to 'hear democracy in action' and still seems to be 'what approaches a local "public sphere" for debate'. Similarly, focus groups' theme 1 speaks of radio's role in 'scrutinising local politicians' and facilitating 'civic engagement', while theme 2 highlights the notion that local news are currently not covered 'in-depth'.

RQ3 was: *What are the options available to policy makers and regulators to create such radio?* Here we consider four models for the future of local news provision by radio in Scotland, emerging from our data.

### **1. Local BBC radio stations in Scotland with opt-ins into BBC Radio Scotland**

This would be based on the English model - where currently there are 40 local BBC stations - possibly starting with the expansion of the existing BBC community stations in Scotland, and later with the setting up of new ones. The amount of output per station would vary and they would all at certain times opt into BBC Scotland, or at night, a national BBC station. This is our preferred solution as we believe that public service broadcasting is the best safeguard against possible further reduction of the public service role played by the commercial rivals, who, as we have shown, already provide just the minimal coverage of news in terms of air-time. The BBC is a well-established PSB, with sufficient resources to run such a service, provided BBC Scotland is reorganised. This is the option Schlesinger seems to suggest when talking about the need to rethink BBC Radio Scotland's model. Based on the funding model used in the Netherlands, Evens and Paulussen (2012) argue that splitting the public broadcasters' licence fee is the most common and sustainable mechanism as it assures predictable funding for local radio stations, which are then essentially funded separately from the national public broadcaster. However, we consider this option the least likely of the four outlined here. It is clear that in the short- to mid-term, the BBC does not have any plans to invest in a network of local radio stations, as confirmed by Gary Smith.

### **2. BBC Radio Scotland with more local opt-outs**

Under this option, the existing BBC community stations would be given more air time and new ones would be added in places where they don't already exist. We envisage that the extension of output of the existing stations and the creation of the new ones would not strain existing resources too much. The main advantage of this option is that it would offer more targeted local news coverage, while relying on the existing human, technical and production resources within the BBC. Our

interviewees did not mention this option, while focus group participants were divided over it: 'If the opt was long enough so that you can maybe spend an hour in your local area, maybe that would work, instead of having to establish a different one in each county' (AZ) and 'I'd feel second-best; I want my dedicated station' (PM). This option, or the previous one, would enable the BBC to better fulfil its obligations towards universality of content, not just reach.

### **3. A new network of non-BBC PSB's for Scotland**

Broadcasting in Scotland (as in the rest of the UK) is expressly reserved to Westminster (Schlesinger 2008), although the current Scottish Government told us it favours its devolution. While there is a lively debate taking place around the issue of devolution in broadcasting, that debate is mostly limited to television. Radio is almost entirely absent from the discussion of the desirability of future broadcasting devolution in Scottish policy papers, audience surveys, government proposals and academic studies (Garner 2012). Several European countries offer useful models for devolved broadcasting policy that Scotland could apply partially or in full. In Spain, all the autonomous regions are constitutionally able to develop their own media policy, but in practice this is not the case (De la Sierra et al 2012). In Belgium media policy is fully devolved to the regions which have their own regulators too (Van Besien and Docquir 2012). Our proposed model for Scotland envisages a network of local public service radio stations that would rival commercial radio in news provision. Those stations would either be independent of each other or part of a formal network. Evens and Paulussen (2012) point to Denmark as an interesting model here, where local radio and television depends on local administration for broadcasting licenses, and where stations are given the possibility to submit applications for subsidies for specific programs. Similarly, in Belgium regions grant subsidies to local non-commercial radio stations (Van Besien and Docquir 2012). An alternative funding model existed in Switzerland, where local stations formed listeners' clubs with membership fees (Browne 1991). A similar idea was offered in focus group discussions when a participant suggested: 'Scottish Enterprise-funded' (GW) local radio. While acknowledging there is not much enthusiasm for a non-BBC network, Hutchison nevertheless favours it, while Blain says it is hard to see it being implemented 'this side of independence'.

### **4. More meaningful support for community radio**

Localism, according to Cammaerts, is considered to be one of the defining characteristics of community radio and media (2009). In the UK, the idea of a third way radio, complementing the commercial and public broadcasting services, was accepted in 2002 when the Radio Authority issued licences for fifteen of what were then called 'access radio stations' (Cammaerts 2009: 10). Sunny G's Jim McMillan says that his station talks to people who are socially excluded, before adding that 'news provision can change people's lives for the better - if it is relevant to the communities'. The challenge for community radio, and regulators too, is whether it can contribute more meaningfully to meeting the informational needs of communities it serves. While some of the programming offered by community radio already does that, it is true that community radio in Scotland does not air news programming in the traditional sense of the word. Anecdotal evidence shows that this is not due to the lack of ambition, but rather the lack of resources. We

argue that, with the right amount of financial and regulatory support, community radio can fill the gap created by the BBC and commercial radio in Scotland. The Scottish Government has told us that following the latest changes in localness obligations of commercial radio, it would like Ofcom to reassess the balance of responsibility between commercial and community radio. Research shows (Berry and Waldfogel 1999) that government intervention might correct the problem of under provision of certain types of programming in some markets, mainly small cities and rural areas, while Jauert and Prehn (2003) argue that structural financing mechanisms should improve the diversity and quality of local programming, and prevent stations homogenizing their audio output. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's speech in Edinburgh in August 2018, in which he suggested creating an independent fund to subsidise public service journalism, possibly paid for by the tech companies, could be a step in that direction (Corbyn 2018). Another model worth exploring is provided by the Spanish Asociación de Emisoras Municipales de Andalucía de Radio y Televisión (EMA-RTV), a municipal station association and support network in Andalucía, which offers its members a range of services intended to sustain them in their local broadcasting (Starkey 2011). As Evens and Paulussen point out, the creation of a fund, mostly financed by a share of advertising revenues of established broadcasters, is another popular practice for supporting small-scale radio stations. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, for example, the FACR (Fonds d'Aide à la Création Radiophonique) is financed from a percentage of the public and private broadcasters' advertising revenue (Evens and Paulussen 2012). Alternative funding models might also be explored, such as 'crowd-funded stations' (GW), as suggested in one of our focus groups.

In this study, we favour public service broadcasters over commercial ones. Our preference for PSBs is based on the qualitative data we gathered, as well as theory. We acknowledge, though, that at the moment, commercial stations are the main provider of local news in the radio arena in Scotland. As Garner points out, commercial radio in the UK is reprimanded for 'reduced' public service content, but the fact that most of these public service obligations were removed by the Westminster government, not the stations themselves, is not mentioned (2012: 59). The most recent case of that trend is a decision by Ofcom to allow commercial radio stations to further limit the number of locally-made hours each station should provide (Ofcom 2018c). Is the alternative then to revisit the obligations of commercial radio in terms of its news provision? Most of our expert interviewees think that is unlikely to happen, with Frost saying: 'There would be considerable resistance to this from owners unless something like the BBC local democracy scheme was expanded to allow commercial radio to hook into it, as local newspapers have'. Søndergaard and Helles (2012) say that in Denmark, the government's decision to help fund a commercial station through public subsidies signals a recognition that the market alone cannot provide the desired pluralism and diversity, and that the state has to intervene more directly in order to achieve this goal.

We believe that the BBC - a long-established broadcaster with significant newsgathering resources - would be best placed to provide expanded local news coverage by radio in Scotland. Not only does the BBC have the resources and

infrastructure in place; it is also highly valued by the audience: 83 per cent of people in the UK rate BBC's current affairs coverage highly for providing a good depth of analysis (Ofcom 2018b). The picture, though, is not perfect, as the BBC has recently dropped in impartiality ratings, where it currently sits lower than its main commercial rival, ITV (Ofcom 2018b). While this refers to BBC television, a similar perception was prominent in our focus group views of BBC Radio Scotland. This is a significant problem for the BBC, and further research should look into it in more detail.

This study has addressed a gap in research on the public service role of radio and the models for it in Scotland. In the present study validity was achieved by successful triangulation of methods and perspectives. We acknowledge that the study is limited by relying on a small number of focus groups and minimal input from regulators and policy makers, who have been reluctant to speak to us beyond simply providing data. Future research could verify the generalizability of the current findings by surveying a larger number of participants. The four proposals outlined here present starting points for discussion and further in-depth research that would look at political viability and feasibility of each one. Future research should also address the state of the current local news provision in Scotland overall, to include BBC opt outs and community radio, but also printed press, television and online. After all, in the age of digital convergence, public service communications should no longer be conceived as simply something only related to broadcasting (Humphreys 2010). While there are schemes to support local press in the UK (see BBC's Local News Partnership), audience research shows that people are increasingly moving towards on-demand and online content, with the young leading the trend (Ofcom 2018b). The BBC in Scotland provides local news coverage on its websites, which to an extent compensates for the lack of local news on the radio. This policy, however, is not without controversy as it leads to a question what exactly is the role of PSBs. In Germany, for example, PSBs are not allowed to provide comprehensive local news coverage online (Müller and Gusy 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Through a combination of policy and regulatory decisions, Scotland has been left without significant local news provision by radio. The waves of deregulation seem to have failed to deliver the greater choice in radio listening, especially in speech-based, non-sports programming. This is not to say that radio in Scotland is a failure - on the contrary, BBC Radio Scotland is going strong, while the commercial sector continues to perform better than elsewhere in the UK. The problem, as we have demonstrated in this study, is the lack of meaningful local news coverage by radio in Scotland, and even more importantly, the lack of a mediated public space for a democratic debate on local issues that local radio provides. This is a significant problem for the public sphere and democracy in Scotland, which at the moment seems to be largely ignored, or, at best, addressed in piecemeal fashion with a modest shift to online. We, however, believe that a proper remedy can only be found if policymakers are prepared to take bolder steps towards increased funding for public service content in local media as an alternative to the unlikely reversal of

deregulation. After all, radio has shown its resilience, it has successfully adapted to the digital age, and as such, deserves to be supported and revived where necessary.

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