

# THE CONVERSATION

## Scotland Decides '14: what does independence debate mean for the BBC?

April 24, 2014 6.13am BST

### Neil Blain

Professor of Communications, Media and Culture, University of Stirling

### Kirsty Gunn

Professor of Creative Writing, University of Dundee

### The Conversation's partners

---

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

### View the full list



BBC Scotland HQ on the banks of the Clyde in Glasgow. John Dee, CC BY-SA

The union Equity is calling for a national Scottish broadcaster to be created regardless of the outcome of the independence referendum in September. Meanwhile, BBC Trust director Jeremy Peat warned the Scottish parliament's culture committee that unfettered access to BBC programming wouldn't necessarily continue in the event of independence.

We asked our independence referendum panel what the future may hold for broadcasting in Scotland.

**Neil Blain, Professor of Media, University of Stirling**

There's been widespread agreement for a long time in Scotland that broadcasting provision is not adequate. We had the report of the **Scottish Broadcasting Commission (SBC)** in 2008 and then the **Digital Network Panel** in 2011, whose recommendations were both broadly welcomed at Holyrood.

What we have at the moment are opt-out services – both **STV** and **BBC Scotland** opt out of network programming. Scotland is almost unique for an area of its size in Europe with a distinct identity in not having a national broadcaster.

MSPs have been quite good at agreeing that we need to do something about broadcasting provision, but nothing ever happens. Indeed, I have been speaking about the future of Scottish broadcasting for 25 years. I would really like to get to the present.

What was planned before the current debate was a Scottish digital channel. Now what's planned by the nationalists is a Scottish broadcasting service which would in some way negotiate with the BBC if the result is yes in September.

If you are thinking strategically about the BBC from London, Scotland is just a bagatelle. I don't think it comprehends Scotland. It is not set up managerially or structurally to do much more than talk about nations and regions policy.

The broadcasting situation in Scotland is unsatisfactory. There's not enough commissioning. There isn't enough editorial control. And there isn't enough expenditure. We contribute much more to the licence fee than comes back in the form of spending on Scottish programming.

The BBC has had since 1920 to try to fix this. There's been tension between Glasgow and London inside the BBC for at least 90 years. The best predictor of future behaviour is usually past behaviour, I'm afraid.

We don't have enough Scottish news and current affairs on television. Whenever there's a news broadcast from London, they refer to the three parties: Labour, the Lib Dems and the Conservatives. Scotland tends to be on the periphery, from politics to weather forecasts.

Sports coverage is an issue. You don't get nearly as much Scottish football as you used to. We have run down output of Scottish-based arts and factual programming.

I should point out that radio is less problematic. **Radio Scotland** has been a model for a broadcasting service which is largely Scottish-based in terms of commissioning and editorial control. The problem with television is it's much more expensive.

The BBC has not responded adequately to constitutional change in Scotland. The root of this is that Scotland wasn't given oversight of media when the parliament was formed. It's always seemed bizarre that Holyrood has responsibility for cultural policy but not media.

Had that happened, you might have got a culture where national broadcasters were more responsive to needs in Scotland. Lack of authority over the media is probably one of the reasons that MSPs haven't acted on their perception of a shortfall in the Scottish offering. I have personally felt quite irritated by this failure to act. I certainly don't think it has helped the nationalists. I would have expected more fuss from the Scottish government.

You have to ask what happens if the no vote wins. I suspect the debate would revive about how we improve the Scottish broadcasting landscape. If I were part of the Better Together campaign and was thinking of ways of reassuring Scots on what they would get after a no vote, I would certainly offer oversight of Scottish media as part of the deal.

**Kirsty Gunn, Professor of Creative Writing, University of Dundee**

There used to be a wonderful Sunday evening programme on Radio Scotland called Pipelines. It featured, in authoritative and sensitive detail, piobaireachd and highland bagpipe music and culture. It was witty, informed and up-to-the minute, showcasing an instrument and musical form that, although celebrated around the world, is massively underrated and even derided at home.

Where is "Pipelines" now? Like so many interesting and wildly idiosyncratic aspects of Scottish cultural identity, it seems to have been given up in favour of a sort of one-size-fits all version of Scottishness.

At best this can be interesting enough, though lacking any particularity that would make it interesting and relevant for its own sake. At worst it is a version of what Jim Kelman, in those pieces he wrote about the Pixar film Braveheart, might have described as a Disneyfied sort of Scotland.

Certainly I have always loved Radio Scotland - drama, fiction reviews ... Less interesting are the current affairs programmes. I always felt they lacked rigour and were too populist and not intellectual enough; too much modelled on a south-of-the border style that never seems authentic. But always there were amazing arts magazine programmes by the likes of Brian Morton to make up for it.

There are still some very good things happening – the cafe style arts shows; Gaynor McFarlane's work in books and drama. But in general I would say the most exciting thing about Salmond's rally call for a Scottish Broadcasting Service – heavily freighted with SNP agenda and sensibility, that would be split off from the BBC while buying in its expensive programmes – is that it makes us focus on what we love, or have loved, about BBC Scotland and how it might be made to shine.

Our cultural identity is the collection of things that make us who we are – not some version of ourselves based on what the trendsetters decree or the marketing figures that come up from London.

It's listening to ourselves – the stories we tell, the music we make, the ideas we have, the sciences we are involved with ... that might give us back the echo of a culture that is generated by its people, not politicians.

After all, the depth our critical enquiry and the interest in local culture and practices has always been a mark of our culture. Would that it might be again, as demonstrated by a national media with British broadcasting providing the base, as it has done in the past, to show ourselves in all our variety: from piobaireachd to philosophy.

*The rest of the work by the Scotland Decides '14 expert panel can be found here.*



Equity  
Scotland  
scottish referendum  
Scotland Decides 14  
BBC Scotland  
 Tweet9  
 Share0  
 Get newsletter