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Title of the thesis: **WHAT PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL RADIO BY ITS JOURNALISTS AND LISTENERS TELL US ABOUT ITS ROLE AND FUTURE**

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**WHAT PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL RADIO BY ITS JOURNALISTS AND LISTENERS TELL US ABOUT ITS ROLE AND FUTURE**

**Aleksandar Kocic**

# ABSTRACT

Local news coverage in the UK is in decline with radio moving away from its focus on the ‘local’, and local newspapers in decline. The present study focuses on local radio in England and Scotland, the two UK nations characterised by the presence of local BBC radio, although in significantly different ways, as well as local commercial radio run either by large media groups – which increasingly move away from local content - or a handful of small independent companies whose stations often struggle to provide substantial local news coverage. Does local news still matter to the people in an increasingly globalised and digital world where people move home more often and their links with the local area are weaker than in the past? And how does the decline in localness affect those working in local radio in Scotland and England and their sense of purpose? Using the theoretical frameworks of the public sphere and localism, the present study aims to answer these questions by speaking to those who work in local radio and those who listen to it. The main aim of the study is to provide a better understanding of how radio professionals perceive their role in today’s media environment and juxtapose those against the perceptions of radio by the listeners. In doing so the present study aims to address gaps in research on local radio and contribute to a limited body of knowledge on the role of local radio as seen by both those who make it and those who listen to it. Ultimately, the present study aims to provide a better understanding of the local radio setup in the UK and the challenges it faces.

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# INTRODUCTION

"*The changes to local programming will be detrimental to you the listener.*"

(Faye Hatcher, BBC Radio Gloucestershire; cited by Cork 2023).

These were the parting words of a local BBC radio journalist broadcast on air during her last Saturday morning show in July 2023. Hatcher decided to resign, unhappy about having to audition for her job at BBC Gloucestershire after more than twenty years at the station. She and many others were asked to reapply for their jobs as part of the restructuring of local BBC radio which will see dozens of jobs disappear.

The above story is just one of many demonstrating that 100 years after it was launched, local radio in the UK is at a turning point, with its future rather uncertain. In 2023 the BBC is reducing its local radio output and teams in England, saying it wishes to focus on its news provision online. Its local radio operations elsewhere are not affected but they have anyway always been much smaller in Scotland, very limited in Northern Ireland and non-existent in Wales. Meanwhile, commercial radio, largely owned by a small number of media groups, is moving away from localism while maintaining only a minimal local news output. The remaining independent commercial stations often maintain strong links with the local communities they serve but struggle to provide any substantive local news coverage.

## **Study Aims**

In the current media environment local news coverage is in decline. Local radio is moving away from or struggling to maintain its focus on the ‘local’, local newspapers are in decline and both mediums are competing for audience against a multitude of new sources of entertainment or news and analysis, with most of the latter focusing on national rather than local news. Media researchers and commentators as well as politicians warn that this is bad for democracy and that the decline must be stopped or reversed (Hunt 2010; Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2013). But does local news still matter to the people who now move home, and shop and socialise online, more than ever before? And how does this decline in localness affect those working in local radio, their sense of purpose and views on the future of local radio and local journalism?

Using the theoretical frameworks of the public sphere (Habermas 1989; 1997) and localism (Napoli 2001; Cowling 2005), the present study aims to answer these questions by speaking to those who work in local radio and those who listen to it. The concept of the media sphere as a location where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices is of particular importance to the present study because local media - and local radio in particular - have traditionally played a key role in facilitating public participation in democratic processes. Local news is considered vital to the functioning of local communities and the engagement of citizens in local democracies (Fenton 2011; Mcleod, Scheufele and Moy 1999; Nielsen 2015). 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, it facilitates mediated public discussion around those issues.

The present study focuses on England and Scotland, the two UK nations with similar local radio setups but also significant differences between them. The English setup is characterised by the strong presence of local BBC radio and more densely populated areas. In Scotland - which does not have its own national broadcaster - there is a much more limited local BBC presence, focused mostly on rural and less populated areas. The BBC does not provide local radio services in large cities such as Glasgow, Dundee or even the capital Edinburgh. Commercial radio fills that gap to an extent, but its news coverage combines local with national and international stories (Kocic and Milicev 2019) and, like most local media, often neglects local politics, favouring instead crime and human-interest stories (Harrison 2006).

The main aim of the present study is to provide a better understanding of how radio journalists and other radio professionals perceive their role and place in today’s media environment and juxtapose those against the perceptions of radio by the listeners. The study is driven by two basic assumptions:

1. In meeting the informational needs of the citizens, the English model, with its network of regional BBC radio stations, serves its audience better than the Scottish one.
2. Local radio still plays an important role in fostering a sense of community and meeting the informational needs of the citizens.

By employing extensive one-to-one interviews with local radio professionals and focus group interviews with listeners in England and Scotland, the present study will try to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1**: How do local radio journalists in Scotland and England reflect on their experience of practice in meeting the informational needs of their listeners?

**RQ2**: How do local radio journalists and audiences in Scotland in England perceive the role of radio?

**RQ3**: What are the views of both groups regarding the future of local radio in the UK?

By answering these research questions, the present study aims to address significant gaps in research on local radio - namely those around the experience of practice by those working in local radio, as well as the perceptions of listeners on the relevance of local radio and local news. The study aims to contribute to a limited body of knowledge on the role of local radio as seen by those who make it and those who listen to it. It also aims to provide a better understanding of the local radio setup in the UK and the challenges it faces.

The study and its design are in no small part driven by the researcher’s own experience as a radio journalist. He started his career in local public service radio in Serbia, working as a reporter, presenter, duty news editor and music editor during the turbulent years leading up to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Upon relocating to the UK, he worked as a journalist for the BBC World Service and domestic radio in London for many years, covering international and national news. The experience of working for both local radio, with its limited resources but great standing in and close relationship with the community it serves, and the BBC World Service, with its huge resources, global reach and a more distant relationship with its listeners, inspired the researcher to embark on the journey aimed at understanding the perceptions of radio journalists and their listeners regarding the status and future of local radio. Moving to Scotland from England, to his surprise the researcher discovered that the BBC in Scotland does not run local radio stations like it does in England. This further spurred a great deal of interest - as an avid radio listener, journalist and researcher - into the local radio setup in the UK and was the primary motivation for this study.

## **Background**

Audiences still love and value radio in general; it is a strong and trusted medium. 88% of the population tunes in every week (Ofcom 2023a), a figure which has remained remarkably consistent in the last decade, although with an important caveat as radio listening is lower among ethnic minority than white listeners (DCMS 2020).

Future listening projections show that radio will retain a central role in UK media for at least the next 10-15 years (DCMS 2020). The prospects for local radio, though, look somewhat less promising. Research shows that in the age of increased globalisation and mobility, people’s links to the area where they live are not as strong as they used to be (Braman 2007; Cowling 2005; Harvey 1989; Nielsen 2015). The present study will demonstrate that this has a negative impact on the listeners’ appreciation for local radio.

These changes in the strength of local radio would not have mattered much at the time when local newspapers were strong. But the sales of both national and local printed newspapers in the UK have fallen by roughly half between 2007 and 2017 and are still dropping (Cairncross 2019). Reach of both print and online newspapers has dropped from 47% in 2020 to 38% in 2022 (Ofcom 2022b), with no sign of recovery for print circulations. In 2019, 63% of Local Authority District (LAD) areas in Great Britain were not covered by a single daily local paper, up from 45% in 2007, while reporting from local courts has also declined significantly (House of Commons 2023). Among teenagers, social media is overtaking traditional channels for news; Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are now their top three most used sources (Ofcom 2022b).

It is not an exaggeration to say that local journalism in the UK is in serious decline. A recent report by the UK Parliament states that more than 320 local newspaper titles closed between 2009 and 2019, while those local news organisations that have survived often operate with diminished resources and fewer journalists (House of Commons 2023). According to the same report, this has resulted in a measurable decrease in participation in civic life within local communities without local news provision, a lack of coverage of public interest news stories, and less scrutiny of local government and public services. The report further points out that local news is most likely to be limited or absent in the most deprived communities in the UK, compounding the disadvantages such areas face (House of Commons 2023). And all of this is happening at a time when trust in the news is declining, while news avoidance is growing (Eddy *et al* 2022).

In the UK local radio is organised in a way that combines public service, commercial and community providers, with some regulatory overlap between the three. The BBC provides 39 local services in England, collectively covering the whole of England - generally at county level - and national services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including separate services in Welsh and Gaelic. The stations in England broadcast their own material up to 16 hours a day and provide news, sport, information and debate at a local level, as well as music, local or otherwise. At night they opt into BBC Radio Two, a national service. The BBC is now proceeding with plans to reduce original programming on these stations to eight hours a day, from 6am-2pm, as it argues that 70% of its audience listens to local radio only between those hours. The target audience for these stations is listeners aged 50 and over, who are not well-served elsewhere. Currently, 13% of adults in England, or 5.7 million people, listen to BBC Local Radio each week, down from 15% in September 2021 (all from Lalic and Tyler-Todd 2022).

In Wales the BBC does not operate any local services; in Northern Ireland it runs just one; while in Scotland it has six. The six studios in Scotland broadcast a limited output during the day, ranging from news bulletins of a few minutes in length several times a day to a 90-minute daily show on Orkney and Shetland each. These bulletins or programmes are broadcast on an opt-out basis, meaning that at fixed times of day listeners to BBC Scotland in selected areas - Dumfries and Galloway, the Scottish Borders, Aberdeenshire, Inverness, Orkney and Shetland - hear only the output from the local studio in their area.

At the same time there are 272 local commercial radio stations in the UK, broadcasting on AM and FM (Ofcom 2023c). In the present study they will be split into two groups - networks and independents - based on their ownership structures. 70% of the commercial stations are owned by media giants such as Bauer Radio or Global (Media Reform Coalition, cited by House of Commons 2023) while the remaining stations have different ownership structures and are in reality often closer to community radio (more on this later). Strictly speaking, in UK legislation (Broadcasting Act 1990; Communications Act 2003) all commercial radio is referred to as ‘independent’ radio, although most researchers, media commentators and even the regulator Ofcom keep referring to it as ‘commercial’. The present study will refer to stations owned by large media groups as ‘commercial network stations’ while the others will be referred to as ‘independent stations’.

Since acquiring dozens of formerly independent local stations, media groups like Bauer or Global have recently grouped them into networks such as Smooth, Hits or Heart amongst others, that share branding and some of the programming, while the local output on these stations has been reduced. This has been done with the approval from the regulator (Ofcom 2023c) and implicit or explicit support by the UK government (Radiocentre 2023; UK Government 2023). The move has been a business success, with a record 38.7m people now tuning in to commercial radio every week, 1.5m more than in the same period last year (Radiocentre 2023). Commercial radio’s annual revenues were around £703m in 2019 (Radiocentre 2021). The owners argue that increased networking is necessary to ensure commercial radio is able to compete with other services for attention, while the critics say that commercial radio is increasingly ‘local in name only’, to borrow a phrase from Franklin(2006a: xxi). They warn that reducing localness negatively impacts radio’s key roles in fostering a sense of community and helping maintain or strengthen community cohesion. For Crider (2012), the consolidation of radio - and the resulting loss of localism - have devalued the public sphere that radio creates.

Nevertheless, the UK Media Bill 2023 contains a number of regulatory changes which will allow commercial radio to further move away from localness in non-news content while securing the availability to listeners of local news and information. Commercial radio stations will not be required to directly employ journalists to gather local news, and will instead be allowed to, for example, enter into partnerships with a newspaper, news agency or freelance journalists who gather news in the local area (UK Government 2023). The Bill also expands existing grant-making powers to allow funding for community related programmes to be made to small commercial stations and producers of audio content.

The remaining independent commercial stations are usually smaller operations than their network rivals, with smaller teams, audience figures and turnovers. They are often located in sparsely populated areas, which partly explains why they have not been taken over by the networks. Independent stations often rely on volunteers and sometimes struggle to produce regular news bulletins. As this study will demonstrate, many of these stations are closer in spirit to community than commercial, for-profit radio.

In the present study, local radio is referred to by some participants as ‘regional’. While there is no clear distinction between the two, it is assumed that ‘regional’ refers to a larger area of coverage than local. The present study, however, does not distinguish between the two and treats all ‘non-national’ radio as local. A few participants in the study refer to their local radio station or its story selection as ‘hyperlocal’, which is a term that primarily applies to “online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community” (Radcliffe 201: 6). In a similar fashion, Metzgar *et al* (2011: 774) define hyperlocal media as “geographically based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organisations indigenous to the web and intended to fill the perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement”. Furthermore, there are substantial overlaps between the notion of hyperlocal media and citizen journalism as they both are mostly web-based, have been started as alternatives to legacy media, often with an emphasis on citizen participation, and seek to drive civic engagement in some form. Last but not least, the term ‘hyperlocal’ is not commonly used to describe radio stations, at least not in the UK. Therefore, in the present study, all non-national radio stations will be treated as local.

## **Study rationale**

In many countries local news provision has been shared by print and broadcast media. As already stated, what is different now is the crisis in local and regional newspapers at a time when, as Nielsen (2015) points out, commercial broadcasters make limited investments in local news and public service broadcasters are primarily regional rather than local. Local newspapers are either closing or reorienting towards soft news, so they are, as Franklin (2006a) points out, increasingly a business success but a journalistic failure. Forms of alternative, citizen, and community media increase media diversity in some areas, but their resources and reach are often limited (Nielsen 2015). In areas where local newspapers are closing altogether and where broadcasters and digital media provide little substantial local coverage, we are witnessing the emergence of local ‘news deserts’ where communities are not covered at all and have to rely on interpersonal communication and information from self-interested parties (politicians, local government, businesses) to stay informed about local affairs (Friedland *et al.* 2012).

Digital media was expected to help fill the gaps in local news provision as the assumption was that low entry and operating costs would stimulate the emergence of new providers focused on local communities, able to cover them in depth and thus carve out their own niche in an increasingly competitive media environment (Nielsen 2015). A range of new local media initiatives has been launched but they are characterised by uneven quality, relatively short lifespans and concerns over their editorial autonomy and independence (Kurpius *et al*. 2010; Thurman *et al*. 2012; van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014), or in some cases they have declined to fulfil tasks previously considered critical to journalism (Hadland 2015). Nevertheless, the UK is among a few countries where alternatives to traditional local media are often considered the best source of news across a range of topics (Schulz 2021).

This crisis in local journalism that some authors speak of (Barnett and Townend 2014; Currah 2009; Franklin 2006b) is feared to have negative democratic implications, with local politicians not being held to account and voters not being given a range of views or deprived of the information they require to make judgements when voting in elections, according to the National Union of Journalists (cited by Ramsey and Moore 2016).

This is happening at a time when the general media environment is going through a significant structural transformation, driven in large part by the rise of digital media (Nielsen 2015). How we communicate, share content, receive information and entertainment is all changing (Grueskin *et al*. 2011; Levy and Nielsen 2010). How people live is also changing profoundly. Their ties to the place where they live are not as strong as they used to be as people move more often, commute to work outside of their local area and increasingly consume goods and services produced far away (Nielsen 2015). The sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed out that many parts of social life have become ‘disembedded’, and that social, economic, and political relations have been ‘lifted out’ of the local context of interaction (Giddens 1990: 21). Transient populations represent a different kind of audience from long-term residents, their informational needs are different, and they have fewer incentives to follow local politics (Nielsen 2015).

All of this presents local journalism with a challenge how to redefine local news and localism, how to stay relevant and continue to cover local affairs in ways that resonate with the audience. Studying local journalism culture is therefore important, as local journalism is, according to McNair (2009), what binds communities together; an essential element in the construction of local identity.

As the present study will confirm, journalists and journalism scholars typically see holding power to account and keeping people informed about public affairs as journalism’s most important role. But is that what people expect of journalists? Several studies identify a significant overlap between what journalists and journalism scholars expect from local journalism and what people more broadly expect (Nielsen 2015), but there are also some differences. Local television audiences in the Netherlands say they expect local media to do several things, such as: supply unbiased background information on community affairs; foster social integration by helping people navigate their local community; provide inspiration and good examples; increase local intra-community understanding between different groups; and contribute to social cohesion, a sense of belonging to the locale (Costera Meijer 2010). A survey of local community members in the US shows that people first and foremost expect local journalists to be ‘good neighbours’ and only then provide accurate and unbiased local news or serve as a watchdog holding local elites to account (Poindexter *et al.* 2006). Another study, also in the US, shows that people expect local journalists to care about the community, to understand and appreciate its values, and, crucially, to prioritise in their coverage solutions as much as problems (Heider, McCombs and Poindexter 2005). The same study also finds that long-held norms of traditional journalism, such as its watchdog role and rapid reporting, are not strongly valued by the majority of people and that the watchdog role is highest among the older people. Offering solutions to community problems was strongly endorsed by only half of the study participants, while it was most popular among those who the authors say have traditionally been disenfranchised from the power sources of government and business: African Americans, Hispanics, adults with less income and education, and women (Heider, McCombs and Poindexter 2005). Solutions is an expectation that people have expressed consistently in numerous studies and is something that journalists have been integrating in their work for some time. Some of the journalists interviewed in the present study will talk about how they do it in their radio reporting.

Then there is the question asked less often - how much local news people want. Surveys show the UK is among the countries with lower-than-average interest in local news (Schulz 2021). UK radio listeners say they continue to value local news and information on local BBC and commercial radio, with 27% of weekly radio listeners saying they value local news on radio, increasing to 39% amongst those who listen to local radio (DCMS 2020). However, as the present study will demonstrate, there is a difference between valuing and actively seeking local news, which suggests that people are sometimes reluctant to admit that they follow news less than they think a good citizen should. This is confirmed in research by Ofcom (2022b) which shows that between 2020 and 2022 the number of people who claim they followed local news on television, radio and in newspapers dropped.

The present study is focused on the perceptions of journalists and listeners regarding the key roles of local radio in facilitating deliberative processes and strengthening community cohesion. Ever since its arrival in the 1920s radio has been relatively under-theorised in media studies (Starkey 2012a), while in the body of research on local news and media it occupies only a minor part. The present study is a contribution towards rectifying that. The study comes at a time when, as Koljonen (2013) says, journalism’s identity is existentially shaken and journalistic ideals have become more ambivalent and liquid. The point about neglect also applies to research on local radio journalists and listeners. The former are mostly neglected in studies on local journalism or local radio, while the latter group is mainly present in quantitative studies by industry bodies or regulators which focus on listening habits only.

Radio as a medium is currently at a turning point. It has to compete for people’s attention against a greater number of sources of information and entertainment. This challenge is what motivates increased moves towards hybridisation of radio, mainly its embrace of video across a variety of platforms. Local radio is facing additional challenges caused by the changes in the way people live and maintain links with their local area.

Understanding the perspectives of both radio journalists and listeners is essential if we wish to understand the current local radio environment and begin to consider its future. That is why the present study is employing qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups with journalists, station and programme managers, as well as listeners. They are the respondents whose experiences are central to the research questions because they are the ones who have “been there” or “are there” (Lindlof and Taylor 2002: 173).

The present study is organised as follows. Chapter 1 will provide a summary of the existing research on the role of media in democracy, the concept of localism, the types of radio relevant to this study and the role of regulation, followed by a review of research on local journalists, radio journalists and also radio listeners. Chapter 2 will offer a brief history of national and local radio in the UK, including the deliberations which led to the BBC Scotland’s decision not to follow the English model and instead set up local radio stations in a different way. Chapter 3 will outline the study design, the research methods employed, and the steps taken to ensure the validity of the study. Chapter 4 will present the study’s findings, grouped into themes which emerged from the interviews and focus groups. This chapter is divided into two parts, with the first one focusing on journalists and station managers, and the second one focusing on the listeners. These findings and their implications will be discussed in Chapter 5, where the research questions will be answered. The main contribution of the present study to the existing body of knowledge about local radio will be outlined in the Conclusion, which will also list the study’s limitations and recommend topics for future research.

# CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

The main focus of this study about perceptions of local radio by both journalists and listeners is on the medium’s role in providing information in the public interest and a space for discussion, the two elements vital for the functioning of democracy. That is why the review of literature presented in this chapter will begin with an overview of research on the role of media in democracy and in providing a public sphere. The chapter will also cover research on the concept of localism, the roles of radio and regulation in it, as well as recent research on radio journalists and listeners.

## **Media and Democracy**

One of the key roles of the media in a democratic society is to facilitate participation in deliberative processes. After all, democracy functions best when both its citizens and decision makers are informed about different viewpoints on policy problems (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Norris 2000; Tiffen *et al* 2014). Goidel, Gaddie and Ehrl (2017)believe the news media are critical to democratic governance, while Carpentier, Dahlgren and Pasquali (2013) say that the media sphere serves as a location where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences, and interact with other voices. McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger point out that citizens should have a degree of access to those who govern their lives and should be able to participate in the process by which political decisions are made. These are essential characteristics of a healthy democracy. The main vehicle for the exercise of such participation has always been the media (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2003). In complex contemporary societies people take much of their understanding of the world from the news media: broadcast news, current affairs programmes, political news in the press and increasingly via news sites on the internet (Harrison 2006). It is the media, therefore, who play a key role in informing the citizens and providing a platform for participation in the public sphere, or, as Benson puts it, the media directly contribute to and shape public debate (Benson 2013, cited by Hadland 2015: 24). McNair (2000: 105) adds to that by saying that a properly functioning public sphere requires *mass access*, not just the consumption of political information through quality media, but to its production too. He argues that a properly functioning public sphere gives the citizens the ability to contribute to and participate in politics by communicating vertically, via the institutions of the media to those of the government and the state, as well as horizontally to other members of the media audience (McNair 2000). Crucially, local news is the lynchpin connecting community life to larger ideas like democracy and the public sphere (Lowrey, Brozana and Mackay 2008).

As Hendy (2000) points out, direct deliberation on all matters of public policy is obviously difficult, and most democracies therefore accept that deliberation is, of necessity, mediated through the mass media. The space created for the ongoing dialogue among and between citizens and their representatives is what constitutes the essence of the public sphere - the space opened up by the media in which opposing views can contend in the ‘marketplace’ of ideas and allow the public to reach informed opinions (Hendy 2013: 209). For Habermas (1989), the public sphere was the area of political life, established with the rise of bourgeois society, in which private individuals, those outside the formal institutions of government, took part in the discussion of public affairs. According to him, a key condition for the development of democratic public opinion is guaranteed universal access to the public sphere for all citizens. Schlesinger, however, says that a serious shortcoming of the early Habermas was to depict the national polity as a *single* public sphere. This is a limiting case that suggests a degree of cultural homogeneity to be found in few societies, if any (Schlesinger 1999). Habermas later expanded the concept and described it as “a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas” (Habermas 1997: 373–374). Fossum and Schlesinger (2007) take the concept of the public sphere a step further; they talk of a multitude of public spheres that came about as different layers of governance emerged and the media environment expanded in the late 20th century. In a similar vein, Fraser (1990) focuses on a variety of communities, which comprise multiple social groups with different, and potentially conflicting, interests. More relevant to the present study, she advocates strengthening a public sphere composed of multiple discursive domains, organized around distinct bases of affinity and interest, because in socially stratified societies, “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (Fraser 1990: 66). Scholars such as Conboy highlight the existence of local public spheres. Writing about the history of local newspapers in the United States, he notes the interrelations between local news and local politics: “Local political factions throughout the country used the local press as a battleground for the hearts, minds, not to mention wallets of the local population so that the national public was increasingly complemented by a series of local publics” (Conboy 2005, cited by Harte, Howells and and Williams 2018: 23). For Friedland (2001: 360), “communicatively integrated communities” are formed and maintained through a robust network of local news outlets. Their covering of local issues and reflecting local voices, he says, continue to act as stimuli for a local public sphere.

For Hendy (2013), the gradual inclusion of the voice of the ‘ordinary citizen’ in the media – what Scannell (cited in Hendy 2013: 209) calls the ‘extension of communicative rights’ - has ensured that the ‘public sphere’ has long been expanded from the narrowly based, populist one. On the other hand, Schudson (1995) argues that the press cannot always communicate effectively about government to the people at large, but it can act as a stand-in for the public, holding the governors accountable - not to the public but to the ideals and rules of the democratic polity itself.

Harrison (2006) makes a distinction between the narrow and more complex views of the concept of public sphere. The former is a means of delivering information to people enabling them to form opinions. From this perspective the public sphere is a means by which citizens can read or hear about competing political news as politicians compete for support and express this competition through the news media. The latter, more complex view sees the public sphere as a deliberative rather than just an informational forum, in which good-quality information is required to stimulate discussion. Both of these views will be put to the participants in the present study to discuss.

The arrival of digital media and its role in the reshaping of public sphere has split scholars. As Zamith and Lewis (2014) point out, there has been considerable debate over whether the internet may serve as an extension of the public sphere. They say that initially, some envisioned the internet making democratic politics more inclusive by providing individuals with both the information necessary to make sound decisions and a platform through which they could advocate with minimal resources (Zamith and Lewis 2014). Or as Shirky (2008) put it, digital media encourage democratic participation and engagement by creating opportunities for online participation.

Albrecht (2006) expected the internet to help foster a deliberative model that was transparent, free of prejudice or obstacles to equal participation, and encourage informed dialogue, thereby helping realize Habermas’ ideal conceptualization of rational-critical deliberation.

Those such as Hindman (2009), however, have questioned the extent to which the internet has led to a flowering of diverse media discourse. Scholars have noted several issues that challenge the internet’s ability to extend the public sphere effectively. For Albrecht (2006) and Papacharissi (2002) one of the key barriers in the relatively early days of the Internet was a “digital divide” or unequal access to the internet, which today at least in the countries such as the UK is much less of an issue. Zamith and Lewis (2014) further highlight other, more persistent problems with the internet as an extension of the public sphere: incivility among participants; the anonymity of communicators; the fragmentation of deliberation; selective exposure by individuals; and the homogenization of discussions. Some scholars note that online participants often look very similar to offline participants (Ceron and Memoli 2016; Hindman 2009). Further to that, a greater choice of news sources may encourage citizens to seek out sources that confirm existing partisan views, thus increasing partisan intensity, while less interested citizens avoid news altogether (Prior 2007). Even back in the early days of the internet, Sunstein (2001) argued that the already emerging group polarization was likely to become more extreme with time. He wrote that two preconditions for a well-functioning, deliberative democracy were threatened by the growth of the internet and the advent of multi-channel broadcasting: first, that people should be exposed to materials they have not chosen in advance, so they can reconsider the issues and possibly recognise validity of opposing points of view. Second, people should have a range of common experiences, in order that they may come to an understanding with respect to particular issues (Sunstein 2001). On the other hand, Mossberger (2008) found a positive effect of the internet on young people in political discussion, political interest and political knowledge. This discussion of the internet as the extension of the public sphere is highly relevant to the present study, given the multimedia nature of radio today, more of which later.

In their work on the connections between the architecture of media systems, the delivery of news and citizens’ awareness of public affairs, Curran *et al* (2009) start from the premise that the democratic process assumes that individual citizens have the capacity to hold elected officials accountable. In practice, political accountability requires a variety of institutional arrangements, including free and frequent elections, the presence of strong political parties and a media system that delivers a sufficient supply of meaningful public affairs information of interest to citizens (Curran *et al* 2009). Esser *et al* (2012) also say that the functioning of democracy relies on an informed citizenship. Keeping members of society informed of news and current affairs is not only important for democracy to work, it is also important for citizens participating in social life and for community integration; otherwise, we may end up with a more uninformed and less engaged electorate, while the society may suffer from disintegrated communities (Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg 2012). After all, democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed (Aalberg, van Aelst and Curran 2010). This is where the often used metaphor of journalism as a ‘watchdog’ comes into play. The metaphor applies to local journalism too, as it also focuses on public affairs coverage holding local elites to account and in that way helping citizens understand the actors and make decisions (Nielsen 2015).

When it comes to the links between local media and political engagement, research is more limited and mostly focused on the US. Studies from there by Althaus and Trautman (2008) on local TV and Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2009) on local news in Spanish show that local news media have the ability to present news of particular relevance to individuals within specific areas, thereby raising election turnout. Reduced access to quality local news has also been found to be harmful to voter behaviour and responsive governance, leading to more corruption (Arnold 2004; Besley, Burgess, and Prat 2002; Campante and Do 2014; Strömberg 2004) and lower voter turnout (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2013). Studies have also consistently found that there is a connection between local newspapers, readership and civic engagement, both in the US (Moy *et al* 2004; Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel 2006; Paek, Yoon and Shah 2005) and in Norway (Bruns and Himmler 2011; Hatcher and Haavik 2013; Skogerbø and Winsvold 2011). Other studies established links between local journalism and local identity (Kanniss 1991; McNair 2006), while research by McLeod, Scheufele and Moy (1999) has shown that media exposure was linked to increases in political deliberation, meeting attendance, and participation in community activities. Local news availability is also linked with the general health of the democratic system (Bruns and Himmler 2011; Ekström, Johansson and Larsson 2006).

Furthermore, the use of local news media is also associated with civic engagement. Various studies have established that citizens who use local news media are more likely to trust their community, participate in community groups and engage in political discourse with neighbours than those who do not consume local media (McLeod, Scheufele and Moy 1999; Stamm 1985; Viswanath *et al* 1990). Reading newspapers is found to have a stronger influence on civic engagement than using other media (Becker and Dunwoody 1982; Robinson and Levy 1996). Conversely, a study by Pew Research Center in the US found that the civically engaged citizens are more likely than the less engaged to use and value local news (Barthel *et al* 2016).

Following on from that, Holbert (2005) says that one of the most important and dominant questions in the study of political communication is how the media aid citizens to become informed voters, or why news is ‘the lifeblood of a democracy’ (Fenton 2010: 3). According to Zaller (2003), the media plays a central role as the citizens’ primary source of information about political issues. The media is expected to provide sufficient and relevant political information to citizens so they can hold their representatives to account and make informed choices (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), or, as Andersen *et al* (2016) put it, influence political participation by affecting knowledge about current political affairs and political efficacy - the citizens’ belief they can understand and influence politics. Active political participation is key to a healthy democracy, especially within the frameworks of participatory and deliberative democracy. 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).

This point is illustrated well in a recent BBC Trust survey of audiences in England, in which the participants said about their local BBC radio: ‘*Helps me understand politics and decision-making in my local area and holds decision makers to account’* or ‘*Provides high quality, independent news’* (BBC Trust 2016: 9-10). Still, there is considerable uncertainty about whether recent changes in the media environment are supporting or impeding increased public affairs knowledge (Aalberg, van Aelst and Curran 2010). This issue will be addressed in more detail later on. For now, it suffices to say that 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, for example, 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). Furthermore, for participation to be meaningful, citizens need to view themselves as capable of acting upon their beliefs and the political system as responsive to their demands (Finkel 1985).

Scholarship distinguishes three determinants for news learning opportunities (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1990; Prior 2007): first, the *media environment*, particularly the frequency with which information is made available; second, people’s *content preferences* for information rather than entertainment; and third, a sense of *civic duty* as citizens to be informed about the major issues of the day. Similarly, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) note that the acquisition of information depends not only on availability or supply but also on attentiveness or demand. Curran *et al*. (2009) indicate that - at least in the European context - people’s content preferences and sense of duty are in part a socialization outcome of the *media environment*. Referring to television, they say that growing up in a broadcast system where the most-watched channels provide multiple options for news encounters does seem to affect people’s long-developed appreciation for information programs, and a sense of social obligation to follow it. Bennett and Iyengar (2008), however, argue that the demand side of the information function is most affected by changes in the media landscape. Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg (2012) argue that we are witnessing decreasing interest in news media, which to them represents an important challenge to democracy and societies throughout Europe. They say the probability of tuning out is a function of both the individual traits of the citizen and supply of news in particular media systems. Research on the effects of television shows that people who watch news on public channels are more politically involved, effective, attentive and knowledgeable than those who watch it on commercial channels (Aarts and Semetko 2003; Curran *et al* 2009; Holtz-Bacha and Norris 2001; Soroka *et al* 2013), while Nir (2012) argues that the knowledge gap amongst segments in society is narrowed by the existence of a strong public service provider. Postman (1985) similarly argues that market mechanisms provide a poor information environment, while Aalberg, van Aelst and Curran (2010) claim that commercial media have a structural bias in disfavouring news and current affairs. Prior (2007) notes that information gaps are increasing as the high-choice media environment makes it easier to avoid news and current affairs altogether. It is therefore not *ability* that is the main obstacle standing between an abundance of political information and a well and evenly informed public, but, rather, a lack of *motivation* in the new high-choice environment where politics constantly compete with entertainment (Aalberg, Blekesaune and Elvestad 2013). Some scholars think that the fragmented news environment weakens the foundation of democracy by diminishing information about public affairs (Bennet 2005; Patterson 2000), while those such as Zaller (2003) or Schudson (1998) say that normative democratic theory places heavy demands on “the good citizen” and that the ideal instead should be that of the “monitorial citizen.” Zaller further argues that intense, dramatic, and entertaining coverage will lead more citizens to get more information because it is more tailored to the needs of the low-information citizens. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that some media should provide only a basic news service that the “monitorial citizen” will scan, while other media offer fuller news coverage and commentary to satisfy the demands of the news junkie (Zaller 2003).

Then there is the question of whether online news consumption sufficiently compensates for the decline in tradi­tional news media use, especially among the younger generation. Norris’ (2001) normalization theses suggests that citizens who are disconnected from traditional news media are not more likely to connect online instead. Traditional social cleavages will continue to persist (Räsänen 2006) or even further increase (Prior 2007). Also, those who acquire their public affairs news from the Internet develop a more fragmented and different issue agenda compared to citizens who use more traditional media (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002). Still, Zaller (2003) points out that even a thin diet of news consumed by the majority is sufficient to sustain a healthy democracy.

Of course, not all societies are democratic and it is important to point out that in non-democratic societies the media usually plays a different role - that of a propaganda tool controlled by the ruling elite whose main aim is to actually supress public debate. Then there are emerging democracies, whose media environments face their own set of unique challenges (for a good overview of those see Hadland 2015). Those are, however, beyond the scope of this study.

The media, as this brief overview of literature has shown, plays a key role in helping citizens participate in democratic procesess by providing a space for public debate. In the next section, another key role of media - fostering a sense of community - will be discussed.

## **Localism**

As Robins and Cornford (1993) noted some 30 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 their perspective, local and regional media are seen as fundamental resources of both democracy and identity. Since the early days of media research, it has been claimed that the news media have had an important function in integrating individuals within their local community (Park 1923, cited by Elvestad 2009: 105). But what exactly do we mean by local (or regional) media? A path towards answering that question lies in the discussion around the concept of localism, which can help us situate the research in this study and better understand the related regulatory policies.

Falling under the larger rubric of *public interest,* the concept of *localism* is meant to facilitate the decentralization of information, ensure diversity and pluralism, encourage public participation in the democratic process, bring power and accountability closer to citizens, and foster community identity (Cowling 2005; Napoli 2001). It also has strong ties to the idea of the community as a geographic entity and as incubator for local values, culture, and tradition (Napoli 2001); it means providing opportunities for local self-expression and reaching out to, developing and promoting local talent, making programming decisions to serve local needs and allocating resources to address the needs of the community (Cowling 2005). Still, this concept has no official definition (Ali 2012). Localism can be understood as a commitment by broadcasters to “local operations, local research, local management, locally originated programming, local artists and local news and events” (*Local Community Radio Act of 2005*, in Dunbar-Hestor 2014: 142), or as Ali (2012: 108) puts it, localism can be defined as the belief that broadcasters should be responsive to the local geographic communities to which they are licensed. Ali further writes that localism rests on a belief in the salience of place-based communities, which, for Cowling (2005: 354) are predicated on an understanding that “local communities and nations continue to define their selves and their aspirations within territorial parameters”. This is important as historically regulators have relied on a place-based definition of the local from which to base regulations for local media (Ali 2012). This generally includes the airing of community-responsive programming, particularly local news and information programming, and being engaged with the local community (Napoli 2001). What is of particular relevance to the present study is the notion that localism brings with it the persuasive assumptions of democracy and civic participation where local media facilitate dialogue and deliberation (Ali 2012). Local media also help create a shared sense of place, promote civic engagement, serve as social glue and contribute to solving problems (Lowrey, Brozana, and Mackay 2008). Napoli *et al* (2017) suggest three criteria for addressing how well communities are served by local journalism: (1) whether the content is original; (2) whether it is about the local community; and (3) whether it addresses communities’ critical information needs, including health, education, transportation, economic development, and political life. But what exactly is local journalism? Ali (2016: 108) offers a comprehensive definition applicable to the present study by saying that local journalism is the reporting undertaken by professional journalists in an institutional setting that is focused on a predetermined geographic area. Related to this, and seen as a consequence of news media’s commitment to localism, is the notion of localness, which is a term often used in the present study. It refers to the quality and independence of local news; in other words - the value of local news (Harte, Howells and Williams 2018). McNair identifies four principal and interrelated democracy-enabling roles for the news. He sees news: as a source of accurate information for citizens; as a watchdog/fourth estate; as a mediator and/or representative of communities, and as an advocate of the public in campaigning terms (McNair 2009: 237–240). Franklin argues that “local newspapers should offer independent and critical commentary on local issues, make local elites accountable, [and] provide a forum for the expression of local views on issues of community concern” (2006b: xix). Several studies, though, have found the ongoing crisis in the UK news industry is endangering the localness of local news (Fenton 2011; Franklin 2006a; Howells 2015).

Ali says that media policies around localism have focused on areas such as local ownership, the location of the studio, local programming quotas, and community dialogue. Still, regulators have struggled to identify what constitutes local programming, particularly local news (Ali 2012). Like localism itself, local programming can be characterized as either “place-based” (“point-of-origin”) or “content-based”/“content-oriented” (Napoli 2001; Smallwood and Moon 2011). As Smallwood and Moon describe, the former is geographically based, whereby programming is expected to be “produced and presented within the local community”. Alternatively, content-based local programming “shifts the emphasis from the production source to the nature of the program’s content” (Smallwood and Moon 2011: 39). The point-of-origin and content-based iterations of local programming can also be labelled as the “spatial” and “social” dimensions of localism, respectively (Napoli 2001; Stavitsky 1994), which, according to Ali, relate to “communities of interest” and “communities of place”. He goes on to say that communities of place—the spatial iteration of localism—have been privileged in regulatory discourse (2012).

Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg say that sharing stories about news and current issues is important not only in a democratic and political sense; it is important because it integrates members of society and strengthens the community feeling. Whether we are talking about communities of place or communities of interest, it still stands that media contributes to community bonding in what is called community integration hypothesis (Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg 2012). In case of local media, that bonding is primarily along spatial lines. Some studies (Høst 1999; Stamm 1985) show that interest in local news is related to different kinds of ties to the community, with length of residence, small probability of moving, and subjective community ties showing a positive correlation with interest in local news media.

Now, however, the importance of local has been eroded by advanced capitalism, which for Harvey (1989) further intensifies the disassociation from places. We still live local lives, but our lives are less locally bounded, as people move more often, as more and more people commute to work elsewhere, as more and more of the goods and services we consume are produced far away, and as some of the most important decisions impacting our lives and communities are taken elsewhere (Nielsen 2015). By accelerating and intensifying the speed at which business is conducted, messages are sent and distances overcome, advanced capitalism and neoliberalism have resulted in a “time-space compression” of our everyday lives (Harvey 1989).

Related to this is the development of digital distribution of media content, which challenges the economic sustainability of local broadcasting as it brings with it audience fragmentation, advertiser gravitation, and user-generated content (Canada 2009 and Waldman 2011, both cited by Ali 2012: 106). Furthermore, digital media pull us away from geographically defined places and help create new communities of interest that have little or nothing to do with geography. This is what Ali (2012) calls *social localism*. He says that these challenges have important and immediate consequences when it comes to the regulation of the broadcasting industry more generally and local news in particular. Is local news now specific to an immediate geographic locality or is it news that is of interest to the local population? Or is it news produced within the locality? What should count as local? While some argue it is time to do away with the spatial concept altogether (Crisell and Starkey 2006; Napoli 2001; Stavitsky 1994), others such as Westwood (2011) say that the geographic element cannot be overlooked.

Academic debates aside, it is worth pointing out that localism in media policy has not been able to keep up with these changes in social relationships, technology, and community formation (Braman 2007). This is why Napoli (2001: 223) argues for hybrid localism policies, recognizing that the spatial dimension will continue because our social, political, and cultural institutions are tied to geographic localities but acknowledging as well that “social conceptualizations” need to be included.

The changes to the notion of local outlined above have a signifcant impact on local media too. Nielsen says that transient populations represent a different kind of audience from long-term residents, that local business news, for example, is less important for people who work and shop outside the community, and that the incentive to follow local politics is reduced if power is perceived to be elsewhere. Local journalism increasingly faces the challenge not only of covering local affairs, but also of identifying in ways that resonate with their audience what is local, what makes it local, and why the local is even relevant (Neilsen 2015).

Harrison believes that the coverage of local democratic institutions and local public services is often limited by the tendency to focus on local crime and human interest stories. He cites local journalists who he says often bemoan the fact that frequently there is not enough hard political news available. Hard local news, they say, more often consists of crime, negative human interest stories and local accidents and disasters (Harrison 2006). Another factor that seems to work against public affairs in news selection is the widely shared view that hard news must be humanized or personalized in order to retain the audience (Bennett 2005). Also, public affairs news is difficult to make as *user friendly* and relevant to the lives of ordinary viewers as stories about personal health or celebrities (Graber 2002; McManus 1994). Broadly speaking, stories deemed not to be of relevance to public policy, are known as soft news (Patterson 2000). Those include human interest stories and a focus on entertainment, weather, or sports (Patterson 2000) and one of their advantages is that they are cheap to cover (Baum 2003).

But what about the increasingly common areas without the presence of local media, the so-called news deserts? Abernathy (2020: 18) defines a news desert as “a community, either rural or urban, where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at the grassroots level.” She further says that news deserts contribute to cultural, economic and political divides in a country, between media-rich communities typically located in urban areas and those in news-deprived regions.

Gulyas (2021) identifies three main approaches to news deserts: outlet, media ecology, and content‐focused understandings. Outlet‐focused investigations typically assess the availability and supply of media outlets in different geographical localities; media‐ecology approaches explore the availability of local news and information in one or a limited number of specific ecosystems, while in content‐focused approaches to news deserts, scholars focus on the quality and relevance of news and the robustness of local journalism that is available to a community. On all three approaches, research in the UK is limited and almost completely bypasses local radio.

Some scholars have demonstrated that the decline in local news coverage in the US results in the decline of political engagement (Hayes and Lawless 2021) and an increase in government inefficiency and spending (Gao *et al*. 2020). Areas with fewer local news outlets have reduced political competitiveness (Hayes and Lawless 2018) and lower voter turnout (Rubado and Jennings 2020). Mathews (2022) has found that following the loss of a local newspaper, community members felt a sense of isolation and diminished pride. Altogether, the absence of service journalism and unequal news distribution intensify inequalities, shape democratic processes, and impact community representation. Conversely, civic engagement and other indicators of an active citizenry should be higher when local news media institutions are numerous and vibrant and members of the public are consuming the content they produce (Shaker 2014).

These growing news divides map onto pre-existing structural inequalities that disproportionately harm lower socio-economic groups. Researchers in the UK have seen a strong correlation between deprivation and local news coverage: the more deprived the area, as per the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, the fewer the number of news outlets, controlling for population size (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis 2023). Similarly, in the US, low-income communities are more likely to lie within news deserts (Stonbely 2020), and poor people are more vulnerable to informational disparities (Hamilton and Morgan 2018). News deserts are often found in areas lagging behind economically, which are increasingly termed by academics, commentators, journalists and politicians as ‘left behind’ (Local Trust 2019: 6). In England, such areas have a more youthful population, have experienced a smaller population increase than other areas, they are more likely to be made up of white British residents and are also characterised as having higher levels of one-person households and lone-parent family households compared with the national average, as well as poorer health outcomes (Local Trust 2019: 11). In the UK, Public Interest News Foundation has also identified ‘news drylands’ where an area is not a total desert but is poorly served given its population size. Most of such drylands are to be found in highly urban areas such as London boroughs and areas around Birmingham (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis 2023).

Research on news deserts in the UK is limited and focuses on newspapers and to a lesser extent new digital media outlets, while neglecting local broadcasting. This is in large part because these types of media encounter the most significant obstacles in terms of generating revenue, as highlighted by the Cairncross report (2019). In their study of deficiencies in local news provision, Ramsay and Moore (2016) found a lack of coverage in many local authority districts. Gulyas (2021) focused on spatial inequalities in printed local news outlets in England and established that over half of communities in the lowest decile for deprivation had between zero and one newspaper. News deserts have also been studied in Brazil (da Silva and Pimenta 2020), Australia (Magasic and Hess 2021) and Spain (Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero and López-García 2023). Wang (2023) warns that the lack of adequate and diverse local news sources in the news deserts could lead to the entrenchment of residents in their pre‐existing political beliefs and high dependence on the nationalized media environment. This could contribute to the polarization of public opinion and potentially restrict democratic discourse (Hopkins 2018; Martin and McCrain 2019). Thus, the spatiality of news circulation has far‐reaching implications for the functioning of democracy and the maintenance of a healthy public sphere. In general, the economically struggling communities that lose a newspaper are the very places where it is most difficult to sustain either a for‐profit or nonprofit news organization (Abernathy 2023).

In more general efforts to address the problem of news deserts, researchers recommend treating news as a public good (Ali 2016), in a way public service broadcasting is treated in media policy in many countries. Ali (2016) actually goes further and argues that local journalism and local news should be treated as what Musgrave (1959; cited by Ali 2016: 120) called merit goods - those which are under-produced by the market and underinvested in by consumers, but should nonetheless be provided, like free school lunches, education, vaccinations and similar. This approach would essentially require a recognition that local news is vital to the democratic health of a nation-state and the everyday lives of citizens, but also note its decline in production and consumption (Ali 2016).

In his work on news interest at different geographical levels, Merton (1968, cited by Elvestad 2009: 105) distinguished between ‘locals’- audience members who were more interested in local news, thereby expressing a primary interest in local society - and ‘cosmopolitans’ - those more interested in ‘national’ news. Elvestad (2009) argues, however, that cosmopolitanism and localism are not mutually exclusive, and that being a local does not necessarily have to be the opposite of being a cosmopolitan.

Another concept relevant to the present study is that of regionalism, which at least in media studies focusing on news provision does not seem to be explored to any large extent. The concept is rather tied to national levels of diversity, centre-periphery dimensions of national politics, to organizational aspects of news production, and to distribution reach primarily of newspapers (Sjovaag 2015). In many contexts, regionalism is also tied to ruralism (Hanusch 2015; Richards 2012) and has been seen as a safeguard against some of the perils of local affiliation (Kanniss 1991; Parsons, Finnegan and Benham 1988).

What does this mean for radio, which has traditionally played a key role in both the delivery of local news and in fostering the sense of community on a local level? This question, which is at the core of the present study, will be dealt with in more detail later. For now, it is important to lay the foundations for that discussion by looking at the key characteristics of radio as a medium.

## **Radio**

It is an understatement to say that in media studies radio does not get as much attention as other media, and certainly nowhere near as much as television (Keith 2007; Lewis and Booth 1989; Lewis 2000; Tacchi 2000). This is an oddity, especially given that from a global perspective, radio is a growing media. Audience figures are on the rise in Asia (Sen 2014), while in many African countries radio remains the most important media (Jauert *et al* 2017). Closer to home in Europe, radio is also in good health, with a weekly reach of 84 percent, although it is losing young listeners and their attention (Jauert *et al* 2017).

Ever since its beginnings, radio has been what Lewis (2000: 161) refers to as ‘soundtrack for living’, intimately woven into our daily, domestic routines. Furthermore, as soon as the technology - phone lines patched into a radio studio - allowed it, radio became an interactive medium. Although radio was primarily a national medium, Prehn says that technological developments such as introduction of FM in the 1960s, made it possible to regionalize and even localize radio. He sees this as a de-concentrating, rather than a decentralizing, political process which brought radio closer to its audience as it created alternative instruments to distribute opinions and give people their own access to the broadcasting medium (Prehn 1998).

Thanks to the developments in technology, radio’s relationship with its audience is changing. Radio’s codes used to be purely auditory, but not any more. Crisell (1994) writes that the distinctiveness of radio is not that it involves the imagination while the other media do not, but that it involves it to a different extent. He believes that radio’s appeal to imagination is closely related to its other advantageous effect - its flexibility, as radio allows the listener to perform other activities while listening. Related to this is Douglas’ useful categorization of the ways people listen to the radio, which again demonstrates the uniqueness of the medium. He says that listeners typically move between two extremes, which he calls *tap* and *concentrated* listening (Douglas 1999: 33), also known as *lean-back* or *lean-forward* types of consumption.

Another characteristic of radio Crisell highlights is that listening to it is mostly a solitary activity. Although radio’s audiences may be counted in millions, the medium addresses itself very much to the *individual* (Crisell 1994). Similarly, Edmond (2014) writes that for a medium fundamentally defined by the indiscriminate spray of communication from one point to many – radio has a surprisingly strong grip on the intimate. This is one of the characteristics of radio which does not seem to be affected by the changes in the way people consume radio. On the other hand, Hendy claims that it is actually the radio industry that speaks increasingly not of global scales and mass audiences but of *individuals*. He says this is because ‘niche’ stations claim to identify and feed the tastes of ever narrower sections of the audience, while technology claims to offer the prospect of listeners becoming the creators of their own personal radio experience. However, in the context of current trends in the radio industry, Hendy is rather sceptical of this claim. Borrowing a term from Adorno, he says that modern radio offers only *pseudo-individualism* as there is no real difference between the myriad radio stations we can tune into. They all play the same records, use the same presenter idioms, the same sources of news, arranged slightly differently but with broadly the same concern for pace and flow of rhythms of daily life (Hendy 2000).

Among radio’s widely acknowledged strengths are its immediacy and relatively low production and transmission costs. But another key point in discussion on radio, which often seems neglected, is its potential as *social* medium - something that Walter Benjamin first noted (Bonini 2014). Benjamin claimed that radio should not be a means to circulate an outdated bourgeois culture or a mere entertainment medium: it should instead occupy a middle ground between sombre and dry educational broadcasts and the low–mindedness of vaudeville shows (cited by Bonini 2014: n/a). If we look at what radio in the UK offers today, in its multichannel form, it is clear that Benjamin’s view of it is still pertinent. While the means of delivery may have changed over time, the basic role of radio - to inform, educate and entertain - is still being fulfilled. Radio remains the invisible medium, although its relationship with its audience is constantly changing. Referring to the ways technology has influenced the way radio communicates to its audience, Bonnini (2014) splits this relationship into four chronological stages: between the invisible medium and a) invisible public, where those listening were not linked in any way with those speaking; b) audible public, characterised by audience participation, mainly through phone-ins; c) readable public, which thanks to developments in technoglogy could now link to those they listened to via text messages, emails and web-sites; and d) networked public, where social media allows listeners to not only link with those they listen to but with other listeners too. Thanks to these changes the distance between the authors of the radio message and its listeners has been increasingly reduced throughout the history of radio, almost disappearing with the emergence of networked publics (Bonnini 2014). Also, radio today is a multi-platform medium, with distribution via analogue technology, DAB variants, satellite and the internet, with the latter allowing the listener to even see the inside of a radio studio through live or recorded streams of radio programmes. It is this expanded interactivity that Hendy (2000) sees as one of the elements that give digital radio its democratic credentials. Another feature of digital radio that is profoundly changing the ways in which we listen to and even understand radio is the non-linear playout or shifted listening, which essentially enables a much greater personalization of radio by the listeners (Hirschmeier and Beule 2021).

Transition to digital transmissions is actually offering a whole new range of content options to radio listeners, precipitating what Laor (2022) calls a profound change in the structure of traditional radio and listening habits, where online tools caused a fundamental change in the relationship between listener and broadcaster. There is a growing body of research on the ways in which radio is trying to reinvent itself to stay relevant in the new multimedia and web-based world (Cordeiro 2012; Laor, Lissitsa and Galily 2019; Moshe, Laor and Friedkin 2017; Punnett 2016; Starkey 2017).

It all started with the arrival of the World Wide Web, which made it possible for stations to offer their programmes in a digital format via streaming and dedicated web sites. Internet radio streaming began in 1994 and accelerated with the development of audio software in the late 1990s. These new possibilities allowed even local radio to go global and find audiences far outside the reach of its broadcast signal (Hilmes 2013), as some of the participants in the present study will confirm. This, in a way, turned radio stations from on-air broadcasters to content makers. The managers once known as Programme Controllers became Content Controllers, managing content generated at their radio station on both analogue and digital platforms (Berry 2014). Cameras were brought into radio studios some 20 or so years ago. In the UK, Virgin Radio was thought to be the pioneer with its simulcasting of the breakfast show, hosted by Chris Evans at the time, on the satellite channel Sky 1. Similar efforts were made in the US, where Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and others all telecasted their terrestrial radio shows (Zechowski 2014). Since then, radio has become more visual through the use of on-screen graphics on digital TV’s, visually enhanced DAB radios, smartphone apps or online players, to webcams and social media content (Berry 2013). In 2011 BBC Radio One, for example, started urging its listeners to its news programme Newsbeat to “Listen, Watch, Share”, as it started offering video versions of the news stories it ran, which users could share with their friends by clicking on 'sharing' icons within the website (Berry 2013). In January 2014, BBC Radio 1 became the first radio station in the world to reach one million subscribers on YouTube (BBC 2014). For a BBC station targeting young listeners, YouTube growth represented a wider desire to reinvent ‘radio’ for the young audience and ensure that key content was delivered to them in the right place, which might not be on an actual radio (Berry 2013). This fits into broadcasters’ strategy identified by Bonini *et al* (2014: 99) to work out where listeners are and then ‘start colonizing’ those spaces with content.

Shareability is of course a big feature of social media, which quickly, as Berry (2014) points out, became a second screen for radio, with social exchanges online being as important as those heard more widely on the radio. Bonixe (2012) points out that social media significantly changed journalism itself, as it gave news consumers the opportunity to comment on the stories, suggest new approaches or add facts about an event reported by journalists; essentially making a blend of producing and consuming information. Bonini (2012) adds to that by saying that the relation between listeners similarly changed as they became able to establish links online, exchange public comments on the programme’s wall and express appreciation, or not, for specific content.

Edmond (2014) writes that following the advent of new audio delivery formats, radio has undergone another period of profound aesthetic reflection. Still, he says, radio continues to be seen as intimate, personal, trustworthy, exploratory, live and immediate, and these same characteristics continue to play a vital role in determining how radio producers, audiences and programmes are transitioning to more expansive and interactive forms of content. For Berry (2013), the introduction of visualisation to complement the auditory offering neither diminishes the impact of sound nor substantially alters the nature of the medium. He sees it as simply a response to audience demands and adds that by expanding into video, radio is turning a threat into an advantage. In a similar way, Lax (2009) observes that media convergence is not about replacing existing media; it is about the augmentation of existing media. Radio no longer lives solely in the kitchen; it is now a mix of websites, social media interactions, podcasts, customisable experiences, videos and hybrid radios (Berry 2014) that can be consumed in a variety of ways. Today, many listeners think of their favourite radio stations as online information providers as much as over-the-air broadcasters; for them, sound is just one aspect of radio across a variety of screens (Hilmes 2013). The Internet and digital media have reorganized the landscape of radio by creating a new format and new listening patterns for radio (Laor 2021). In the UK, Bauer Media Group announced in 2021 that it was launching a premium service where listeners could skip songs, hear ad-free versions of a radio show or listen to additional stations (Cooper 2021; cited by Berry 2023: 510). Other broadcasters’ apps allow listeners to restart or pause a live programme (as is the case with BBC Sounds) or skip out of a live stream into a customized stream in the same station format (Global Player). Still, the traditional strengths of radio are undiminished: mobility, ease of access, real-time broadcasting, integration with the community, personalities, entertainment, established journalistic standards and creative audio programming (Jędrzejewski 2014). All of this explains why radio still sees itself as probably the most democratic medium. Berry (2013) suggests that the addition of images means that what we once knew as ‘radio’ has become something more, maybe “audio” or maybe we need a new term altogether; something like “Radio+” or even “Radio 3.0”.

## **Radio as public sphere**

As Hendy (2000) explains, radio adopts the language of democracy and employs the rhetoric of two apparently different democratic functions: one in which it claims to mediate the views of the listeners on their behalf, thus carving out some form of institutionalized ‘public sphere’ of opinion and debate, and a second in which it claims to be an ‘alternative’ medium representing not just the voice but also the active participation of those incapable of expression through other media or public forums. Radio does this as its stations and programmes are the ‘voice; of the people, where they ‘talkback’ to those in positions of influence and power’ (Hendy 2000: 195). The third way in which radio presents itself as a democratic medium is through the opportunities it provides for direct participation in its own production, as it is cheap to produce, which makes it, at least in theory, the medium of the more marginalized and disenfranchised sections of the community as much as of the large corporation or the state (Hendy 2000). Here, Hendy refers to community radio, which, as Meadows *et al* (2005) point out, can re-invigorate the public sphere by reflecting local cultures and stimulating debate and discussions. Some elements of this are identifiable in independent commercial radio in the UK, as will be demonstrated later.

More narrowly, the way radio contributes to “deliberative democracy” (Chambers and Costain 2000: xi) in Britain, where it sustains “a healthy public sphere where citizens can exchange ideas, acquire knowledge and information, confront public problems, exercise public accountability, discuss policy options, challenge the powerful without fear of reprisals, and defend principles” (Chambers and Costain 2000: xi) is through access programmes, or what Rushkoff (cited by McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2002: p9) calls “forum media”. McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger write that these programmes on radio and television represent the people to themselves, in the process of engaging with the political elite, and they give people voice, real and symbolic. Access programmes are generally considered to offer valuable political information, although there are some reservations about their lack of impact on government and policy, as well as a lingering perception of class bias and elitism in at least some formats, while some critics see them as “dumbed down” political infotainment (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2002). Others advocate the democratic potential of what Livingstone and Lunt have called “talk show democracy”, while Kenneth Newton (1997) speculates on the positive role of access programmes in the “mobilisation” of the citizenry (all cited by McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2002: 408). In his book on journalism and democracy, McNair offers a good introduction to pre-internet age access routes which allowed members of the public to participate in political media, starting with readers’ letters. He says that the evolution of public access to the political media was characterized by three trends:

* From elite to mass, reflecting the development of the media and political culture;
* From self-selection to relatively random access, though media professionals always retain the right to draw up the rules which govern access;
* And from journalistic control of the content of the contributions made in access spaces, to relative lack of control, verging at times on the chaotic (McNair 2000: 108)

Mc Nair, Hibberd and Schlesinger split access programmes found in the British broadcast media into three categories:

* *the studio debate*, where an audience drawn from the public at large is invited to put questions to a panel of politicians and/or appropriately qualified experts, usually comprising four or more individuals.
* *the phone-in debate*, in which callers contribute to studio discussion or put questions to politicians and other experts over the line. Issue-led and news-driven, the phone-in show tends to focus on one or two issues over a two or three-hour period, allowing for prolonged debate.
* *the single-issue debate*, in which members of the public are invited to decide the merits of a single issue by listening to the presentation of competing views, which may include the views of the audience (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2002: 33).

Public participation in these programmes is facilitated for the purpose of achieving three goals in support of the democratic process:

* *representation* of the people in the public sphere;
* *interrogation* - what Habermas (1989) has called the *critical scrutiny* of or *critical publicity*  towards political elites by the people;
* the *mobilisation* of citizens to participate in politics whether that involvement takes the form of voting or some other mode of participation, such as party membership, involvement in single-issue campaigning, or simply thinking in a sustained way about politics. In the terms frequently heard in current debates about the crisis of democratic participation, this aim can also be defined as *engagement* of citizens in the political process (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2002: 34).

As noted above, the phone-in is one of the main formats in access programmes on radio. The first radio phone-in shows were developed in the United States in the 1950s, while the first phone-in in the UK was heard in Nottingham in 1968 (Crisell 2002: 147). With the development of phone-in programmes, members of the public were on a routine basis actively encouraged to contribute to issues under discussion in the studio, including political and social debates. In his deliberations on radio, Hendy (2000: 209) attaches particular importance to the talk radio phone-in, calling it an ‘alternative channel’ which repairs the democratic deficit of ‘mediated public deliberation’, while Douglas (2004: 285) sees the phone-ins as ‘electronic surrogates for the town common, the village square, the meeting hall, the coffee house…’ Polan (1990; cited by Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 21), however, sees audience discussion programmes as an example of a pseudo public sphere, with little to recommend it. Bourdieu (1998) goes further; he sees all political debate shows and other forms of public access broadcasting as pointless charades. All these and other perspectives will be put to the participants in the present study.

While there is abundant literature on the role of broadcast media as public sphere, not much has been written about the history of discussion programmes on UK radio and television. In their summary of the history of political discussion, or “access programming” in the UK media, McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2003) write that until the 1960s there was comparatively little three-way interaction between broadcasters, politicians and the general public. In the first 40 years of the BBC, they write, public participation in political programmes was prevented by a formidable alliance of the BBC and political elites. The BBC only began to reverse this policy in the post-1945 period when tentative moves were made to encourage greater public participation in radio programming, including political formats. It took some politicians even longer to accept the idea that the public could play an important part in mediated political discussion (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2003). In the post-war period active public involvement was limited to a number of programmes, including the political access programme Any Questions? which began in the Western region in 1948 and was eventually given a nationwide transmission slot. The programme continues broadcasting today as the longest running political access programme on radio. Otherwise, the broadcasting of politics was a one-sided affair with the public receiving news of political developments and events, with very little chance for the public to interrogate political elites. Neither the BBC nor the political parties encouraged such interaction. McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2003) further write that John Reith was keen to nurture limited public participation, although without the involvement of politicians. They cite the example of the 1934 series, *Time to Spare*, which examined the consequences of unemployment, inviting ordinary working-class people to discuss the harsh consequences of mass unemployment. Eleven people spoke in total, including a miner and a homeless person. Politicians, meanwhile, defended the primacy of Parliament as the forum for national debate, although this started to change in 1943 with *Everybody's Mike,* aprogramme which involved six MPs answering questions put to them by a comedian but sent by members of the public.

With the arrival of BBC local radio in 1967 phone-in formats were developed in areas such as Leicester, Nottingham and Sheffield. McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2003) write that the quality of debate was often poor as the listeners were still largely unaccustomed to requests for their views. Nevertheless, the format stayed on and then saw further expansion with the advent of commercial local radio in 1973, where it was seen as ideal because it combined by then a genuine popular appeal with relatively low production costs. The national radio soon followed and in 1970 the BBC launched a new political show, *It’s Your Line* with Robin Day, followed in 1974 by *Election Call,* where leading political figures were questioned on a range of issues during the two election campaigns that year.

Later years saw a big rise in the numbers of political access programmes on radio, associated with the significant growth in speech radio, which was in no small part facilitated by the arrival of digital modes of transmission and the opening up of space on the spectrum. For the BBC, the next key moment in this process was the launch of Radio 5 Live in March 1994, a station wholly devoted to news and sport. For small commercial stations access programs can be a crucial element in building reputation and visibility in the market (this brief summary is based on McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2003). However, as the present study will demonstrate later, access programmes have, for a variety of reasons, disappeared from commercial radio. Writing about local radio in the US, Crider (2023) says that localism has been on the decline since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 ushered in an era of radio corporate consolidation. As noted earlier, something similar has been happening in the UK, where the BBC is reducing its local output while commercial radio is maintaining only a modicum of it. Crider (2020) also says that smaller owners in the US struggle to maintain local programming, which again is what we see in the UK as well. This erosion of local radio as a political public sphere has contributed to creating an electorate with inadequate knowledge of local issues, choosing to focus only on national politics instead (Brooks and Collins 2016). One of the key promises of the transfer to digital transmission was that radio’s role in the public sphere would be enhanced, as the additional capacity for stations should allow a greater diversity of radio formats (Lax 2007). As we now know, and the present study outlines it, this has not happened.

Research is now beginning to emerge on podcasting as an extension of the broadcast public sphere, although most of it is focused on US podcasts covering national topics.

Given the above-mentioned advent of new audio delivery formats, the definition of what constitutes radio today becomes somewhat blurred. Leaving aside the means of delivery and the challenges that creates, we need to look at ways to categorize radio. Hendy proposes to do it according to the way radio is funded and - related to that - how it is motivated, where motivation means discerning the goals of the broadcasters which may be broadly economic, political or cultural in character. He identifies five models:

* State radio
* Underground radio
* Community radio
* Public-service radio
* Commercial radio (Hendy 2000: 14).

It is the latter three that the present study will be looking at in more detail, as those are the models available in England and Scotland that in one way or another include the provision of news in their programming.

## **Public Service Radio**

In the UK there is only one purely public service radio broadcaster - the BBC with its range of national stations covering the whole of the UK, and 40 local stations in England. In Scotland, there is however just one public service radio station - BBC Radio Scotland, with its regional community stations that broadcast on an opt-out basis. As elsewhere in the UK, public service radio is the oldest form of broadcasting and still enjoys relatively high levels of popularity and audience loyalty. In its ideal model, public service broadcasting (PSB) is understood to be a public media platform capable of providing citizens with independent and quality information, free from both commercial and political pressures, and which has its roots in the enlightenment notion of a public space where social and political life unfolds (Habermas 1989). Hendy (2013) sees PSB as an emancipatory project rooted in the idea of Enlightenment. Most generally, ideas of what contemporary mass media owe to society are rooted in the history of democratic states, especially in the western liberal tradition that has freedom of expression as its foundation stone (McQuail 2003). Scanell says that PSB was started by those who believed that mass culture shouldn’t be ignored; that it should be improved. And in its various forms it was precisely this idea of *service* which was later ‘grafted onto broadcasting in its formative period’ (Scannell 1993: 55). Radio was a form of communication that suddenly by the 1920s seemed tailor-made for achieving the mass-enlightenment. In principle, it could reach into every home, indifferent to class or reading ability. Its possibilities gradually dawned on a generation of thinkers, public administrators and entrepreneurs across the developed world (Hendy 2013).

BBC’s first Director-General, John Reith, quickly concluded that broadcasting was a precious national resource - too precious to be used to merely deliver audiences to advertisers or even to wireless manufacturers. He thought that it should instead be developed into a comprehensive public service which for him was distinguished by five main characteristics:

1. It is aimed to broadcast to *everyone* in the country who wished to listen;

2. It sought to maintain *high standards* - to provide the best of everything. To achieve these two things the public service system needed to:

3. Operate as a monopoly because competition would force it to abandon ‘quality’ programmes and programmes for minorities and simply seek to maximize its audience;

4. Be funded by a licence fee to ensure that the costs of the programmes were not related to audience size - that if need be, expensive programmes could be made for minorities. The licence fee allowed the system to achieve another aim alongside universality of provision and high standards of content;

5. To be institutionally and editorially *independent* - of commercial pressures on the one hand and, as far as possible, government influence on the other (all from Crisell 2002: 19).

Reith saw PSB as an important political tool. In his book *Broadcast over Britain* he suggested that broadcasting was an undemocratic tool for achieving highly democratic purposes (Crisell 2002). As Hendy notes, if PSB’s fundamental goal is advancing human enlightenment, then the most important manifestation of this goal is its concern with the smooth running of democracy. For in democracy, everyone’s opinion should count. PSB therefore asserts, even if only implicitly, the value of a deliberative rational process - where opinions form slowly, through intelligent debate, argument and reflection (Hendy 2013).

For Banerjee and Seneviratne, public service broadcasting’s only raison d’être is public service, as it is neither commercial nor state-controlled. Public broadcasters, they add, encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others. Banerjee and Seneviratne define PSB as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals (2005). This is why a core concern of PSB from the very beginning has been the notion that it fails to act in the service of the public unless it offers a thoroughly non-partisan approach to reporting the world (Hendy 2013). O’Neill (2015) sees the role of PSBs as making a contribution towards public goods such as shared sense of the public space, communication with others who are not already like-minded and access to a wide and varied pool of information.

Public broadcasting systems are allocated certain responsibilities and are required to serve the *‘*public interest’ in ways that go beyond what market forces can determine (McQuail 2003: 15). For Born and Prosser (2001), the three core values of PSBs are: citizenship, universality and quality. In particular, what is of interest to this study is the extent to which the BBC meets its responsibilities in terms of Universality and Diversity. These are - together with Independence and Distinctiveness - some of the main responsibilities of PSBs, as defined by Banerjee and Seneviratne (2005). Furthermore, within universality of content Iosifidis (2011) distinguishes between universality of Content and universality of Access. It is the former that is of particular concern to this study.

The broadcasting landscape has undergone dramatic change recently. In most countries, there are now mixed broadcasting models, with the co-existence of state or public service radio stations, alongside fully commercial broadcasting enterprises and community stations. Some scholars, such as Banerjee and Seneviratne, believe that commercial broadcasting’s pursuit of profit has often diverted the media from its public interest focus towards pure entertainment. Yet, nowhere have commercial operators made public service broadcasting obsolete, and the dual systems often provide the best media ecology (Banerjee and Seneviratne 2005). Within this ecology, PSBs face a significant dilemma while they try to attract audiences for reasons of funding and political legitimacy: if they simply emulate commercial providers, then they risk losing their special status, their unique selling point; if, however, they differentiate themselves to the extent that their audience share declines, then they risk losing public and political support (Arriaza Ibarra, Nowak and Kuhn 2015). It is important to note, though, that while there is a debate in most countries on the mission of public service broadcasting, no country has made the choice to really narrow the programme task and focus of PSB (Bardoel and d'Haenens 2008). This is important as evidence suggests that in some areas, such as informational programming, the public service model of broadcasting gives greater attention to public affairs, and thereby fosters greater knowledge in this area, than the market model (Curran *et al* 2009).

## **Commercial Radio**

Throughout the history of broadcasting, the idea of PSB as a monopoly has been challenged and compared unfavourably with ‘the real choice’ offered to consumers by a deregulated market. It was the political Right which asserted that social goods flow not from collective activity organized from the top down, but from a myriad individual decisions organized from the bottom up, rooted in the right of the individual to choose (Tracey 1998). Consumers, from this standpoint, are deemed to be the best judges of what is in their own interests - and broadcasters by implication are required to relinquish their historic role as cultural arbiters (Hendy 2013).

Commercial radio in the UK is doing rather well; stations have increased their share of hours and their reach over the past year (Ofcom 2023a) while overall commercial radio is more popular than BBC radio (Ofcom 2022a). Commercial radio was introduced in the early 1970s, some fifty years after the public service one. The first Independent Local Radio (ILR) station, as it was known then, was London Broadcasting Company (LBC), which started broadcasting in 1972, while the first in Scotland was Radio Clyde, which came on air in Glasgow on New Year's Eve 1973. According to Crisell (2002), the Conservative government at the time was keen to give commercial interests the opportunity to exploit radio just as they had been able to exploit television since 1955 (more on this in the next chapter). This deregulation of radio was part of a project to weaken the dominance and perceived cultural elitism of the public-service broadcasters - or at least force them into more responsiveness to audience desires (Hendy 2000).

Rothenbuhler argues that commercial radio communicates, but only as a means to non-communicative, i.e. economic ends; it cares little about the messages it transmits so long as the audience is there to bring in advertising revenue (1996, cited by Hendy 2000: 190). Hendy says that the introduction of commercial radio 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 idea was that this would create a greater 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. It was envisaged that these new stations would use more specialized programming to chase a niche audience - smaller in size but consisting of listeners of the right kind for a particular segment of advertising revenue - but the reality was different: broadcasters opted for the safety and predictability and ended up producing a clustering of formats around a few recurring programming styles (Hendy 2000).

Early work on the market provision of broadcasting, based on the output of commercial radio and TV in the US, demonstrated this long before commercial radio was fully established in Europe. Work on the type of programming produced and the viewer/listener benefits it generates concluded that the market would programme sub-optimally: popular programme types would be excessively duplicated (Steiner 1952) and speciality types of programming would tend not to be provided (Spence and Owen 1977). Building on this is Glasser’s (1984) observation that astation will duplicate an existing format [within a market] 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 (1996) 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. In their work on market provision of broadcasting, Anderson and Coate conclude that the market does not always provide socially valuable programming. They say under-provision will arise when the benefits of programming to viewers are high relative to the benefits advertisers get from contacting viewers, while over-provision can arise when programme benefits are low relative to advertiser benefits and nuisance costs are low. This to them indicates that the market may sometimes over-provide certain type of programming, which is why they say that arguments for more public broadcasting should not be made on a priori grounds (Anderson and Coate 2005). Furthemore, research has shown that consolidation leads to content under-provision, despite claims to the contrary by the proponents of deregulation. Consolidation may lead to economic benefits for station owners, but research shows that this happens at the expense of public interest (Crider 2012; Huntemann 1999; Prindle 2003; Saffran 2011). Since the 1996 Telecommunications Act the US commercial radio industry consolidated and researchers subsequently found that news content became influenced more and more by business interests as media outlets were acquired by corporations with multiple financial concerns (Herman and McChesney 1997: 4). Although consolidation in the radio industry has brought benefits such as efficient organizational structure to management (Owens and Carpentier 2004), it has also been blamed for resulting decreases in “localism” in radio stations (Huntemann 1999; Saffran 2011). Croteau and Hoynes (2001) defined two major elements to describe the concept of localism in news: local control and local content. Local control in the UK and elsewhere has disappeared as more and more stations have been acquired by the larger corporate giants, while local content is fast disappearing as programming is increasingly networked. The downsizing of local radio in recent years has primarily been analysed through the lens of political economy (Ala-Fossi 2004; Blevins 2007; Kellner 2004). Scholars such as Fisher (2007) and Hilliard and Keith (2005) have tried to trace the history of localism and why it has declined, while focusing on its impacts on the US radio industry. Job losses and inferior content are certainly important, but the larger questions of audience connection and socio-political effects have not been addressed (Crider 2012).

Local commercial stations’ schedules by and large confirm the reduced localism hypothesis, with programming based on light entertainment and DJ-driven shows dominated by chart or popular music. There are, though, noteworthy exceptions, such as Clyde Radio’s topical sports discussion and phone-in show ‘Superscoreboard’ (Haynes and Boyle 2008). At the same time, the provision of socially valuable programming is directly influenced by the regulatory framework. This is important to note because in broadcasting in Scotland, it was commercial radio which has been the main provider of local news ever since its arrival in 1973. More on this will be said in the next chapter.

News aside, the often-heard criticism is that corporate-run local radio is increasingly devoid of the vibrancy of localism, such as local announcers in local studios talking to local audiences. Saffran writes that this is only one side of the story though, and that today’s proliferation of new media, which all challenge local radio for relevance, justifies a competitive free market in the best interests of consumers and the public good. Also, according to that view, any loss of radio localism or harm to the public interest from ownership consolidation is indeterminate because both are ambiguous concepts (Saffran 2011).

There has been very little research on news provision by commercial radio in the UK, possibly because by and large local radio has, after waves of deregulation, reduced its coverage of news significantly when compared to its early days. Commercial radio in the UK has in recent years witnessed large waves of consolidation, which have been shown to produce cost efficiencies in the production of news, but at a price in terms of content, including news coverage. As was previously demonstrated in the US, consolidation changes the incentives of news providers, shifting coverage toward the topics that can be distributed in multiple markets rather than those - such as local politics - that are market-specific (Martin and McCrain 2019).

## **Community Radio**

The present study does not cover community radio as such but a short discussion of community radio’s history and characteristics is useful because many of the independent commercial radio stations covered by this study are in essence - community stations. They are formally registered as independent local radio and are, at least on paper, for-profit, but as their representatives explain later, their ownership structures, mission and approach to radio much more resemble community radio than commercial networks.

Community radio is the most recent arrival onto the radio scene in the UK. Because of the dominance of the public service model, the UK has only recently created a specific legal status for community radio and started actively promoting the emergence of new community radio initiatives (Cammaerts 2009). However, as Partridge (1982) writes, the idea of locally embedded small-scale radio, produced and controlled by citizens had been around for a while. As an example, he cites US amateur broadcasters before World War I.

In the UK there are 317 community radio stations (Ofcom 2023c), which attract around 2% of those aged 15+ (DCMS 2020). Community radio is particularly effective at reaching audiences which are proportionately less well represented in the total radio audience - working class and those from a black or Asian background (DCMS 2020).

In the UK community radio, or ‘Access Radio’ as it was previously named, was launched in 2002. The first stations ranged from neighbourhood to small-scale community-of-interest stations in nature and their single year licences were soon extended as the scheme was considered a success (Starkey 2011). The scheme was renamed Community Radio and a systematic, rolling process of licensing new services began. Community radio licences are for small-scale, not-for-profit radio stations operated for the good of members of the public, or of particular communities, and in order to deliver social gain (The Community Radio Order 2004). The application process required stations to identify not only the community which they were intending to serve, but also the ‘social gain’ objectives and milestones over the five-year period by which achievement of those objectives would be measured (Starkey 2011).

The term ‘community radio’ was first coined by Powell (1965, cited by Partridge 1982: 10) in a leaflet entitled *Possibilities for Local Radio*. Lewis and Booth (1989) situate community radio within participatory forms of radio, whileCarpentier *et al* (2003) see it as an alternative to the mainstream, part of a community and as being embedded in civil society. Today, community media is defined as: grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity (Howley 2005: 2). Howley’s (2005) definition points to localism as one of the defining characteristics of community media and community radio - they are the epitome of localism; the most local of any local media. To him, community media is what connects the local to the global, without sacrificing local identity. He also associates community media with a wider set of notions and practices, such as participation *by* communities *in* their own media, and producing content *for* the communities they serve. Similarly the participation element is highly significant to Prehn (1991: 259), who sees community radio as *‘*involving people directly in station programming, administration and policy activities*’*. From this perspective, community radio contributes both to external pluralism, by being a different voice among public and commercial broadcasters; and to internal pluralism, by being democratic and providing a platform for a diversity of voices and styles, often lacking in mainstream media (Cammaerts 2009). With community radio, the relationship between the broadcaster and the community is placed in the foreground; the audience is not defined as an aggregate of individuals who share only socio-demographic or economic characteristics, but instead as a collective of people holding a series of identifying group relations (Carpentier *et al* 2003).

Another important aspect of community radio, and community media in general, is that it is seen as an alternative to mainstream media. According to Carpentier *et al* (2003) this is reflected both at the organizational and content level. At the organizational level, the existence of community media shows that media can exist independently from state and market, while having a horizontal structure, unlike more vertical ones at larger, mainstream media. At the content level, community media can offer representations and discourses that vary from those originating from the mainstream media, mainly thanks to the higher level of participation of different societal groups and communities (Carpentier *et al* 2003).

Most community radio stations in the UK already offer news in some form. This includes announcements of cultural and other events, interviews with local artists or volunteers and similar. What community radio offers much less is ‘hard news’ - stories that have a high level of newsworthiness - usually regarding politics, economics and social matters - that demands immediate publication (as defined by Smith 1985). Recent research (Kocic *et al* 2021) has shown that by and large community radio volunteers regard it as their moral duty to assume the role of journalists and help reverse the current downward trend in local news coverage, using their links with local community as a strength. Yet, in its ambition to assume the role of a citizen journalist, community radio faces numerous challenges including a limited skillset with which volunteers enter the sector, lack of training and limited funding (Kocic *et al* 2021).

Like public service and commercial radio, community radio in the UK is also regulated by Ofcom. The next section will discuss how a regulatory framework influences the radio environment and programme content.

## **Regulation and Policy**

From its beginnings the media has been the object of both government policy and regulation. Governments exert control over the media or channels of distribution, allocate the spectrum, or provide a legal framework for public broadcasting (Cammaerts 2009). Freedman (2008: 13) makes a distinction between policy and regulation by saying that media policy suggests the broader field where a variety of ideas and assumptions about desirable structure and behaviour circulate, while regulation points to the specific institutional mechanisms for realising these aims. Horwitz (1989: 46) defines regulationas ‘a form of activity whereby a governmental authority formulates rules to mould private, usually economic, conduct’.

Furthermore, literature distinguishes between two main models of regulatory intervention in the media sector: structural regulation and content regulation (Hitchens 2006). Psychogiopoulou and Anagnostou explain that structural regulation normally addresses the architecture of the media landscape and typically builds on competition rules, aimed at ensuring a competitive media market. Content requirements have been widely imposed either in order to preclude material that is considered to be harmful or undesirable, or with a view to enhancing the range of voices and opinions expressed through the media (Psychogiopoulou and Anagnostou 2012). The former is referred to as negative content regulation, while the latter is positive content regulation (Iosifidis 2011). The present study is primarily interested in the latter one, as it is through positive regulation that certain types of formats and content - news, discussions, documentaries etc. - can be added to or maintained in radio stations’ schedules.

Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2000: 111-112) recognise three distinct periods in the history of media regulation. The first period ran until the Second World War and was first characterized by ‘no policy’. The second period lasted until the 1980s and Van Cuilenburg and McQuail describe it as the ‘public service era’ and the third and current period is the ‘era of communication policy’ rather than media policy. Curran and Seaton (2010: 377) view UK broadcasting policy ‘as an attempt to square a circle: a fervent belief in the market, combined with a highly developed sense of its limitations’. They see this as a standard social market position that justifies the regulator as champion of the public interest. For Swann (1988), the current period is reflective of the relative disengagement of the state from the economy, while Shiller (1996, cited in Cammaerts 2009: 4) sees in it the treatment of media content and communication more as a commodity than a democratic and public resource. That does not mean the media is not seen as a democratic resource any more, and, as Iosifidis (2011) says, further regulatory intervention in a free market can still be justified on public interest grounds. Due to digitization and the rise of the Internet, however, media use increasingly focuses on content produced in and distributed from foreign countries, which weakens the ability of national actors and national legislation to effectively control the media within national borders (Nieminen 2018). Scholars such as Meier (2018) go a step further and say that from a public interest point of view, the last 10-15 years of media policy and media regulation cannot be called a success. For some scholars, the main culprit is neo-liberalism which has been the dominant ideological force in media policy and promotes freedom of action for private business and market mechanisms over state regulation and public provision (Hardy 2014). Freedman (2008) argues that deregulation, liberalization, privatization and marketization have driven neo-liberal media policy since the early 1980s.

For McQuail (1992: 3) the public interest is ‘informational, cultural and social benefits to the wider society which go beyond the immediate, particular and individual interests’. Speaking of ways to identify the public interest, Downs says the first is to see the public interest as what the majority wants, while the second is to determine public interest according to some absolute standard of value regardless of what citizens want, where the interests of the public override the interests of individuals, in order to establish a common value (Downs 1962). McQuail (1992) pointed out that this system could be applied to public service broadcasting, because of the benefits it is supposed to bring to the public – universality; minority provision; preservation of national culture and identity; provision of educational and informational services. The third way of looking at public interest is to say it is what political institutions arrive at by their decision-making, where common interest is shared and agreed upon by the society as a whole (Downs 1962). In the media and communications field, this approach would apply to the notion of an all-inclusive information society and the requirement of an informed and participating public, in order for it to benefit from the fruits of the network era (Iosifidis 2011).

One of the key aims of regulation in the media sector is to ensure that there is media diversity. Generally, two different policy approaches to media diversity are distinguished. According to the competition or market approach, economic regulation and competition law are under­stood to prevent market failure. Governments only intervene if free and fair competition is distorted and market entry is limited by the dominance of a particular firm (Evens and Paulussen 2012). It is important to note here that at least in the European Union, most states take the normative assumption that the media have public opinion forming power, hence, under competition law the media sector is given special treatment (Harcourt and Picard 2009). The interventionist or public model, in contrast, involves an active media policy and highlights the importance of various political views and cultural values (Karppinen 2006). Evens and Paulussen further add that the interventionist approach allows for a variety of measures aimed at protecting or promoting media diversity, including must-carry rules and quotas for specific output. Generally, small states stick to the interventionist model, as the competition approach fails due to the economic realities of small media markets (Evens and Paulussen 2012). This also explains why most small states have opted for a late introduction of commercial broadcasting (Puppis 2009).

Early regulation sought to achieve diversity through requiring that each broadcaster provides diversity within its station's programming (Bates and Chambers 1999). The marketplace model, however, argued that diversity was achieved by different operators competitively seeking out, and serving, targeted audiences (Krattenmaker and Powe 1995). True diversity, the argument went, was achieved through a multiplicity of sources, rather than within each source. Radio competes with television, newspapers, magazines, cable, and a variety of alternative information providers. Thus, even if there were monopoly power within radio markets, that power would be diluted by competition from other media outlets (Bates and Chambers 1999). However, as demonstrated in the section on commercial radio, deregulation did not achieve the desired effects such as an increase in the total number of radio services so that true niche radio becomes a reality. It does not seem to have delivered the greater choice in radio listening it promised. Douglas (1999) believes that the variety of programming *within* each station has been eroded. This is in line with Steiner's (1952) pioneering study into workable competition in the radio industry. He concluded that, although competition in general led to greater programme diversity, in markets with limited numbers of stations and barriers to entry, it would lead to programme duplication, which, in turn, would not serve the public interest. Bates and Chambers argue that this kind of commercial logic has brought mixed results regarding the provision of specific formats such as news, which is in line with the market-failure model based on the argument that private markets tend to ignore certain public, or social, aspects of value. According to this view, news and other information with high social value is under-produced in the absence of regulation because private markets do not take social benefits into account. This "social economics" approach argues that regulation can be justified in terms of bringing such social-value considerations into the marketplace (Bates and Chambers 1999).

UK commercial stations’ schedules reflect these trends, as they mostly offer programming based on light entertainment and DJ-driven shows dominated by chart or popular music, with news relegated to brief hourly bulletins only (n.b. station’s schedules are available on their websites). At the same time, the success of commercial radio has forced the BBC to focus more on and improve its light entertainment programming or compete directly with commercial rivals in sports coverage, notably in some parts of Scotland. However, it was not always like that. Commercial radio in Scotland has benefitted from the absence of BBC local radio based 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. Put simply, public service obligations of commercial radio in the early days were significantly more demanding than they are today. 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 (Ofcom 2022b), while local radio is deregulated 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 2018), which indicates strong demand for local news.

On this point, Starkey argues that the survival of localness on radio will depend entirely on the will of legislators and regulators to keep it alive. Regulation of both ownership and content, as well as the provision of support funding, may be essential to stem the tide of local radio going global (Starkey 2011). Research has demonstrated that content diversity (Aufderheide 1991; Berry and Waldfogel 2001; Busterna 1988; McChesney 1997; Ortner 2000; Rifle and Shaw 1990) and media localism (Bishop and Hakanen 2002; Howard 1997) are reduced when ownership concentration increases. In the United States some of the measures previously implemeneted in an effort to preserve the localism principle included requiring local residence and local staffing by a broadcasting station, attention to cross-ownership, use of geographic zones in the allocation of spectrum, non-entertainment program guidelines, and awarding “preference points” in license competitions to those stations that could demonstrate a commitment to integrating ownership and management (Braman 2007).

The existing regulatory framework in the UK does not say much about the volume of local news on local radio in England and Scotland and the news selection is mostly for the individual stations to decide for themselves. Local BBC radio stations in England, and the opt-outs in Scotland, focus on local news, while their commercial rivals combine in their news bulletins local, national and international news.

This review of literature has highlighted the importance of media for the functioning of a democracy and the role local media play in fostering a sense of community, which are two key themes of the present study. It has defined some key terms – such as localism and types of radio available to listeners in Scotland – before explaining the role of regulation in the implementation of media policy in a country. As the present study is focused on perceptions of local radio by journalists working in it as well as its listeners, the last section of this review will offer a brief summary of research on journalists and audience.

**Research on journalists**

Research about journalists is now a rich field, with numerous studies about the theories of the profession and the place it claims in society (Deuze 2002). Although most studies speak of journalism as a profession, Deuze (2005) suggests that to understand how journalists give meaning to their work, it is more useful to conceptualise journalism as an ideology. He says that the public service ideal can be seen as a powerful component of journalism’s ideology, an ideal that journalists aspire to as they share a sense of a watchdog ‘doing it for the public’. Hanitzsch and Örnebring (2019) point out that normative roles of journalists are primarily derived from a view that emphasizes journalism’s contribution - potential or real - to the proper workings of democracy. In this context, they say, journalism is expected to provide surveillance of and information about potentially relevant events and their contexts; to deliver commentary, guidance, and advice on complex issues; to provide the means for political access, expression, and participation; to contribute to shared consciousness; and to act as critic and watchdog to hold the powerful to account. Christians *et al* (2009) expect journalists to play four principal roles: monitorial (collection, publication, and distribution of information of interest to audiences); facilitative (promoting social dialogue and active participation in political life); radical (providing a platform for criticism with the aim to support change and reform); and collaborative (supporting authorities in defence of the social order). In the context of the UK’s heavily regulated broadcasting sector, the role of radical journalist does not apply and has not been mentioned by the present study’s participants.

There have been studies on how European journalists, mostly those working for national media, view their role (Hanitzsch *et al* 2011; Statham 2008; Weaver and Willnat 2012) or the challenges journalists increasingly face in their work (Witschge and Nygren 2009). Somewhat unsurprisingly, in his comparison of 21 countries, Weaver (1998) found that the characteristics of journalists are largely similar worldwide. More recently, Picard’s (2015) study of over 500 journalists across the Western world focused on how they see the future of their work and found that they think journalism would be a harder job with less institutional support in the future.

Several cross-national studies addressed journalists’ professional identity and characteristics (Deuze 2002; Donsbach and Klett 1993; Weaver 1998; Weischenberg, Löfelholz and Scholl 1998). The way journalists see their own role in society has also been studied extensively, by Hellmueller and Mellado (2015), Shoemaker and Reese (1996), Vos (2005) and Zhu et al (1997) amongst others. Shameer and Reddy (2019) focused on perceptions of Indian broadcast journalists on a variety of aspects of their work.

While there have been numerous studies that aimed to capture and compare national journalistic cultures, far fewer have looked at the difference between metropolitan and local journalists within a single country or nation. One such study from Australia found that local newspaper journalists exhibit much stronger support for the community forum and advocacy role, while there is very little difference in their support of the watchdog role compared to metropolitan journalists (Hanusch 2015). Local journalists also tend to see themselves as “community promoters and advocates, often highlighting achievements by local businesses or entrepreneurs” (Bowd 2011: 76). Several studies looked at how contemporary changes are affecting local journalism and local media: Abernathy’s (2014) study of several community newspapers in the US offers strategies for the future, while Ryfe (2012) paints a bleak picture of American newsrooms’ inability to embrace change. In their comparative study of local newspaper managers, editors, and reporters in four countries, Jenkins and Kleis Nielsen (2020) find that local journalists remain focused on providing journalism that serves the needs of their communities while increasingly considering or embracing forms of journalism that can draw broad online audiences, such as service, solutions, and constructive approaches, which was previously established in studies of local newspaper journalists in the US (Ali *et al* 2018) and France (Amiel and Powers 2019). Hovden (2008, cited by Olsen and Mathisen 2023: 392) places local journalists in the sector with the lowest journalistic prestige, at the opposite end to those in large national newsrooms who have the highest levels of prestige and status. A study by Mathisen (2021) shows that local journalists express a feeling of inferiority and lack of professional capital compared to colleagues in larger newsrooms. Nielsen (2015) points out that in both academic research and public debate, local journalism is often criticised for deferential and patriotic reporting, acting more as a guard dog for those in power than society’s watchdog.

Research on local, and in particular radio journalists in the UK is, to the best of this researcher’s knowledge, somewhat limited. In her interviews with local journalists, including two radio journalists, in Leeds on perceptions of changes to local news media, Firmstone (2016) finds that radio journalists describe public interest news as an ‘add on’ rather than a driver of their news bulletins, with additional information provided online for the audience to access separately. This study finds that, instead, there is greater emphasis on campaign-oriented news in order to appeal to audiences and create a distinctive product.

## **Research on listeners**

Media audiences have only recently started to be taken seriously in journalism studies, partly because the focus of journalism studies, as the field’s name suggests, has always been on journalism, its content, and its professional practices (Meijer 2019). Where there is research on audience, it by and large neglects radio listeners and mostly focuses on newspaper readers or TV viewers instead.

Several studies look at audience perceptions of the roles of local news and journalists. One such study in the US, by Poindexter, Heider and McCombs (2006) identifies four distinct dimensions of the public’s expectation of local news: (1) good neighbour, (2) watchdog, (3) unbiased and accurate, and (4) fast. The good neighbour factor included characteristics associated with public journalism: caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions. The watchdog factor included journalism traits associated with traditional journalism: being a watchdog of powerful people and the government, reporting on certain topics, providing a forum, and explaining topics in the news. Other studies also suggest that the news media’s watchdog function is at the core of citizens’ expectations of the news media in Germany (Fawzi and Mothes 2020) and the Netherlands (Van Der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014). There are, however, studies which indicate that in some countries citizens may be repelled by aggressive watchdog coverage and more likely to endorse a “good neighbour” ideal, preferring news that serves the public by responding to everyday societal problems rather than news that fixates on holding powerful figures accountable (Costera Meijer 2010; Heider *et al*. 2005). Kalogeropoulos, Toff and Fletcher (2022) find that the watchdog role of journalism may not be as influential for audience trust as the curatorial or analytical roles.

Radio listeners are included in a comprehensive multimethod study of a single city’s media ecology by Coleman, Thumim and Moss (2016), which found that not all groups are represented or addressed equally across the local media in Leeds. A study of localism’s influence on listener’s first impressions of heard radio output in a single US city found slight preferences for local origination and a marginal preference for local ownership (Hubbard 2010).

An earlier study on the importance of radio consolidation for listeners’ perceptions found most listeners believed the money earned by an independently owned station was more likely to stay in the community than money earned by a group owned station, and that audiences preferred ‘‘local’’ personalities but showed little awareness that some of those personalities actually broadcast from elsewhere (Chambers and Callison 2003). In his study of the effects of radio ownership concentration on radio localism in the US Saffran (2011) found an overall high level of listener dissatisfaction with local radio programming, but at the same time overall satisfaction with the community involvement of local radio stations and announcers.

As radio is experiencing a radical transformation towards listening on demand and offering a multimedia experience, a growing body of research is starting to emerge that focuses on those aspects of the medium. A study of young listeners in Germany showed that in their embrace of new opportunities offered by digital technology, broadcasters should be mindful of the enduring and valued characteristics of the traditional radio listening experience (Hirschmeier and Beule 2021). Laor’s (2022) study of radio listening habits among consumers who use on-demand radio shows that listeners proactively use the options offered by on-demand radio and value the move away from linear, scheduled listening. Robins and Lazaro (2010) found that listeners who engaged with a radio programme through social media developed a clearer sense of connection between themselves and the programme hosts and saw them more as “real people”. In a similar way, radio listeners (in Israel), if they can still be called that, say that viewing visual radio programs creates a stronger sense of connection with the broadcasters and a sense of accessibility that collapses formal distances. They say that viewing the broadcasters as they actually are in the studio lends an added element of authenticity (Laor 2021). In the same study in Israel, most broadcasters were reluctant to embrace radio’s visual transformation, believing it to detract from the unique advantages of radio, while their station managers and policymakers favoured radio’s presence in the interactive, visual and viral space of the Internet (Laor 2021).

In order to start looking in more detail into the radio set-up in England and Scotland, in an effort to evaluate its public service and public sphere roles, it is useful to look back at how we got to where we are - a vibrant local radio environment, but one at least in Scotland without much in the way of public service radio. This why the next chapter provides an overview of the history of radio in the UK, with a particular focus on Scotland.

# CHAPTER 2 - HISTORY OF RADIO IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND

To better understand the context in which the present study is conducted, this chapter will offer a summary of the history of radio in the UK, with a particular focus on the BBC in Scotland and local radio in the whole of the UK. There are several key developments in that history that stand out and will be highlighted in this chapter. Most historians of radio agree that the medium was truly local only in its first few formative years, before the BBC centralised it. Ever since then, there has been an inherent tension within the BBC’s mission in Scotland - how to best represent the nation while serving all its disparate regions and reflecting British values at the same time. Because the BBC in Scotland eventually decided to all but leave out local broadcasting from its development, local commercial radio, when it arrived, entered an uncontested space and firmly established itself as a major player in Scotland, remaining quite successful to this day. The brief summary of the history of local radio which follows is to a large extent based on the documentation accessed at the BBC Written Archive in Caversham.

## **Early BBC in Scotland**

The story of radio in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, begins with the BBC. The then British Broadcasting Company started in 1922 as a government-controlled monopoly of six private radio set manufacturers (Briggs 1995; Crisell 1994, 2002). Although initially the BBC was made a monopoly due to the scarcity of frequencies, as soon as radio caught on, politicians increasingly became aware of the influence of the medium and its potential to become dangerous if left unchecked (Seymor-Ure 1996). The new Company initially transmitted only in the London area, but soon afterwards stations were established elsewhere in the UK. In the very early years of the BBC, from 1923 to the end of 1926, broadcasting developed on a local basis, but by 1925 plans were already in place to change this and create a centralised national service with an alternative regional choice (Scannell 1993). The first station in Scotland opened in Glasgow on 6th March 1923, as 5SC of the British Broadcasting Company, in Rex House at 202 Bath Street. In his history of the BBC in Scotland David Pat Walker describes the opening night at the new station:

*The transmitter was ready and connected to the control room in Bath Street by a rented post office telephone line. The evening’s cast of civic dignitaries and performers crammed around the single microphone in the small studio sharing it with the station’s house orchestra while the inevitable pipe band spilled out into the adjoining corridor. At 7pm precisely, following a short burst of music on the pipes, John Reith, the BBC’s General Manager, bent to the microphone and announced 5SC, the Glasgow Station of the British Broadcasting Company, was calling. (Walker 2011: 24)*

Within two weeks, Glasgow transmitted its first outside broadcast - a live relay from the Coliseum Theatre in Eglinton Street. Soon afterwards, stations were also opened in Aberdeen (10th October 1923), Edinburgh (1st April 1924) and Dundee (12th November 1924). The stations were connected to London by telephone links and often used simultaneous broadcasting, or networking, as it is called today. Aberdeen was particularly important to the BBC as it was the first of the main stations to include a large element of rural listeners. It also served as an experiment to prove that with simultaneous broadcasts between Aberdeen and London, the BBC could plan for a future when stations would no longer have to supply all their own programme material (Walker 2011). Still, these early stations also relied upon local talent to provide localised topical interest programmes (McDowell 1992). More and more people in Scotland as well as elsewhere in the UK began to recognise the attractions of the new medium (Blain and Hutchison 2008).

BBC’s first Director-General, John Reith, was quick to realise the potential benefits that an effective broadcasting system could deliver to its listeners (Blain and Hutchison 2008). For Reith, the guiding principles were shaped by three core elements – namely that the service should, in the words of the first and subsequent BBC Charters, provide ‘information, education and entertainment’. However, of equal importance to Reith was the notion that above all else, the BBC should be a public service, free from both commercial pressures and interference from external forces, government in particular (Scannell 1990). Broadcasting soon came to be considered as one of the most significant influences on the social life and cultural fabric of the nation (Cardiff and Scannell 1991).

The first stations the BBC set up were in some ways extremely local, producing programmes for and by the local population (Hajkowski 2010). During the first few months, before simultaneous broadcasting started, the Glasgow station had to generate all its own output and the staff found themselves feeding a voracious appetite (Walker 2011). It was similar elsewhere in the UK, with stations in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Cardiff, Bournemouth and Belfast enjoying a substantial degree of independence, producing a large portion of their own programmes and exploiting local sources for material (Hajkowski 2010). During this early period of the BBC's existence there was no regional organization of the company and local station directors were given a considerable measure of independence (Briggs 1995). As with all the BBC's stations, the staff at 5SC had to be involved in all aspects of the running of the station, including administration, production, publicity and public relations, as well as taking part as performers in actual studio productions (Scullion 1995). Most of the output of these early stations was based on music, but also included agricultural bulletins, drama productions, talks, news and children's programming, appeals, religious programmes, and special broadcasts for Scottish days such as Burns Night and St Andrew's Day. Glasgow and Aberdeen - as the main stations - would draw on local talent and broadcast a significant amount of specifically “Scottish” material (Hajkowski 2010). Programmes in Scotland were broadcast mainly during the evenings. A typical schedule in the early days looked something like this one for Thursday 4th October 1923:

*15:30 - An Hour of Melody (by the Wireless Trio)*

*17:00 - A Talk to Women*

*17:30 - The Children’s Corner*

*18:00 - Special Weather Report for Farmers*

*18:15 - Boy Scout’s Bulletin*

*19:00 - The First General News Bulletin (broadcast from London; followed by Glasgow News and Weather Forecast)*

*19:15 - Classical Night of The Wireless Orchestra*

*19:25 - Mr Alex MacGregor, Baritone*

*19:35 - Orchestra*

*19:45 - Miss Josephine MacPherson, mezzo-soprano*

*19:55 - Orchestra*

*20:05 - Talk (by a member of the Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)*

*20:15 - Mr Alex MacGregor, Baritone*

*20:25 - Orchestra*

*20:35 - Miss Josephine MacPherson, mezzo-soprano*

*20:45 - Orchestra*

*21:00 - Close Down*

*21:30 - The Second General News Bulletin (broadcast from London; followed by Glasgow News and Weather Forecast)*

*21:45 - Mr Alex MacGregor, Baritone*

*21:55 - Orchestra*

*22:05 - Miss Josephine MacPherson, mezzo-soprano*

*22:15 - Orchestra*

*22:30 - Special Announcements; Close Down*

(BBC Genome)

Not all locally-originated programmes were on purely Scottish subjects, and, as McDowell points out, not all programmes maintained high standards. At times, the BBC’s head office in London was concerned about the poor quality of material provided by local artistes in the provinces, not just in Scotland (McDowell 1992).

Each of the main stations was producing about six hours of its own programme material a day and their effective range of reception was twenty miles at most, which meant that many neighbouring urban centres could not get adequate reception (Scannell 1993). That’s why in the next few years a number of smaller ‘relay stations’ were set up to increase coverage, including two in Scotland - Edinburgh and Dundee. Of the four Scottish stations, Glasgow assumed the mantle of headquarters almost from the very start and its seniority was reinforced by the size of its audience and the growing reputation for innovation enjoyed by its small staff (Walker 2011). Yet rural and isolated areas were either poorly served if close to a major city, or in most cases not served at all (McDowell 1992). It was originally intended that the added stations should simply relay programme material from the nearest main station, but that was not how things developed (Scannell 1993). While Edinburgh and Dundee took a great deal of material from London, they also broadcast some locally produced material, including their own version of the popular *Children's Hour* programme (Hajkowski 2010). The number of programmes and hours of broadcast varied from day to day, from 4 to 9, as on Wednesday 12 November 1924:

*15:00 - The Station Pianoforte Trio*

*17:00 - Children’s Corner*

*19:00 - Weather Forecast and News (S.B[[1]](#footnote-2). from London)*

*19:30 - D. Millar Craig (S.B. from Glasgow. Orchestra)*

*19:45 - Miriam Woods*

*20:00 - Mr. James Paterson R.S.A., R.W.S., P.R.S.W. on “Appreciation of Art”*

*20:20 - Orchestra*

*20:30 - Kenyon Letts*

*20:40 - Miriam Woods*

*20:45 - Orchestra*

*21:00 - Speech by the Lord Provost at the Official (Opening of the Dundee Relay Station. S.B. from Dundee)*

*21:10 - Kenyon Letts*

*21:15 - Orchestra*

*21:30 - Weather Forecast and News (S.B. from London)*

*22:10 - Kenyon Letts*

*22:30 - Savoy Bands*

*23:00 - Romany Revellers (from the Dunedin Palais de Danso)*

*0:00 - Close Down*

(BBC Genome)

Scannell believes that these early BBC stations sought to establish an interactive relationship with their audiences, in which the broadcasters treated their listeners as equals. He says the stations tried to become integral parts of the local community, working with civic authorities, local cultural organisations, businesses, universities and schools, churches, hospitals and so forth. For him, they were what we now call community services: they interacted with and became part of their local culture. Because early radio very much depended on local resources for its programmes, the broadcasters had to get out into the community and work with local people in order to produce a local service. Early broadcasting was in many ways more genuinely local than BBC local radio is today (Scannell 1993). As a BBC memorandum noted: “*those who have not been much in the Provinces cannot assess the extraordinary value placed upon the local station by provincial listeners*” (cited by Briggs 1961: 395). As an example, at the station directors’ annual meeting in 1925, directors of all stations asked for more local sports results than were available in a standardised bulletin supplied by the Reuters news agency. Glasgow was complaining that the Scottish sports news was inadequate for the station (BBC WAC CO9). The special bond between the newly launched stations and their listeners is illustrated further by the vast amount of letters sent in by the listeners. In 1923 the average number of letters received from listeners was not greater than 300 per week; by 1926 stations in the provinces were getting around 3,500 letters a week each (BBC WAC CO69). Scullion (1995) says that the early broadcasting infrastructure ensured that each regional centre could advance the boundaries of radio in different, more exciting and challenging ways than the production centre in London. She also points out that within Scotland the early years of the BBC parallel the period of the literary renaissance and contemporary political debates on socialism and nationalism.

However, this brief era of local, autonomous radio was over when by the end of 1924 all the company's stations in the UK were linked by land line to allow simultaneous broadcasting (Briggs 1995). This marked the birth of the National programme and was followed by the creation of the Regional Scheme in 1929. The five regions were: London (for the Home Counties), Birmingham (Midlands), Manchester (Industrial North), Cardiff (Wales and West of England) and Glasgow (Scotland). Scotland was the first Region to reorganise staff in preparation for the Scheme. The new ‘regions’ were based not on any cultural or even geographical identity but on technical coverage and administrative convenience and were to that extent arbitrary (Crisell 2002). The moves to systematise the relaying of London programmers to the provinces did cause some apprehension amongst listeners who enjoyed the local friendliness that was part of the provincial stations (Walker 2011). The Northern Area Director, David Cleghorn Thomson, said at the annual station directors’ meeting in 1927 that local news contributed to the creation of an ‘intimate’ atmosphere with the listener (BBC WAC CO9).

## **After localism**

The following section will mainly focus on BBC in Scotland in order to illustrate how the growing tensions between the BBC’s national and regional programmes reflected on Scotland, where broadcasting at that time started to resemble a national network, which would actually be born almost 50 years later. No such developments occurred in England.

By 1927, the BBC was reconstituted as the British Broadcasting Corporation, which Crisell (2002) describes as publicly funded yet quasi-autonomous organization whose constitution and statutory obligations have remained largely unchanged. The government decided that the service should be under central control and in the hands of one organisation (Walker 2011). And so, as Scannell points out, it was the National, rather than the Regional Programme that was set in place first. This London-based service began in 1930, while the Regional Programme, spreading throughout Britain in the next decade, he says was from the start structured in subordination to the London programme. The key concept that defined the in-house definition and development of the Regional Scheme was ‘centralisation’, a policy that was imposed from the centre on the margins in a “strikingly insensitive way” (Scannell 1993: 32). The point for Seymor-Ure about a public corporation was its midway status between the politicians on the one hand and the people running the broadcast service day to day on the other. He says it was a quintessential institution of British government: its success depended upon informal, tacit habits and understandings, rooted in the shared values and experiences of an educated class, more than on legal forms and niceties (Seymor-Ure 1996). In such a set-up, local autonomy was never an option in a crowded island (Laughton 2008). Robins and Cornford think that regionalism and localism were subordinated to a policy of centralisation with a clear objective - to create a culture of national unity. They say that Reith created a system that was in all respects ‘British’: a nationalised industry, functioning as national public sphere, and articulating a particular conception of national culture and identity (Robins and Cornford 1993). This was central to the concept of public service which he vigorously promoted from 1924 onwards (Scannell 1993). Scannell and Cardiff (1991) note that a shift from local to national programming in the late 1920s resulted in an unequal distribution of control between London and the nations and regions. Minutes from annual station directors’ meetings at the time show that the changes caused apprehension, with the Glasgow station director, Henry Fitch, saying at the 1927 meeting that the decision to drop local news was causing a fall in sales of licences at post offices in Glasgow (BBC WAC CO9). According to the same minutes, the Director General, John Reith, was of the view that it was not possible to fully satisfy listeners in each particular town, so it was better not to even make any such attempt. On the question of the type of news the BBC should be broadcasting, Reith insisted that news should be a ‘dignified announcement of the more important happenings in the world rather than an attempt to attract attention through vivid headlines’. This method, he continued, ‘could not be reconciled with the practice of disseminating details of petty local happenings even though it were clearly shown that there was a certain public demand’ (BBC WAC CO9).

The transformation of the BBC into a national broadcaster started with simultaneous broadcasting (Hajkowski 2010). Briggs says that one of the main advantages of simultaneous broadcasting was that national programmes could be broadcast from a London studio, using artists who were often reluctant to embark on provincial tours, while interesting provincial programmes could be shared by more than one station. He believes that the specifically local element in local broadcasting was not greatly appreciated (Briggs 1995). McDowell believes that local stations faced challenges in technical and artistic terms given their limitations on manpower and on technical and financial resources, as well as the restricted pool of available local talent. That is why the BBC thought it would make more sense to centralise resources in order to improve the range and quality of programmes (McDowell 1992). After all, the BBC Handbook in 1933 described the implementation of the Regional Scheme under the heading of 'A Policy of Centralisation' (cited by Scullion 1995: 18). Under this policy, two programmes were established: National, which would essentially be the same for all areas of the country while produced in London, and Regional, which would more suit the needs of the particular geographic area it served. The Regional Scheme was formally inaugurated in 1929 by the introduction in the Home Counties of a choice between the National and London Regional wavebands. In 1931 the North National and the North Regional went into service. The Scottish National and the Scottish Regional programmes were broadcast from a transmitter near Westerglen Farm which came on-line in June 1932. The new transmitter covered 80 per cent of the Scottish population, and the coverage, especially in the north, was further extended with the establishment of the Burghead transmitter on the Moray Firth in 1936 (Hajkowski 2010).

The BBC Regional Scheme was born out of a desire to give listeners in all parts of the country, including in many rural areas, access to radio programmes, and was a means of providing a choice of programmes for listeners, but it was accompanied by a degree of centralised control (McDowell 1992). The newly established BBC Regions were based primarily on technical considerations, but the arguments in favour of greater centralisation of output were not wholly technical; there were also financial considerations. It was also intended that all material, except Regional programmes, should originate in London on the grounds that the best artistic talent and facilities could be found there (McDowell 1992). Many, however, criticised that policy, believing that ever since the 1920s London swallowed up creative personnel, stripping the regions of their indigenous talent (Harvey and Robins 1993).

Hajkowski writes that broadcasting in Scotland at that time started to resemble something of a national network, with the four Scottish stations sharing programmes - such as Scots Concerts in 1928 - with greater frequency. Programmes on Scottish Regional were specifically designed to cater to Scottish tastes, explore Scottish history and tradition and reflect “Scotland” back to itself. There were special anniversary programmes - remembrances of famous Scots such as Burns, Walter Scott and Mary Stuart, or historical events in Scotland, such as the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. The first Scottish news bulletin was broadcast on Monday 24 September 1928 (Hajkowski 2010). As Walker notes, the practice until then was for the four Scottish stations to broadcast ‘local announcements’ every weekday evening after the London general news bulletin and topical talk. Now, the new programme was compiled in Glasgow and broadcast simultaneously on all four stations in Scotland. It was for the most part welcomed by listeners, who seemed to want what was in fact a switch from local to national news (Walker 2011).

BBC Scotland at that time also broadcast programmes aimed at nurturing the sense of Scottishness and representing Scotland’s diversity. A 1931 programme included broadcasts from both the Glasgow and Edinburgh studios, with special effects to represent the shipyards of Glasgow, a Gaelic choir, and dozens of voices from various parts of Scotland. The 1932 programme, *Hail Caledonia*, was also about expressing the diversity of Scotland, while *Frae a’ the Airts* was about the folk culture that still existed in the Scottish countryside. That programme was broadcast live from pubs and halls of rural Scotland. Then there was *In Praise of Scotland*, part tourist information and part paean to the Scottish countryside consisting of a talk, music, and information. Similar travel and tourism and travel-oriented series were *The Weekend Out of Doors* and *Adventures in Scotland* (all listed by Hajkowski 2010). Like the National Programme, the Scottish stations also produced programmes about the British empire. Hajkowski (2010) says that from the beginning, empire was an important element in the programmes of the BBC's Scottish stations until Scotland’s incorporation in the regional scheme in 1932, after which the BBC policy implied that “empire” would cease to be a significant element in Scottish programmes.

During that time the BBC, both in London and Scotland, broadcast debates and talks on the question of nationalism in 1929, 1931, 1936, and 1938, which represented an implicit recognition of the legitimacy of Scottish nationalism. In Scotland, the BBC also occasionally aired programmes about national heroes and movements of Scotland's independent past. By the mid-1930s about 40 per cent of BBC Scotland's material was produced in Scotland, but the majority of this programming appeared in the evening, when audiences were their largest; London material was taken in large part to fill in the long daytime hours (Hajkowski 2010). Programme production and administration became centralized in Glasgow, where in 1928 Cleghorn Thomson was appointed the first Scottish Regional Director. By the end of that year Edinburgh and Dundee were no longer considered ‘stations’. Less than a year later the BBC closed the Dundee studio. All the remaining stations concentrated on the task of specialising in their individual and characteristic contributions to an all-Scotland programme pool, while looking for local folk talent and traditions (Scullion 1995).

McDowell writes that Thomson was worried that the content and style of some Scottish programming was of such ‘inferior’ quality to what was coming out of London that it could simply not compete on equal terms when compared with the national service. In a broadcast to Scottish listeners in October 1929, Thomson announced a reduction in the number and frequency of programmes transmitted from Scotland on the basis that it was neither economically nor creatively viable to continue as before (McDowell 1992: 24). The growing number of London programmes being carried by the local stations caused complaints that Scottish programmes were being over-anglicised, with pronunciation and dialect being smoothed out in favour of standard English (Walker 2011).

For Hajkowski, the BBC in Scotland defined and reflected the *Scottish* community as opposed to the local urban community. This allowed BBC Scotland to foster a sense of Scottish national identity for its listeners and create a common, recognizable culture within the region. Internal correspondence Hajkowski refers to in his book on the BBC and national identity in Britain reflects the desire by BBC Scotland’s staff to develop it into a truly national service, whose first priority would be serving the Scottish - as opposed to the British - listener (Hajkowski 2010). McDowell (1992) agrees it was clear that the output of the Scottish station was designed to cater for the whole of Scotland and not local areas. He, however, adds that this resulted in some degree of submerging of cultural diversity within Scotland. Blain and Hutchison (2008) also point out that the output failed to reflect the diverse range of local and regional cultures in any significant fashion. Maurice Graham noted that the Regional Programme destroyed the local basis of early broadcasting, which had drawn on local talent and catered to local needs (cited by Crisell 2002: 31). While acknowledging that local broadcasting represented a more democratic alternative to the system of broadcasting that later evolved in Britain, Hajkowski (2010) believes that historians of the BBC such as Briggs or Scannell and Cardiff tend to overstate the independence and “localness” of the early BBC stations. He says that this ‘romanticization’ of early local broadcasting is based on a belief that the local stations represented the “reality” of genuine communities and that the local stations were less formal than the regional ones and more “in touch” with their listeners. To this he adds that over half the BBC's early local stations - the relay stations - produced only a small amount of local programming; the rest of their output came from London via telephone lines (Hajkowski 2010: 110). All these changes were accompanied in the mid-1930s by a wider shift in the BBC’s approach to public service broadcasting. The corporation’s opposition to ‘indiscriminate and lazy’ listening, reflected in its scheduling of some regular programmes at different times and its commitment to an ‘improving’ diet of programmes, eroded in the face of public pressure and the strengthening of competition for the British audience from overseas commercial radio stations. (Curran 2002: 141)

This era in the history of radio in Scotland is best summed up by Scullion (1995) who says that Scottish broadcasting maintained a mixed agenda: on the one hand, operating within a public service ethos that identified and spoke to Britain as a whole; on the other, keen to promote a distinctive Scottish identity. Within this cultural and political nexus, the programming decisions made by the Scottish broadcasters are important markers of cultural independence (Scullion 1995). An illustration of that can be found in an episode from 1934 that Hajkowski (2010) writes about: when the BBC Head Office complained about the small number of programmes that the Scottish region contributed to the national networks, the first BBC Scottish Programme Director, Moray McLaren, responded by asserting that his first priority was not the national networks or English listeners, but Scotland. McLaren claimed that it was more difficult for Scotland to provide programmes to the national network because of the essential differences between the English and the Scots. Genuinely Scottish programmes were inherently unsuitable for a British audience (Hajkowski 2010). However, a confidential internal memo from 1940 written just after the BBC Chairman and Director General visited Scotland speaks of widespread feeling in Glasgow that Scotland is under-represented in national programmes (BBC WAC R34/731/3). This period also sparked a contradiction in the way the BBC sees Scotland, which persists to this day. As McDowell points out, the BBC Regions were too large to represent communities with a common sense of social and cultural identity. Scotland could not easily be treated as a single region, so the BBC gave it the status of ‘National Region’. It was regarded as a region because it represented only one part of a unitary BBC covering the whole of the UK; it was regarded as a national region because it served a nation, thus distinguishing it from one of the BBC’s English regions (McDowell 1992).

## **Post-war BBC in UK and Scotland**

During the Second World War the BBC suspended the regional networks and synchronized all its transmitters to the same wavelength. It operated two networks - the Home Service and the General Forces Programme. This was done following a request by the Air Ministry, which had even considered asking for the suspension of all broadcasting during the war (Hajkowski 2010). Limited production of programmes with a regional flavour was maintained, though, and for Hajkowski (2010) this served to acknowledge Britain's multinational character and was a nation-building exercise.

When the war ended the General Forces Programme was replaced by the Light Programme, based on music and light entertainment, with very few regionally produced programmes. Regional programming was resumed in 1945, as an opt-out of the Home Service. England was divided into four Regions, while Scotland and Wales were one each. Northern Ireland had to share its frequency with the North of England. The regions were able to opt-out of the Home Service when they liked to broadcast their own regional programmes and they also took material from the London-based Home Service (Hajkowski 2010). This ‘slow but persistent’ creative, managerial and financial development of the regional centres (including the national centres in Belfast, Glasgow and Cardiff) was equally the product of local pressure and a concession from Head Office responding to the criticisms of centralisation and of the bias towards London (Harvey and Robins 1993: 3). In his March 1947 report to the Director General, Senior Controller of Regional Matters, B.E. Nichols, stated that regional broadcasting was important from a political and a sociological point of view. The regions were, amongst other things, a ‘basic source of recruitment and replenishment for all forms of artistic creativity’, and also the parts of the BBC that ‘move the nearest to the naked earth’ (BBC WAC R34/731/4).

The Scottish Regional Programme was later renamed the Scottish Home Service, and the shape and content of output expanded considerably, ranging from drama, news, children's programming, talks and features through to sport, current affairs and variety (McDowell 1992). With respect to the planning of its schedule, the new service enjoyed almost complete autonomy (Hajkowski 2010) and the management of the Scottish station welcomed this new degree of freedom (Walker 2011). This period is often referred to as the ‘golden age’ of Scottish broadcasting (McDowell 1992).

As McDowell writes, the BBC in Scotland now had the opportunity to cover local material and promote indigenous talent, but that didn’t necessarily mean that the most successful Regional programmes were the most local in content. Also, the Regions including Scotland now had to face tough competition from the more popular Light Programme (McDowell 1992). To that, the Third Programme was added in 1946. An internal 1955 BBC analysis of the regions, written by the then Director of the Western Region, Frank Gillard, saw regional broadcasting serving purely regional audience requirements as well as representing regions in national and international broadcasting. In what was a significant shift from the early days of radio, Gillard stated that regional services operated ‘most effectively’ in the sphere of information, while in ‘the realm of entertainment the local element [was] now of no great account’ (BBC WAC R34/731/5).

This era saw the introduction of new bodies aimed at ensuring the viability and autonomy of broadcasting in Scotland. First in 1947, the BBC established a Scottish Advisory Committee (SAC), modelled on the BBC's General Advisory Committee. The SAC consisted of the good and the great in Scottish society and its purpose was to keep the BBC staff in Scotland attuned to movements in Scottish public opinion (Hajkowski 2010). Following the publication of the Beveridge Report on broadcasting[[2]](#footnote-3) in 1951, the BBC's new charter established a Broadcasting Council for Scotland, which could set policy, appoint advisory committees, and oversee the activities of the BBC in Scotland. The Beveridge Report also recommended that the national regions have special representatives on the BBC Board of Governors.

Still, according to Walker, the new service was not welcomed with open arms by the Scottish Press. Equally, having gained a wide knowledge of all BBC programmes during wartime listening, the listeners were now unhappy about the prospect of missing popular programmes when there was an opt-out to place something of ‘Scottish interest’. However, this period of public dissatisfaction and open criticism did not last long, and Scottish listeners returned to the Scottish Home Service in large numbers (Walker 2011). For a number of years, the Scottish programme output was greater than any other Region except London, while Scottish radio programmes remained popular (McDowell 1992). In fact, the Scottish Home Service was at that time the only BBC service to have a larger audience in its own area than the hugely successful Light Programme (Walker 2011). For Crisell (1994) this was the period when radio in the UK in general enjoyed its heyday, providing programmes of distinction in every genre, especially factual ones partly created through imaginative scripting which blended narration, actuality, dramatic dialogue and sound effects.

Hajkowski points out that during the first thirty years of its existence, the BBC in Scotland played an important part in sustaining and reinforcing a complex sense of Scottish national identity. The BBC, he says, was not an agent in the anglicization of Scotland, but perhaps the most powerful institution for the dissemination of information and entertainment in Scotland, constructing a powerful sense of “Scottishness” through its organizational structure, policy, and programmes (Hajkowski 2010).

All of this was happening at a time when radio was going through a profound change. Curran says that the medium was under increased pressure to entertain, which in 1945–1946 led to the establishment of ‘tiered’ channels directed towards different public tastes. This was a key watershed in the history of the BBC. The Reithian ideals were being challenged and were modified in favour of pragmatic acceptance that different kinds of people liked different programmes (Curran 2002). Then came television which inevitably further threatened radio. In the mid-1960s Britain was entering a new period of economic prosperity, and radio was a medium in decline that some thought would be terminal. Between 1949 and 1958 the BBC’s average evening radio audience dropped from nearly 9 million to less than 3.5 million, three quarters of whom were people without television sets (Paulu 1961: 155). Audience size now became an important factor in the shaping of the BBC’s radio policy whose duty was to cater to a wide range of tastes (Crisell 1994). By the mid-1960s the BBC saw its mission as reflecting the diversity of an ever more pluralist society, which, in a way, was proof that the Reithian project, which envisaged broadcasting as serving a single national culture, had been fatally compromised by the mid-1960s (Carter and McKinlay 2013). By the end of the decade, the BBC’s pamphlet Broadcasting in the Seventies acknowledged that television replaced radio as the main focus of attention. As Crisell writes, radio was now treated by the listener as secondary to her other activities. Since the listener may not be listening too closely, the old mixed programme pattern, with its sudden changes and pleasant surprises, was inherently unsuited to such a role. What was needed instead was a more uniform and predictable kind of content, an uninterrupted supply of music or information. Hence, the BBC’s duty to provide a comprehensive public service would be fulfilled not in any one network alone but through the networks as a whole (Crisell 1994). According to McDowell, this prompted the BBC to propose changes in its network services and re-evaluate the role of the Regions; competition between the radio services was now to be replaced by a policy of integration. London and the Regions were expected to pool their resources, as they already did in television, to provide the best possible material for national broadcasting, which meant more simultaneous broadcasts (McDowell 1992). Despite these profound changes and significant threats, radio survived and even gained strength largely thanks to technological developments since the end of the second world war - car radio[[3]](#footnote-4) and transistor radio, which made radio portable, available to the listener on the go. Crisell (1994) writes that at one point so numerous and portable had transistor sets become that the Post Office could no longer keep track of them in order to collect the licence fee. He goes as far as to say that what the transistor achieved was a revolution in the way radio was used. Still, he adds, this revolution was ambiguous: the transistor ensured not only that radio would undergo a revival but that the revival would be limited. The medium would be heard in many more places and situations than before, but for this very reason listened to rather less - treated simply as background noise and sometimes ignored altogether (Crisell 1994).

At the same time, the arrival of television brought about technological developments that profoundly influenced radio as well. As Briggs writes, the introduction of VHF transmission in the 1950s facilitated the development of local radio as it created additional space on the waveband. The first experiments took place in Bristol in 1961, followed by Dumfries in March 1962. However, there was little evidence to suggest that demand for local radio at the time was substantial (Briggs 1995).

## **Local BBC radio**

The idea to set up local radio in the UK was first formulated in 1951, in the Beveridge Report on the Future of Broadcasting. The report stated that: *‘Use of VHF could make it possible not merely to give the existing BBC programmes to people who now fail to get them, but to establish local stations with independent programmes of their own’* (Beveridge Report 1951: 78). VHF offered much better sound quality than the medium and long waves, and it allowed for a large number of stations to broadcast, since its low-power transmissions allowed stations that were a reasonable distance apart to occupy neighbouring or even identical wavelengths (Crisell and Starkey 2006). VHF was therefore the technology which facilitated the expansion of local radio during the 1970s and 1980s (Crisell 2002).

The Beveridge report envisaged local authorities, universities or specially formed voluntary agencies as those who could operate local radio stations. Then in 1962 the Pilkington report[[4]](#footnote-5) stated that only a public corporation should be responsible for developing a service of local radio covering as many communities as possible. The report noted that the BBC local stations could rely upon the three radio networks for sustaining material and at a lower cost than a commercial system could achieve. The committee, amongst other things, also rejected the idea of establishing a Scottish Broadcasting Corporation as the dangers of ‘Londonisation’ were deemed to be less than those of isolation (Cmnd. 1753). And so, the BBC started to work on a strategy to develop local broadcasting. This was based in part on the earlier realisation that the regional service was not wholly satisfactory for meeting local needs, and in part on the recognition that commercial competitors could exploit the gap in the market and so challenge the BBC’s sound monopoly, as expressed in a 1955 document by the then Director of the Western Region, Frank Gillard (BBC WAC R34/731/5). There was also the added factor of pirate radio stations, which challenged the BBC’s dominance of airwaves (Cammaerts 2009). For Crisell (2002), the pirates were relevant because they were, in a sense, local - most of them broadcast over small areas, they promoted local events and some appealed to local loyalties by taking names such as Radio Essex or Radio Kent. Still, most were soon taken off air by the legislation introduced in 1967. The strategy, outlined in a policy document from 1959, envisaged around 70 stations, covering two-thirds of the population. The communities to be served were divided into three categories: large conurbations such as Manchester, Birmingham or Glasgow; self-contained large towns such as Leicester and Nottingham and medium-sized towns such as Exeter or Lincoln, which are focal points for wider areas (BBC WAC R34/1, 585/1).

In the period between 1962 and 1966 the BBC was putting resources in place to launch local broadcasting, if and when a permission to do so was obtained. The chances of this happening were greatly increased with a Labour victory in the 1964 general election. It was almost inevitable that under Labour local radio would be run by the BBC, which was the idea Pilkington favoured too (Higgins 2015). Choice for listeners was to be between services, but not between providers, and the intention was for the BBC’s monopoly of radio broadcasting in the UK to be fully restored (Starkey 2011). In July 1966, the BBC was given private assurances that it would be granted permission to proceed with local radio, subject to details, although it was not clear how the stations would be paid for (Linfoot 2011). A White Paper on local radio envisaged „local sources of funding from local authorities and other bodies‟, while rejecting the possibility that local radio could be run by commercial companies (Home Office 1966). This was all to be done on an experimental basis, with the Postmaster General having the final say on the locations of the stations, the appointment of the Local Broadcasting Advisory Councils and the frequencies on which they would broadcast (Home Office 1966).

In January 1967 the BBC held a conference of local authorities interested in having local stations in their communities. The BBC Written Archive contains letters of interest from 83 different local authorities and councils, some received before and some after the conference. This list included a number of councils in Scotland, with Edinburgh as the only one in the ‘firm offer’ rubric (BBC WAC R102/69/1). In the end, only eight said they would be willing to provide the full operating costs of a station: Leeds, Blackburn, Sheffield, Gateshead, Leicester, Stoke, Liverpool and Pontypridd. Leicester even offered to pay the capital costs too. Edinburgh, together with Manchester and Swansea, made formal applications but without any financial pledges (BBC WAC R78/608). Starkey (2011) points out that only Labour-controlled authorities were willing to take part in the new broadcasting experiment.

McDowell (1992) writes that at the time there was no evidence the public wanted local radio, but, he adds, public demand could not be gauged accurately until local radio services were actually provided. In any case, the BBC’s main aims for local stations - which would be able to serve discrete communities with programmes of local interest - were that they should serve local communities and enrich the national networks, while also help halt the decline in radio audiences because of television (McDowell 1992).

BBC local radio was established in 1967. The first local station opened on 8th November in Leicester, followed by Sheffield and Merseyside later that month. Five more were opened in 1968 and then many others during the 1970s and 1980s. The output of the local stations typically consisted of local news, chat, phone-ins, programmes on local themes and educative features, while the purpose of the new stations was to replace regional radio, which was discontinued in 1983 (Crisell 2002). Eventually, the requirement for co-funding from local authorities was dropped, and local stations became fully funded from the television licence fee, thus enabling the BBC to extend the network’s coverage beyond the original Labour strongholds which had supported the earlier experiment (Starkey 2011).

For Linfoot (2011), local radio was able to articulate the changes in society, by providing a place where people could have a dialogue, share their experiences and concerns and debate the issues. Thanks to their use of the phone-in - first heard on the BBC Radio Nottingham in 1968 - as a staple of their output, local stations made radio something of a two-way medium, which was part of their ‘democratic’ achievement (Crisell 2002).

In the meantime, Scotland continued to be served by the opt-out from Radio 4. Early deliberations on local radio focused on Aberdeen, Inverness, Dundee and possibly Dumfries, and not on Edinburgh and Glasgow, with the latter discarded as too expensive to run as a successful competitor to commercial Radio Clyde. There were ideas to create a Scottish Radio 2, as a direct competitor to the commercial stations in Glasgow and Edinburgh, but nothing came of that (BBC WAC R78/611/1). In the end, BBC Scotland decided to opt out of the local radio experiments, preferring to focus on developing its national service (BBC WAC R102/46/1). McDowell (1992) writes that Controller of BBC Scotland, Andrew Stewart, was not in favour of local radio experiments in Scotland. The Scottish management feared that it would have to surrender some degree of power to autonomous local stations. It also feared that local stations would have to reflect accurately the social and cultural mix of the areas which they served, and this was contrary to the Reithian mixed programming philosophy favoured by BBC Scotland (McDowell 1992). Scotland was a nation and so radio’s first remit must be to underline the national identity (Walker 2011). This was an autonomous decision by the BBC in Scotland and it reflected the views of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland[[5]](#footnote-6) (McDowell 1992). Radio, as the Council had reported, must continue to develop as a national service serving a large and natural community (Walker 2011). Similar decisions were made in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Since the early 1960s, BBC Scotland had an interest in ‘area’ broadcasting, believing that this was a better option than city-based local stations (BBC WAC R102/46/1). Two modest services were running on VHF, serving the North and North-East, using spare studio capacity in Aberdeen and, according to Walker (2011), hoping for money to develop a station in Inverness. However, London insisted that any area development in Scotland did not become an extra tier of broadcasting on top of the existing service, so the message was: develop along these lines if you wish, but you pay for it yourself, diverting some of your existing resources from running the national service (Walker 2011).

The idea of local radio for Scotland was revisited after the new Conservative government came to power in 1970. The Conservatives were committed in principle to introducing commercial stations, while the BBC suggested that what was needed in Scotland was a limited form of local broadcasting based on the major Scottish cities, a local service for the Highlands and Islands, and a stronger Scottish opt-out on Radio 4 (McDowell 1992). During discussions between the BBC and the Government at the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in May 1970, the BBC’s Director General at the time, Charles Curran, expressed the preference for all further stations to be opened in England only, while Scotland and Wales would continue to have their regional opt-outs. The Government thought some stations should soon be opened in Scotland and Wales too. Curran replied that the Broadcasting Councils in Scotland and Wales recommended that those stations should cover rural areas, while the BBC preferred large urban centres (BBC WAC R78/610/1). Then in 1972 Curran said he was in favour of the introduction of local radio in Scotland, but no doubt as a means of enabling the BBC to compete with the impending start of commercial local radio (McDowell 1992). In the end, however, the solution was to introduce local opt-outs, first from the Radio 4 opt-out, and later from the standalone BBC Radio Scotland, launched in 1978. BBC Radio Highland launched in March 1976 to serve Inverness, followed by Radio Aberdeen in April. Then came the two-man community stations - BBC Radio Orkney and BBC Radio Shetland - in 1977. Both produced about two and a half hours of programmes each week (McDowell 1992). Two more opt-outs were launched in 1983 - BBC Radio Tweed for Selkirk and BBC Radio Solway for Dumfries. In each case these were very small operations which provided little more than extended local news bulletins within the more general diet of BBC Radio Scotland (Starkey 2011). These stations differed from BBC local radio in England because they operated on an opt-out, not opt-in, basis from Radio Scotland. BBC local stations in England, with their own transmission facilities and airtime, and with an output of six to eight hours a day, were opt-in rather than opt-out services. They would join a national BBC station only at the end of the day, when their own programming ended. The Scottish community stations, however, had to take most of their programme material from Radio Scotland and opt out for only limited periods each day. Still, these stations provided a means of catering to some extent for the needs of listeners, including Gaelic listeners, in some remote areas, and they demonstrated that the BBC in Scotland wished to provide some form of localised radio broadcasting (McDowell 1992).

The changes at the local level were taking place at a time when the BBC was going through more profound restructuring. By the end of the 1960s, the BBC concluded that listeners sought the convenience of predictable networks and expected radio to be based on a different principle - that of a specialised network, offering a continuous stream of one particular type of programme, meeting one particular interest (BBC 1969a, cited by Crisell 2002: 148) The old style of mixed programming was now all but eliminated, and, as Crisell (2002) points out, BBC radio could be perceived as a ‘public service’ - providing something for everyone - only across the totality of its four networks and not within any one of them. Audience size was now as important a criterion in moulding the BBC’s radio policy as its duty to cater to a wide range of tastes (Crisell 1994)

## **Local commercial radio**

The BBC’s monopoly of legal radio in the UK lasted until 1973, when it was replaced by a duopoly. The change was introduced gradually, starting with local radio. It was the Sound Broadcasting Act 1972 that opened the door to commercial radio, though in the beginning only on a local scale (Starkey 2011). According to Crisell (2002), the Conservative government, which regained power in 1970, was keen to give commercial interests the opportunity to exploit radio just as they had been able to exploit television since 1955. The government argued that it was offering an extended choice of public service broadcasting by allowing commercial stations to operate (McDowell 1992). It argued that the system of commercial radio would also be ‘free’ to the listener, and that it would provide an economic stimulus by allowing businesses to run stations and giving advertisers a new medium through which to promote their products (Crisell 2002). The new service was called Independent Local Radio (ILR) and it was regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA).

The ILR was an attempt to find a compromise between a public service and a purely commercial approach to broadcasting. For Stoller (2010: 40) it was a ‘quintessentially British compromise in which the vulgar vigour of the free market was to be held in check by the cautious wisdom of an established system of licensing and oversight’. ILR’s commercial initiative was constrained by a legislative and regulatory framework based on public service broadcasting, which for Allen (2013) reflected the continuation of Britain’s paternalistic broadcasting policy. Local commercial radio stations were required to have a range of content, ‘with a particular relevance to the needs and opportunities of local life’, and in a ‘fresh and distinctive radio style’ (Stoller 2010: 43). Stations’ schedules had to include programmes catering for, among others, children, religious groups and the elderly, as well as a strong commitment to social action and local communities, summed up as ‘all things to all listeners’ (Carter 2003: 20). Local news was an integral feature of every station (Wray 2009). The result of all this heavy regulation imposed upon the commercial radio industry was, according to Wray (2010), quality programming across a range of genres. In essence, ILR was a community-based public radio service funded by the sale of advertising time (Allen 2013). This was similar to the model applied to Britain’s first commercial television service, Independent Television (ITV), when it began in the 1950s. Like ITV, ILR was a network of limited companies, and crucial to the success of each ILR station was the way in which it addressed the conflicting need to make money while fulfilling a public service remit (Allen 2013).

Even before the decision was made to launch ILR, several hundred commercial stations were registered, especially by groups within the newspaper industry, which was a prominent player in the campaign for commercial radio (Briggs 1995). That meant that interest in running commercial stations outstripped supply of available frequencies – eight companies applied for the first two London contracts eventually awarded to LBC and Capital Radio, four applied for the first in Birmingham, six applied for Glasgow and three for Manchester (Carter 2003). The first station to go on air was London Broadcasting Company (LBC), on 8th October 1973, followed by Capital, also in London, which came on air a week later. 17 others quickly followed, chosen from more than 60 applicants (Seymour-Ure 1996).

The first commercial station in Scotland was Radio Clyde, which began broadcasting in Glasgow on New Year's Eve 1973. The Glasgow Herald wrote that the station opened with a message of good wish from the Ver Rev. Andrew Herron, the former moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The opening broadcast included a New Year message by Radio Clyde’s Chairman, Ian Chapman, from Glasgow Cross, and many ‘prominent Scots’, including Jackie Stewart, Sean Connery, Jimmy Logan and Kenneth McKellar, were interviewed (The Glasgow Herald, Jan 3, 1974). Radio Clyde also had a formidable list of backers including Collins publishers, Rangers Football Club, the Scottish CWS and the Scottish Television, as well as three substantial newspaper publishing groups, between them offering the Glasgow Herald and Evening Times, the Paisley Daily Express and the Scottish Daily Express, plus the Greenock Telegraph (Stoller 2010). The station sought to reflect Glasgow and West of Scotland culture (McDowell 1992) and was an overnight hit (Garner 2012). Stoller writes that it offered remarkably varied programming with wide popular appeal. Its T*owards 2000* series of programmes, which included Prince Phillip speaking about how life might be at the end of the Millennium, drew requests for transcripts from 110 networks and newspapers in 40 countries (Stoller 2010). For Hetherington (1992), the secret of Clyde’s success was that it created a Scottish cross between Radios 1 and 2, with high quality hourly news. He says that by the end of the 1970s, Clyde had a weekly reach of close to a million people in the greater Glasgow area, compared to under half a million for BBC Radio Scotland.

Many other stations followed Clyde, most notably Radio Forth (1975) in Edinburgh, Tay (1980) in Dundee and Perth, and Northsound (1981) in Aberdeen. Stoller points out that Radio Forth started with a notably strong newsroom team and offered serious material alongside the usual popular music, information and entertainment. Yet, he adds, it faced the problem common to all other media in the Scottish capital - how to reconcile the expectations of the Scottish middle-class establishment with the genuine working-class character of much of the eastern Central Lowlands and the rural hinterland (Stoller 2010).

Allen writes that the early days of commercial radio in the UK were a time during which many stations struggled to meet stringent regulatory requirements, especially with the Labour government between 1974 and 1979 encouraging stations to prioritise their PSB commitment (Allen 2013). Several authors argue that ILR was heavily regulated to the detriment of the medium (Barnard 2000; Crisell 2002; Street 2002). The political climate changed with a Conservative victory in 1979 and its emphasis on consumer choice. This change encouraged commercial stations to argue for a relaxed regulatory regime (Allen 2013). The sector was growing in the whole of the UK, from 19 stations in 1977 to 43 in 1983, covering more than 80 per cent of the population (Crisell 2002: 196). By 1987 49 ILR stations were covering about 85 per cent of the UK population (Seymour-Ure 1996). The ‘Heathrow’ conference in June 1984 of the chairmen of the original 19 ILR companies was the first occasion when *independent* radio started to shift into *commercial* radio (Stoller 2010). Carter (2003) adds that this corresponded to a shift in perception from viewing commercial radio as a ‘quasi-public service’ system which just happened to carry advertising to a fully commercial, highly competitive and increasingly profitable business. After all, until the 1990s the share of the total UK advertising market that found its way to radio barely reached even a meagre two per cent (Starkey 2012b). The IBA lightened the public service obligations of commercial stations so that now they were allowed to adopt a simple Top 40 and capsule news format, while sponsorship was also permitted (Crisell 2002). By 1988, there were 66 commercial radio stations in Britain and this rise was partly owed to the decision by the Conservative government to allow local stations to offer different services on their AM (MW) and FM (VHF) services (Laughton 2008). By the time most of the remaining stations split their services formally in the early Nineties, almost all adopted the same strategy – targeting younger listeners with chart-based pop on FM and older listeners with classic pop and ‘golden oldies’ on AM (Carter 2003). In Scotland, commercial radio also benefitted from the absence of BBC local radio based on the English model (Blain and Hutchison 1993). Clyde steadily bought up other heritage ILR stations, forming Scottish Radio Holdings in 1994, which by 1997 included Northsound, Forth, Tay, Borders, West Sound and Moray Firth (Stoller 2010). Further changes came with the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which relieved ILR of its vestigial public service obligations (Crisell 1994) and instead introduced what Hendy (2000: 41) refers to as ‘open market’ regulation. None of the independent stations would incur the public service obligation to provide ‘range’ and ‘balance’ (Crisell 2002). The result of this boost was that by 1995 there were more than 160 commercial stations in the UK (Seymour-Ure 1996). Despite the looser regulatory framework, commercial necessity precipitated the eventual shift from an industry run by a network of local fiefdoms through the emergence of regional groupings in the late Eighties to a Nineties industry dominated by half a dozen or so major ownership groupings (Carter 2003). Starkey (2012b) points out that the trend for locally-owned, locally-originated and locally-accountable commercial radio stations to be acquired by national and even international media groups gathered pace from the mid-1990s. While some stations, such as CBC in Cardiff and Radio Aire in Leeds, struggled to stay afloat, Centre Radio in Leicester disappeared altogether, before being acquired by a new owner. The neighbouring station in Nottingham, Radio Trent, became the majority shareholder of a new company, Leicester Sound, and the two stations were allowed by the IBA to share twelve hours per day of programming outside daytimes. They also achieved joint savings by sharing resources for accounting, administration and commercial production (Starkey 2012b). According to Stoller, ‘such almost covert takeovers began to be routine as the eighties progressed’ (2010: 124). Starkey (2012b) sees this takeover as a precedent which spawned a wave of mergers and acquisitions by some cash-rich stations. He highlights the example of Wiltshire Radio in Swindon which in 1985 took control of Radio West in the neighbouring city of Bristol, after which, and following the passing of a new Broadcasting Act in 1996, which effected a comprehensive overhaul of the law on cross-media ownership (Kuhn 2007, cited by Starkey 2011: 124), Wiltshire Radio became GWR and by March 2001 the company owned or controlled a total of forty seven stations across the UK (Starkey 2012b.

Starkey (2012b) cites several examples of programme sharing, which soon became known as syndication: in 1986 Beacon from Wolverhampton was supplying a five-hour long overnight programme to its neighbours Mercia in Coventry, Signal in Stoke-on-Trent and Wyvern in Hereford and Worcestershire, in which only separate advertisement breaks provided a distinction between the four versions of the same programme. Other similar initiatives followed (Starkey 2012b).

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## **BBC Radio Scotland**

Around the time local BBC radio was being set up in England in the 1960s, Scotland had to decide whether to do the same or develop Radio Scotland as a national service. The advent of Radio Scotland was an attempt to resolve a dilemma: should radio be national or primarily local; should it focus on cultural unity or cultural diversity; and should it concentrate primarily on Scottish matters and perhaps be criticised for being too provincial, or should it provide a Scottish perspective on UK and international events without listeners having to tune in to the UK-wide Radio 4 (McDowell 1992).

As BBC’s Chief Assistant for Radio, John Gray, wrote in 1976 in an internal document on Radio Scotland, until the mid-1950s the BBC in Scotland developed on two fronts: within the mixed ‘regional’ (and later the Home Service) programme, it opted out for material of ‘peculiarly Scottish significance’ and to encourage local talent; and at the same time contributed substantially to the networks. In the 1960s BBC Scotland showed minimal interest in the development of local broadcasting and since the 1960s the development of UK broadcasting as four generic networks had three results for Scotland. All listeners had to have access to all networks; the Scottish opt-out service was almost entirely confined to providing equivalents of Radio 4; and the ‘stranded’ nature of the networks made it more difficult for Scotland to contribute to them (BBC WAC SC1/64/1). And so, for the BBC in Scotland the principal aim was to build up Radio Scotland as a network service throughout Scotland before considering the development of local radio services (Blain and Hutchison 1993). In November 1974 the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting Coverage[[6]](#footnote-7) also stated that the first objective of radio in Scotland should be to meet national requirements and only then consider the possibility of local stations (McDowell 1992). The decision to focus on a national station was in part a reflection of the socio-political and technological changes in the 1970s, which posed further challenges for the BBC in Scotland. According to Hibberd (2008), strengthened calls for political devolution were mirrored with calls for a greater level of control over broadcasting. Inside the BBC there was even an expectation that in case a proposed Scottish Assembly became a reality, broadcasting in Scotland might be removed from the BBC’s control (Hetherington 1992). This was all happening at a time when London was firmly in control over national regions and may have been reluctant to relinquish some of that control. In his recollection of the politics in and around BBC Scotland during that time, Hetherington (1992) writes that as newly appointed Controller for Scotland, he did not even have the freedom to hire specialist correspondents without London’s approval; one candidate was rejected because London thought her Scottish accent was too strong.

Both the Crawford Committee (1974) and the Annan Committee (1977)[[7]](#footnote-8) proposed changes for BBC Scotland in the event of a Scottish Assembly being formed and Radio Scotland was born in anticipation of that (Hibberd 2008). Furthermore, McDowell (1992) sees a link between the formation of Radio Scotland and mini-devolution within the BBC. He says that Radio Scotland was part of the general expansion of programme services. This has led to a much more mature level of development in radio than in television, but inevitably it meant that there was no money to develop local radio other than on a very limited FM opt-out basis (Blain and Hutchison 1993: 54). And so, the need for a comprehensive radio service for Scotland had been agreed in principle before the end of 1976. (McDowell 1992). At that time, BBC Scotland was broadcasting as an opt-out from Radio 4 and was allowed to broadcast on its own for up to 33 per cent of transmission time. Its news and current affairs output was limited to the two-hour long *Good Morning Scotland* followed by *Twelve Noon*, which was a mixture of news and music (Hetherington 1992). And within such limited Radio Scotland there were local opt-outs in the forms of Radio Highland and Radio Aberdeen from 1976, followed by Radio Orkney and Radio Shetland, which came on air in the spring of 1977[[8]](#footnote-9). Orkney’s morning half hour reached an average of 70 per cent of the local population, and Shetland’s early evening half hour achieved a similar level (Hetherington 1992). Now that the decision had been made to create a stand-alone Radio Scotland, a further dilemma was what kind of radio that should be: the equivalent of Radio 4 or a mixed programme aimed at the wider Scottish audience. John Gray was clearly in favour of the latter, arguing for a ‘complete national broadcast service’ (BBC WAC SC1/64/1).

A fully stand-alone BBC Radio Scotland came into being on 23 November 1978. It owes its existence in large part to the new international reallocation of frequencies agreed in Geneva in October 1975 (Hetherington 1992). These allowed Radio Scotland to get its own frequency and broadcast alongside Radio 4. The creation of BBC Scotland appeared to be a sensible option in line with the new mood of national consciousness within Scotland (McDowell 1992). It was part of an initiative which saw the establishment of similar stations in Wales and Northern Ireland.

McDowell writes that in its early days, BBC Scotland sought within a single service to place programmes into three or four separate categories during the day, associate these with well-known presenters and thereby appeal to different audiences at different times of the day. However, he adds, it was the use of mixed rather than streamed programming which hindered Radio Scotland in cultivating audience identification (McDowell 1992). Part of the remit of the new station for Scotland was to provide extensive coverage of the Scottish Assembly, which was expected to be set up by the end of 1979. That’s why a decision was made that Radio Scotland should be based in Edinburgh, as close as possible to the old Royal High School which had been chosen to house the new assembly[[9]](#footnote-10). The station’s brief was not to be simply a Scottish version of Radio 4, but at the same time not to go as far as Radio Clyde; to be more popular than the existing service and to speak with a more distinct Scottish accent (Hetherington 1992). Its line-up of presenters included comedian Andy Cameron and DJs Tom Ferrie and John Dunn. Programmes included *Good Morning Scotland*, *Help Yourself*, *The Gerry Davis Show*, *Rhythm and News* and *Night Beat*. Tom Ferrie presented Scotland’s first radio bingo show, with Billy Connolly as his first guest (all information on presenters and programmes from: Young 1978). Initial audience reaction seems to have been far from positive. Radio Scotland ‘has failed to establish its own national identity’; it was ‘just another Radio 2, filling the gaps when ideas run out’; it was ‘pap’; and its new programmes were ‘unmentionable and totally indescribable’ - these were just some of the letters sent to the Scotsman newspaper when Radio Scotland launched (Hetherington 1992: 74). The recently appointed Head of Radio, John Pickles, tried to defend the new station in the same newspaper, by pointing out that in just three opening days Radio Scotland broadcast three plays, a symphony concert, programmes on the arts, wildlife, religion, current affairs and sports (Hetherington 1992: 74). In his recollection of Radio Scotland’s early days, Hetherington (1992: 74) says that the station got the style wrong when it went to ‘relaxed’ presentation while talking to the listeners accustomed to listening to Radio 4. In his view, the station took about two years to find its feet. 30 years ago McDowell, however, went further and said that the struggle to create a coherent Radio Scotland identity, balancing speech and music, scheduling many kinds of programming and trying to meet the desires of different Scottish audiences was the story of the station ever since (McDowell 1992).

And to this day, BBC Radio Scotland remains a stubbornly traditional station in its approach to public service, reflected in its something-for-everyone-on-a-single-channel approach to programming. The strategy seems to be working as in its share of listening figures BBC Radio Scotland performs better than regional BBC radio in England combined. At the same time, local commercial radio stations are more popular in Scotland than in the UK overall (all from Ofcom 2022a). Before looking at how the current setup is viewed by radio professionals and listeners in England and Scotland, an outline of the methods used in the present study will be provided in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 3 - METHODS

As stated earlier, the main aim of the present study is to get a better understanding of how radio journalists perceive their role and place in today’s media environment and juxtapose those against the perceptions of radio by the listeners. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1**: How do local radio journalists in Scotland and England reflect on their experience of practice in meeting the informational needs of their listeners?

**RQ2**: How do local radio journalists and audiences in Scotland in England perceive the role of radio?

**RQ3**: What are the views of both groups regarding the future of local radio in the UK?

To answer these questions, the study employs qualitative research methods such as individual interviews and focus groups. This chapter will outline the study design, including the rationale for the selected methods and the procedure followed. It will also provide participant details and explain how the obtained data was analysed and validated.

## **Design**

As the present study is primarily focused on perceptions, experiences, attitudes and beliefs, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis has been chosen because it can, as Murray (2014) points out, provide an opportunity to develop an understanding of human experience. Indeed, it is the experience that often informs perceptions, which are also tied to social, cultural and political attitudes and beliefs.

Qualitative research is now accepted as a central approach within social science and a challenge to the dominant quantitative approaches. Qualitative studies often do not claim to explain or predict events but try to give detailed descriptions of a social environment, its rules and practices, as well as the orientations and interpretations of its members (Kelle 2014). Qualitative research is therefore concerned with aspects of reality that cannot be quantified, focusing on the understanding and explanation of the dynamics of social relations (Queirós, Faria and Almeida 2017).

The present study employs a multi-method design, using qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups with multiple stakeholders to obtain rich, comprehensive data in the form of in-depth views of professionals and citizens. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to obtain the views of radio professionals, allowing the researcher to gather detailed answers about each respondent’s field of expertise and their views on the state of the industry. Interviews with radio journalists and editors provide access to key information not necessarily in the public domain – they are about the journalists’ professional practice and views, opinions and beliefs on radio news services. The interview format has been chosen because it is a flexible tool for data collection that can be controlled while still giving space for spontaneity, and where the interviewer can press not only for complete answers but also for responses about complex and deep issues (Cohen and Manion 1994). Both structured and unstructured interview formats were considered as data collection tools. The former is useful when researchers are aware of what they don’t know and are framing questions that will supply the knowledge required, while the latter is useful when researchers are not aware of what they do not know and therefore rely on the respondents to tell them (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In the end, the semi-structured interview was chosen as the best format for the present study as it provides flexibility to the researcher aware that new discoveries could be made that he was not previously aware of. In some interviews, certain questions were added to the schedule either in advance or on the spot, based on the expertise and responses of the interviewees. As highlighted by Bell (2014), this adaptability allows the researcher to follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings.

Following the interviews, focus groups were run to obtain the views of the radio listeners on the current radio provision in England and Scotland. The aim was to collect citizens’ views on their experience of radio, interpretive strategies of the choices they make, how they make sense of radio and, crucially, how radio fits into their media consumption and everyday experience. This method was appropriate because of the underlying idea that there is a ‘synergy’ in focus groups that makes them more productive (Morgan 1996: 138). The objective was not primarily to elicit a group's answers but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers (Bloor et al 2002). Also, focus group dynamics, based on the interactions between group members, are likely to produce a wider range of views and perspectives than one-to-one interviews (Kidd and Parshall 2000; Krueger nad Casey 2015). For the present study, the key advantage of focus groups over individual interviews is in that they allow for dynamic discourse where meaning is constructed socially (Aldoory *et al* 2008). While focus groups are not an appropriate method for measuring attitudes (Barbour 2018), they were deemed to be a particularly useful tool for the present study as its main aim was to capture audience perceptions. Or to put it differently, focus groups excel at providing insights into process rather than outcome (Barbour 2018). “Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do’ (Morgan 1988: 25). Also, focus groups may encourage participation of individuals who may otherwise be reluctant to talk about their experiences due to feeling that they have little to contribute to a research project (Kitzinger 1995).

## **Procedure**

The study received ethical approval from the University of Stirling and was undertaken in two consecutive phases: (1) interviews with journalists and editors at selected local and regional radio stations in Scotland and England; (2) focus groups. The findings from the first phase informed the design of the second phase.

## **Participants**

***Interviews with station managers and journalists***

First station managers, editors and journalists at selected BBC and commercial radio stations in England and Scotland were approached for interviews. For commercial stations it was important to include most of the (remaining) independent ones as well as those belonging to large media groups such as Bauer Media or Global. These will be labelled *Independent* and *Network*, respectively. The other key criterion was to include stations from a cross-section of regions, including large urban areas served by a variety of stations, and more rural areas where there is less or no competition among local radio stations. The same criteria were used to select regional BBC stations in England, while in Scotland this was, with the exception of Aberdeen, limited to more rural areas, since those are the only ones served by regional BBC radio (on an opt-out basis).

The main source of station information and contact details was the Ofcom website, which in June 2022 listed as AM/FM licence holders 40 BBC and 224 commercial stations in England, as well as seven BBC and 32 commercial stations in Scotland. Of those, in England all BBC stations as well as 30 commercial ones were approached, while in Scotland all BBC stations as well as 16 commercial ones were approached. In the end, in England representatives from four BBC and eight commercial stations were interviewed, while in Scotland representatives from five BBC and nine commercial stations were interviewed. On two occasions, two people representing the same station were interviewed at the same time. Representatives of commercial networks proved to be the most difficult to recruit and, as a result, they are under-represented in the present study. All interviews took place between September 2020 and July 2021. Participants were selected on the basis of their role - station editor or senior journalist wherever possible - and approached by email or telephone. Due to coronavirus-related restrictions, all interviews were conducted by telephone or one of video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams. The interviews ranged from15 to 45 minutes in length, with an average time of around 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a friendly atmosphere and the interviewees spoke at length about their own and the role of their station. They discussed the challenges their stations face and shared their thoughts on the current radio environment in their nation or ideas about possible changes in the future. All interviewees are listed in Table 1.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Station** | **Person** | **Role** |
| **England** | | |
| BBC Merseyside | Andrew Bowman | Editor |
| BBC Oxford | Sophie Law | Journalist |
| BBC Stoke | Jennie Aitken | Journalist |
| BBC Surrey | Will Flockton | Journalist |
| Global NW, Manchester (Network) | Alex Wallis | Regional news editor, NW |
| KMFM (Bauer) (Network) | Rob Wills | Programme Manager |
| Mansfield FM, Mansfield (Independent) | Tony Delahunty | Station manager |
| Radio Essex (Independent) | Steve Shillinglaw | Journalist |
| Radio Exe, Exeter (Independent) | Paul Nero | Managing director |
| Radio Jackie, Croydon (Independent) | Steve Mowbray | Office manager and presenter |
| Time 1075, Romford (Independent) | Lorna Waters | Station manager |
| Your Harrogate, Harrogate (Independent) | Adam Daniel | Station manager |
| **Scotland** | | |
| Argyll FM (Independent; (community with commercial licence) | Colin Middleton | Chairman |
| Bauer Media, Edinburgh (Network) | Michael MacRae | Regional Content Director, South and East Scotland |
| BBC Aberdeen | Steven Duff | Journalist |
| BBC Borders | Angela Soave | Journalist |
| BBC Dumfries | Debbie Muir | Journalist |
| BBC Orkney | Dave Gray  David Delday | Senior producer  Journalist |
| BBC Shetland | Daniel Lawson | Journalist |
| Central FM, Stirling (Independent) | Andrew Baxter | Reporter |
| DC Thomson radio, Dundee (Network) | Brian Copland  Andrew McMurry | Head of news, radio  Head of Radio commercial activity |
| Heartland FM, Pitlochry (Independent) | Alistair Smith | Station manager |
| North Angus Radio, Arbroath (Independent) | Malcolm Finlayson | Station manager |
| Radio Skye, Portree (Independent) | Suzy Lee | Station manager |
| SIBC, Shetland (Independent) | Ian Anderson | Station manager and journalist |
| Two Lochs Radio, Wester Ross (Independent) | Alex Grey | Station manager |

Table 1: *Interviewees*

***Focus groups***

Design of the interview schedule for the focus groups was to a large extent informed by the findings from interviews with editors and journalists listed above. Both interview and focus groups schedules are provided in the appendix.

Focus groups were run to obtain insight into ordinary citizens’ views on the relevance of radio in general, and local radio in particular. Furthermore, it was deemed important to hear about the listeners’ perceptions of local news provision by radio. Residents of Scotland and England aged 18 and above were eligible to participate, provided they had resided in their locality for at least one year and did not work in radio, so as to avoid possible conflict of interest. Self-reported keen interest in local news or local radio was not a prerequisite as the study aimed to capture general attitudes of citizens on local radio and local news provision. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and snowballing as well as via advertisements and invitations placed free of charge in selected local newspapers or local area Facebook groups throughout England and Scotland. This helped the participants establish a ‘common communicative ground’ in which they behaved more as a small group, co-creating the narrative as they go along, rather than as individuals expressing their private views (Hydén and Bülow 2003: 311).

The number of focus groups to run was not pre-determined and instead, after each one the recordings were transcribed and briefly analysed to determine whether sufficient amount of useful data was collected and a saturation point reached. In the end and in line with Krueger’s (1994) and Morgan’s (1997) recommendations on the ideal number of groups, a total of four (N=4) focus groups were conducted online between September 2021 and January 2022, with 16 (N=16) participants in total, 3 women and 13 men, whose age range is 27-65, with the median age 47. No specific requirements were set during the recruitment process regarding participants’ age, sex, race or educational or professional background. Each focus group consisted of participants living in the same nation. Ten participants were from Scotland and six were from England. In one of the groups two persons who had previously agreed to participate did not show up.

Although no specific data on participants’ backgrounds was collected during the recruitment process, in the end all four groups appeared to be homogenous in their appreciation for public service media and speech-based radio, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. This homogeneity was an added benefit as commonality rather than diversity is usually understood to produce better data (Krueger 1994). Furthermore, groups which are too diverse in relation to a particular topic may result in the generation of data that provides an insufficient depth of information (Bloor *et al* 2002). In the present study, it is this accidental homogeneity in attitudes - that allowed for more free-flowing conversations among participants within groups, as predicted by Morgan (1988). For Kitzinger (1994), the whole point of holding focus groups is to capture the interaction between participants. In terms of participant interaction in the present study, the medium level was aimed at and achieved. At this level, the researcher is mainly focused on the content and is using the interaction to contextualize that content (Belzile and Oberg 2012). The fact that the focus groups were held online probably impacted participants’ interaction to a certain extent. As expected, one of the key shortcomings of using online focus groups was that participants tended to contribute shorter comments and some were more likely to say just a few words of agreement; but at the same time the online setting helped reduce the main risk in face-to-face groups where some participants tend to contribute a disproportionately large number of words, whereas other participants are relatively silent (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk 2015). In the present study this did not occur to an extent that it impacted on the group dynamics. Furthermore, all four focus group conversations were cordial, with very little interruption by other participants and at several points worked as information exchanges regarding tips on programmes or podcasts.

## **Data analysis**

Both the interview and focus groups recordings were first transcribed using the MS Teams in-built transcription facility or transcription packages such as Otter and Trint, and then verified for accuracy. Transcript-based analysis represents the most rigorous and time-intensive mode of analysing data (Onwuegbuzie *et al* 2009). The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (TA) - 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 and relevant theoretical ideas (Braun and Clarke 2013; Clarke and Braun 2014) and as such should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). While rooted in the much older tradition of content analysis, TA has only recently been recognised as a method in its own right (Joffe 2012). It allows for research questions to be addressed in a way that aims to tap into individuals’ conceptions of social phenomena, as it enables the capture of a wide range of views, so that the most dominant ones can be identified (Willig 2013). It is best suited to elucidating the specific nature of a given group’s conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study (Joffe 2012) and it seeks to unearth the themes important in the description of the phenomenon under study (Daly *et al* 1997) or salient in a text at different levels (Attride-Stirling 2001). Boyatzis (1998: 161) defines a theme as “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon”. TA is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly *et al* 1997) and the process involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy 1999: 258). It also involves the searching *across* a data set – in this case a number of interviews and focus groups – to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006). As such TA is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). It is a technique for breaking up text and finding within it explicit rationalizations and their implicit signification (Attride-Stirling 2001).

In the present study, the analysis of the interview data was performed in three groups - BBC, Networks and Independents - while focus group data was analysed as a single set except where the discussions were on the specifics of a particular nation.

In thematic analysis, themes or patterns within data can be identified in one of two primary ways: in an inductive or „bottom up‟ way (Frith and Gleeson 2004), or in a theoretical or deductive „top down‟ way (Boyatzis 1998; Hayes 1997). In an inductive approach the themes are not driven by the researcher’s theoretical interest in the area or topic and the coding of data is conducted without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions; this form of thematic analysis is data-driven (Braun and Clarke 2006). A deductive theme, on the other hand, is one drawn from a theoretical idea that the researcher brings to the research (Joffe 2012). The present study uses a combination of the two approaches. It is deductive in the sense that the identification of themes in a ‘top-down’ way was used to explore particular theoretical ideas (Braun and Clarke 2013), specifically those relating to the role of local media for the well-being of community, the role of media in democracy and the assumption that the informational needs of an audience are better served where there is presence of local public service radio. It is also inductive as it identified and embraced themes or perspectives which came from the bottom-up and were not expected or did not conform with the main expectations. The study therefore employs a hybrid codebook approach to TA known as template analysis (Brooks *et al* 2015). This approach combines the deductive a priori template of codes approach with the data-driven inductive analysis that identifies themes that emerge directly from the data. This approach is aligned with the research questions and aims as it enables the researchers to capture the themes that emerge directly from the data while integrating a relevant theoretical framework into the analytic process (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

The themes were identified through coding, which is about ‘naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data’ (Charmaz 2006: 43). By coding, researchers scrutinize and interact with the data and also ask analytical questions of the data, and in this way create their codes by defining what the data is about (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). In the present study, coding consisted of two phases: *initial coding* and *focused coding* (Charmaz 2006)*.* During initial coding (also known as *open coding),* a researcher compares data with data while moving quickly but carefully through the data (Charmaz 2006). To scrutinize and code the data, the researcher might ask questions such as: ‘What is this data a study of?’, ‘What category does this incident indicate?’ (Glaser 1978: 57) or ‘What is the participant's main concern?’ (Glaser 1998: 140). In focused coding(also known as *selective coding),* the researcher uses these previously ‘discovered’, most significant or frequent initial codes that make the most analytical sense (Charmaz 2006).

The two-stage coding process in the present study was performed in N-Vivo by searching for patterns across the interviews. First, preliminary codes were assigned to the data so that the themes could emerge. Those themes were then refined through focused coding and defined so that each theme was coherent and distinct. This is what Kvale (2007: 104) describes as ‘meaning coding’ and ‘meaning condensation’ which finally leads to ‘meaning interpretation’, which means that the themes were in the main identified at a latent or interpretative, rather than semantic or explicit level (Boyatzis 1998). In the subsequent presentation of findings, the identified themes represent the dominant attitudes and perceptions related to local radio and local news provision in Scotland and England, while the minority opinions are recorded as ‘disproving cases’, helping to form a balanced representation of the entire data set.

It should be noted that in qualitative data the analysis is almost inevitably interpretive, hence the data analysis is less a completely accurate representation (as in the numerical, positivist tradition) but more of a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data that are already interpretations of a social encounter (Cohen and Manion 1994). Furthermore, whereas quantitative research mostly strives to reveal fundamental truths which are as free as possible from researcher bias (Young and Ryan 2020), qualitative research depends on subjectivity (Rees *et al*. 2020). Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity to account for how subjectivity shapes their inquiry which means that their subjective perspective is fundamentally intertwined with qualitative research processes. (Olmos-Vega 2023).

In the present study, data analysis was facilitated by the researcher’s extensive experience in radio journalism; understanding of the challenges of working in local radio; inside knowledge of the BBC setup and processes; as well as his own experience as a radio listener that comes with an understanding of the most common formats and approaches used in modern-day radio. In analysing the data, the researcher engaged in reflexive activities related to his own views emanating from his long career in radio journalism, and also his experience as an avid radio listener, in order to identify where they echoed or diverged from those of the participants. These activities included self-reflection and efforts to understand and address some of the researcher’s biases, primarily those around his own professional experience in and preference for public service broadcasters. During the theme generation and subsequent analysis, the researcher sought to enhance rigour by ensuring all themes were supported by participant quotes taken in context and seeking out counterevidence in the data to avoid focusing only on those experiences he most closely identified with.

## **Validity**

The validity of findings or data is traditionally understood to refer to the 'correctness' or 'precision' of a research reading (Ritchie and Lewis 2003), concepts more suited to quantitative than qualitative research. The validity of data and findings in the present study was ensured by adhering to Yardley’s (2000) core principles for evaluating validity in qualitative psychology, which are Sensitivity to context, Commitment and rigour, Coherence and transparency, and Impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context was established through thorough engagement with the existing literature on the research topic and the material obtained from the participants. Commitment in the present study is shown in the degree of attentiveness to each participant during data collection and the care with which the analysis of each interview or focus group is carried out. Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study in terms of the quality and depth of interviews and the completeness of the analysis undertaken, which will be demonstrated in the next two chapters. Transparency is demonstrated by the detailed description of the research process offered here, while the hope is that the summary of methods used, together with findings and analysis that follow this chapter, make a coherent reading. Finally, the impact and importance of this study will be judged by its readers.

In interviews with station editors and journalists, validity was further ensured by using an inverted funnel design (Lunt and Livingston 1996), with a highly structured interview schedule in the beginning, as recommended by Silverman (1993), followed by a more flexible questioning led by the direction of the discussion. This compromise makes it possible to hear the participants' responses to the researcher's specific interests in the early part of each discussion as well as their own perspectives in the later part of the discussion. This is a particularly important factor in attitudinal rather than factual questions (Oppenheim 1992). The interview schedule was designed to provide rich data that would primarily help answer RQ1. The questions in the schedule ranged from those trying to establish the profile of a station and key information about its programming, to those looking to elicit journalists’ views on the state of the radio industry, the challenges the industry faces and the vision of the future. Similar approach was taken in focus group interviews, where a single schedule was used throughout with only minor variations. The focus group schedule was designed so it provides rich data that would help answer RQs 2 and 3. The focus group interview schedule covered areas such as participants’ news interests and news consumption habits, views on the radio provision in general, as well as the importance they attach to local news. Furthermore, the extent to which participants in each focus group agreed on issues indicates strong reliability of the data (Breen 2006).

Furthermore, and following Cohen and Manion’s (1994) typology of validity, in the present study internal validity, or ‘credibility’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of the data analysis was achieved by a) constant comparative method (Silverman 2000) which involves deriving hypotheses from one part of the data and testing them on another by constant checking and comparison; and b) deviant case analysis to ensure that deviant cases or 'outliers' are not forced into classes or ignored but instead used as an important resource in aiding understanding or theory development (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Internal validity will be demonstrated in the next chapter where the findings - explanations and interpretations of identified themes - will be supported by use of samples from the data set. Attempts at achieving external validity have not been made as they are not suited to qualitative research of this type. The same applies to the issue of reliability - generally understood to concern the replicability of research findings - which in qualitative research is often avoided (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

Generalizability in qualitative research is not established in the same way as it is in quantitative research. The data set and methods used in the present study do not offer the possibility to make standard generalizations about population trends, but they do allow for ‘theoretical’ or ‘logical’ generalizations (Johnson 1997). This means that the findings of this study are not expected to be exactly replicated in any other sample or context, but that the insights derived from studying this particular context - radio in its current setup in Scotland and England - would prove useful in other contexts that had similarities (Yardley 2015).

In both interview and focus group conversations, the Covid-19 pandemic was an inevitable topic because of its significant impact on the industry and the listeners’ news consumption habits and perceptions of radio. The views of both groups on the impact of the pandemic will be included in the presentation of the findings from the interviews and focus groups which follows.

# CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS PART 1: INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS AND STATION MANAGERS

Local radio in the UK is going through its biggest crisis since it was launched more than 55 years ago. The BBC is shrinking its local radio in England, while commercial radio is dominated by a small number of big players who, while commercially going strong, are increasingly moving away from localism. At the same time, the remaining independent commercial stations are in many ways staying close to the original idea and spirit of local radio but are struggling to survive or are edging closer to community radio. None of this is happening entirely against the preferences of the audience. Local BBC and independent radio attract mostly older listeners (RAJAR 2023a), while the population in general does not value local news or localness as much as it used to (Schulz 2021; Waterson 2020a). Interviews with local radio journalists, station managers and programme controllers presented here will provide insight into the perspectives on the state of local radio and its role by those who make it.

Interviews in this chapter are divided into three sections, based on the type of local radio station the interviewees work for - local or regional BBC radio, local commercial stations owned by large media groups, here referred to as Networks, and independent local stations. In each group a number of common or distinct themes emerged from the interviews. Sometimes, within each theme sub-themes emerged too.

Amongst the themes common to all three groups of interviews are an acknowledgment that radio is less of a forum for public debate than it used to be, that the Covid-19 pandemic had a big impact on the way stations operate while strengthening their relationship with listeners and a relatively optimistic outlook on the future of local radio. Also, all three groups of interviewees pointed out that the focus of their station is always on “local”, with variations in how that is reflected in their news coverage. Amongst the themes unique to each group is BBC’s commitment to the coverage of local councils, commercial networks’ focus on entertainment and independent radio’s reliance on volunteers.

The chapter is organised as follows. First the findings from the interviews with local BBC radio journalists in England and Scotland will be presented. Within this group, there are obvious differences between the stations in England and Scotland in the way they work, which informs the views of their journalists on the role of local radio and its prospects in the future. Next, the findings from the interviews with journalists and programme controllers from commercial networks will be presented. Those will reveal the interviewees’ acknowledgment that the output of commercial radio is increasingly networked and satisfaction that commercial radio is doing well at the moment. Finally, the interviews with journalists and station managers from the remaining independent stations will show that providing news while in most cases relying on volunteers and with limited resources is very challenging.

## **BBC Interviews**

In the first part of the interviews, the ten BBC journalists were asked to provide a profile of their station and describe their own role. As expected, it quickly emerged that there are significant differences in the way stations in Scotland and England are set up and operate, which has implications for the roles of their journalists. Learning about these differences helps us understand how the journalists view their role and the future of local radio.

**Theme 1:** ***Stations in Scotland operate differently from those in England***

Given the size of their output, it is to be expected that BBC stations in Scotland employ smaller teams where each member might have a variety of duties. BBC Orkney’s Dave Gray summed it up by saying that he is “*Senior producer, assistant editor, station manager, anything you want.*” BBC Borders’s Angela Soave pointed out that the lines are blurred at managerial level too: “*I'm the only senior journalist, so head of station, and I am the local news editor*”. The only exception to this is BBC Aberdeen, as it covers a large and more diverse region, while also being tasked with producing output for the national BBC. There the roles are more clearly defined, in part because some of their journalists primarily work for BBC Scotland’s national radio and TV news programmes. Some of their work then filters into local BBC Aberdeen bulletins too.

Meanwhile, stations in England produce a much bigger output and therefore employ more staff whose roles are, with some exceptions, more narrowly defined. BBC Surrey’s Will Flockton says he is the breakfast producer, while BBC Stoke’s Jennie Aitken says they have a political reporter on the station, who covers “*all our kind of council, local government stories, big stories in the area*”. This is the kind of a role unimaginable in Scottish opt-outs. At the same time, Aitken adds, journalists are often expected to merge or switch roles, so she is “*a reporter, a news reader, a producer”.* This illustrates two key points; the first is that journalists at BBC stations in both England and Scotland have to be versatile, ‘jack of all trades’ in news production, both in front (presenter) and behind (producer) the microphone, and also across platforms; and the second point is that there are variations in the two-way news flow system in which BBC local and national stations operate. At stations in England, like BBC Surrey, resources are targeted at delivering in-depth coverage of local news stories, while also appropriating larger national stories for local people. That means that a station such as BBC Surrey primarily feeds news down to local audiences, while at a station such as BBC Aberdeen the process is almost the reverse. Aberdeen also feeds local stories up into the national news for BBC Scotland more often that many other local stations. After all, local radio was from its beginnings regarded within the BBC as existing primarily to feed the networks (Crisell 2002). Whether that is still true or not, having to feed up in the way Aberdeen does influences the journalism taking place at those stations and, to an extent, the news values at each station.

Nevertheless, on both sides of the border the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way BBC journalists worked. Some of these changes were temporary, such as working more from home, although on Orkney - one of the places with almost no Covid cases at all - that didn’t last long and staff were quick to return to the studio. Some of the changes introduced during the pandemic, such as increased use of online interviewing, are probably here to stay as they help stations save on travel and other costs. In Scotland, this may be particularly appealing because of the distances both journalists and guests previously had to travel.

***1.1 We (don’t) know who our listeners are***

Another significant difference between the BBC stations in England and those in Scotland is that the former have a very good idea about how many people listen to them and who they are, while the latter are pretty much in the dark on this. That is because RAJAR, which collects audience data for public service and commercial radio in the UK, does not track audience for opt-out stations in Scotland. BBC Shetland’s Daniel Lawson highlights that contradiction like this.

*“We can tell you how many folks in Scotland are listening to Radio Scotland. But we can't tell you how many folk in Shetland are listening to Radio Scotland at the times we are on. We have no idea.*” (Daniel Lawson BBC Shetland)

Without this kind of data Scottish opt-outs rely only on anecdotal evidence on who listens to their output any how satisfied they are with it. Their counterparts in England, however, know exactly how many listeners they have and who they are. The description of the BBC Merseyside’s typical listener, offered by Andrew Bowman, easily applies to all BBC regional radio - as evidenced in data provided by RAJAR, with only minor variations.

“*People that tend to be interested in local radio tend to be a little bit older, tend to be […] around 50-55, which is, you know, people feel settled in their family lives and have time to look what's in the local community.*” (Andrew Bowman, BBC Merseyside and Lancashire)

He also says that regional BBC stations attract more socio-economically diverse audiences than the national ones. Will Flockton repeats this claim and describes regional BBC radio listeners like this:

“*Slightly lower socio-economic background-type people, less educated, dare I say it, but sort of salt of the earth, real people who work, who are sort of more the workers rather than the thinkers who would listen to Radio Four.”* (Will Flockton BBC Surrey)

Furthermore, some regional stations in England run listener feedback sessions in order to gain further insight into what their listeners think of them. That is not the case in Scotland.

**Theme 2:** ***Every patch is diverse, however small***

As noted earlier, in media coverage of and research on local radio, the terms ‘local’ and ‘regional’ are often used interchangeably, depending on which station one talks about. This has been reflected in the present study too, with the interviewees often switching in their answers between ‘local’ and ‘regional’. Aiming to provide clarity on this, the interviewees were asked to describe and define their stations’ area of coverage. All interviewees agree that the areas their stations cover are diverse, regardless of their size. Sometimes that diversity stems from the large number of people who live in an area, as in the case of BBC Sussex and BBC Surrey (which are technically two stations merged into one) or BBC Merseyside. Some stations, however, serve relatively small populations but over a large and diverse area. BBC Orkney and BBC Shetland, for example, serve a combined population of only about 50,000 people, who are spread over large territories and live in what could be described as separate micro-communities. Then there is a patch like Aberdeen, which is not among the largest by size, but is quite diverse as it includes several distinct areas and audiences. It is both urban and rural, includes some of the richest as well as some of the most deprived areas in Scotland and a variety of industries, from oil and gas to fishing and farming, all of which generate specific and often unique news stories. BBC Aberdeen’s Steven Duff sees it as “*a microcosm of Scotland*”.

For Andrew Bowman, BBC Merseyside is a regional station, as it covers several cities and towns which are “*distinctly different and lead different lives and have different agendas*”. He highlights the importance of cultural identity connected to place when he says people in Merseyside are more loyal to their town or city, while in Lancashire (also under his remit), the “*county comes first*”. For Will Flockton, BBC Surrey is a ‘*countywide*’ station whose main challenge is how to serve a politically diverse audience, with Brighton being a “*left-wing city surrounded by right-wing areas*”.

With the exception of Aberdeen, Scottish opt-out stations cover less populated areas, which brings its own challenges for journalists. Orkney and Shetland are both very large patches which require a lot of travelling by the local journalists. Orkney consists of almost 20 inhabited islands, each with “*its particular news, problems, particular issues*” (Dave Gray, BBC Radio Orkney). Daniel Lawson describes Shetland as a “*good news patch for its size*” because of its rich industry based mainly around oil and gas as well as fishing, but also because of its politically engaged community.

Regardless of what precise term they use to describe their station, the interviewees invariably agree that the content they provide to their listeners is always local or related to their locality.

**Theme 3:** ***Everything we do is local***

Given the stations’ remit, it was not surprising to hear the interviewees say their focus is always on the news from and about the local area. After all, as Dave Gray points out, that is why they are there: “*There would be no point in having a local radio station in a small place like Orkney unless it was locally focused*”. Or in other words: “*It’s hyperlocal, it covers Oxfordshire and that is it*” (Sophie Law, BBC Oxford). The approach of all regional or local BBC stations is probably best summed up by Daniel Lawson.

“*What's going on in Shetland. And also, what's going on in the rest of the world that might affect Shetland. Or what's happening to Shetland that's around the rest of the world as well.*” (Daniel Lawson BBC Shetland)

Sometimes that means looking for a local angle on a national or international story and sometimes it is about stories which may not have any direct connection to the local area but may resonate with it: “*Farming stories can be done without much amending because they apply to all farmers*” (Angela Soave BBC Borders). These are illustrations of the strengths of the Scottish opt-outs; they have access to material produced by the national BBC which allows them to include in their news bulletins stories originating beyond their localities but relevant to or resonating with them. Still, Debbie Muir points out that focus on local is what distinguishes Scottish opt-outs from their commercial rivals, who will in their bulletins combine local and national or international stories. For stations that serve several administrative regions or distinct communities, as most BBC stations in England do, the focus is on stories that “*traverse council lines or are of interest to a greater audience”* (Will Flockton BBC Surrey). Andrew Bowman illustrates this point by saying the challenge is to “*take a story on traffic restrictions* *in Warrington [and] make it relatable to a bigger area*”. He then cites the example of the Make a Difference slot - a regular feature across local BBC radio in England - which takes the old idea of ending news bulletins on something positive and pushes it further by focusing on stories which are usually about local volunteers doing something good for the community and thus becoming inspirational. Daniel Lawson echoes this by saying that for stories to resonate with the audience, not all of them need to be hard news.

***3.1 Local council coverage is our bread and butter***

Nevertheless, for local and regional public service radio coverage of local council affairs is expected to be its primary task. Debbie Muir confirms this by saying BBC Dumfries covers every council or local health board meeting, as it is a “*responsibility of public broadcaster to do that*”. BBC Aberdeen’s Steven Duff reflects that when he says that they regularly challenge the local council, where “*they [the Council] know that when they get a call from the BBC they sit up*”. What these journalists are saying is that like so many of their colleagues cited in previous research, they see their role first and foremost as that of a watchdog; of an essential facilitator of democracy. Angela Soave, however, notes that local authorities are not as forthcoming as they used to be, which makes coverage of local politics more difficult than in the past. All other interviewees confirm that coverage of local councils is something they do on a regular basis, with some variations. Will Flockton says stations such as BBC Surrey, whose patch includes several local authorities, would cover only those meetings that have “*sort of a bigger impact”.* He then adds that, except for a “*vocal minority with a stake in issues such as housing developments*”, in general listeners are less keen than before to hear about local politics. This is a key point that will be repeated in the interviews in this study several times. There is a whole host of factors that would explain reduced interest in local politics, some of which will be discussed later in the study. Still, interviewees agree that the BBC as a public service broadcaster has a duty to cover local politics, despite all the challenges. Sophie Law offers a convincing rationale for that approach by saying that BBC Oxford’s main purpose is to reach “*underserved local communities, telling them what's going to happen [and] holding their politicians to account*”.

In their coverage of local councils, many stations use the services of Local Democracy Reporters, a pool of journalists funded by the BBC whose coverage of local councils is available to the BBC and others, mainly local newspapers, who join the scheme. Of the four UK nations, the scheme has the largest number of contracts and reporters in Scotland, but almost no radio stations amongst its customers, except for DC Thomson newspaper reporters who share content and expertise with local radio stations owned by the company in Scotland (BBC n/d 1). Under the scheme, officially called Local Democracy Reporter Service (LDRS) the BBC funds the salaries of 165 journalists. The service is part of the BBC’s Local News Partnership (LNP) scheme, launched in 2017 between the Corporation and the News Media Association, “in recognition of the fact that, as commercial news providers face increasing financial challenges, it is more difficult for them to find the resource to provide coverage of local democratic institutions and processes”. The LNP is funded by the BBC from the licence fee, at a cost of up to £8 million per year. Over 170 media organisations representing more than 1,000 news titles or outlets are now signed up, giving them access to several services, such as a News Hub, which offers partner media organisations access to BBC video material shortly after transmission for use online and a Shared Data Unit set up to support the development of data journalism across the local news industry (all from House of Commons 2023). Interviewees in the present study have mixed views on the service. Some think it’s a great scheme as it provides detailed coverage of local council affairs while supporting local press. Others, such as Angela Soave, see it as a “*pointless exercise*” because, she says, the scheme should primarily serve the BBC. This will be echoed by other interviewees later.

***3.2 Sport coverage is dominated by football***

For every news organisation, sport or at least football is a big part of its news coverage. The same applies to BBC local radio in England, although much less so for its counterparts in Scotland, mainly because of their significantly smaller output. In areas dominated by big Premier League football teams, the sports coverage is unavoidably focused on those, while in other places the focus is on local teams. BBC Oxford, for example, provides live commentary of games played by Oxford United, a local football team currently in the third tier of the English football league system. It is similar in Stoke, where there are three local football teams. Future research should look at this more closely to find out to what extent sports coverage is dominated by (male) football and whether it comes at the expense of other sports.

When it comes to cultural and other non-news output, it is non-existent on Scottish opt-outs except for Orkney and Shetland, which have longer broadcast times. Listeners of BBC Shetland therefore get to hear programmes on traditional and other types of music, but also on “*outdoor activities, film, food, history*, *all sorts of stuff”* (Daniel Lawson, BBC Shetland). It is similar on BBC Orkney, where there are programmes on “*dialect, archaeology, traditional music, discussion, any subject that is of interest locally or somebody suggests*” (Dave Gray, BBC Orkney). This is what makes these two stations closer to their counterparts in England, which are able to include in their programming other important, non-news aspects of local life and culture.

**Theme 4**: ***Radio still fosters a sense of community***

Local radio has always had a special place in the lives of its dedicated listeners and served to foster a sense of community (Robins and Cornford 1993; Napoli 2001; Cowling 2005). It was therefore important to find out whether it does that in the age of redefined localism and a more fragmented media landscape. Several BBC journalists say they feel their radio station is an integral part of the community, or as Dave Gray puts it: “*Radio Orkney sounds like it comes from Orkney*”. Daniel Lawson goes further and says that people in Shetland see their local BBC station as “*theirs somehow, they have some ownership of it*”. Jennie Aitken thinks BBC Stoke has a special connection with its listeners which informs and is reflected in everything they do, from news bulletins to the songs they play. She adds that the pandemic has helped local radio improve its links with the community. As highlighted previously, in some communities the local radio station is the first place people call when they need information. Although responding to such inquiries may not be in their job description, for journalists such as David Delday, part of the role is to be a *“counsellor”.*

*“You've got to kind of humour them and speak to them [as] folks view us as a hub for information and quite often will come to us first*” (David Delday, BBC Radio Orkney).

These statements highlight another important aspect of local media - a sense of cultural ownership of it. Content-makers understand that the listeners are invested in it, which motivates and frames the news values and the overall output of a station.

Dave Gray thinks part of the reason for the strong bond between BBC Orkney and its listeners is the fact that almost all of their staff are from the area and speak in local dialect. This socio-cultural identity and understanding of local cultures seem to be very important attributes for journalists on the stations to have. Will Flockton explains how this works in practice.

“*My presenter is very much from here, she grew up here in Sussex and will proudly say so on air all the time, she lives in the community. She has kids who go to the local school, we all do, she'll reflect on what her kids are doing, reflect on the issues that other parents are talking about at the school gates when she goes to pick them up. And if she'd gone to a village fair with the children at the weekend, she'll tell our listeners about it. So, yeah, she is present in the community. And all our staff live in the patch. And they'll bring all of that local knowledge to how we deliver our shows and news.*” (Will Flockton BBC Surrey)

***4.1 Sense of community is also built through campaigns***

For all local radio stations - public service or commercial – another way of engaging with the listeners and fostering a sense of community is through campaigns. Because it is a public service broadcaster, the BBC is limited in the type of campaigns it can engage in. While it cannot run commercial campaigns, it does run charity fundraisers or one-off campaigns aimed at specific issues in the community. One such campaign was run by BBC Orkney to raise money for families whose members had to go to mainland Scotland for medical treatment.

***4.2 Local radio is not a forum for debate it used to be***

Another way in which radio fosters a sense of belonging to a community is as being a platform for debate, a form of public sphere. This has been one of its key roles for a long time, either through that staple of radio, the phone-in, or through other types of discussion programmes. But that role is now diminished by several factors, including there being more choice for listeners, and the popularity of social media. BBC stations in England still maintain some form of the traditional phone-in, through Big Conversation, an hour-long morning show on the hot topic of the day, which is now a regular fixture in all BBC regional radio schedules. Sophie Law says their typical guests would be a new leader of the county council or the Police and Crime Commissioner and similar. Meanwhile, Scottish opt-outs with their more limited outputs can run debates on special occasions only and with permission from BBC Scotland HQ in Glasgow. BBC Dumfries ran an hour-long debate on floods in the area, while BBC Aberdeen broadcast debates on the decline of the main shopping street in the city or a new stadium for Aberdeen football club. Such debates require extensions to the stations’ usual schedule and are often carried by BBC Scotland as well. More regular discussion programmes on Scottish opt-outs appear only on BBC Shetland and BBC Orkney in winter months. BBC Shetland runs an hour-long debate programme where members of the community, rather than politicians and officials, debate “*social issues or whatever's going on*” (Daniel Lawson BBC Shetland). Interestingly, despite having regular debates, neither station runs traditional phone-ins.

“*This is a small community, people don't like so much popping their head above the parapet, and they're more inclined to burn you an email, or a Facebook message or something, but generally Orcadians are quite reticent about being interviewed or being thrust into the spotlight. A phone-in wouldn’t be that popular. Being put on the radio would be most Orcadians definition of torture if they were made to do that.*” (Dave Gray, BBC Radio Orkney)

Several journalists say that discussion programmes, while still popular, are now more difficult to set up and produce because audiences are more polarised than before. Angela Soave says it is difficult for BBC Borders to get a balanced audience, while Will Flockton thinks that social media, which allows people to *click off voices you don't want to hear”,* has made listener*s “more antagonistic to each other”.* This is a significant challenge for the heavily-regulated broadcast media in the UK. For all broadcasters, but the BBC in particular, presenting a variety of perspectives in a balanced way is key if they are to maintain the trust of the audience. Already these challenges suggest that radio’s traditional role as being a platform for debate may be diminished. This is something that was previously established in research on local radio in the US too, where, as Pointdexter (2016) points out, audience fragmentation has resulted in listeners self-selecting into groups of like-minded individuals, thus preventing real debate.

***Theme 5: Coverage of the pandemic brought us closer to the listeners***

All BBC journalists interviewed for this study agree that the pandemic brought them closer to the listeners as people were keen to get more information. Andrew Bowman points out that the pandemic introduced local BBC radio to people who may have previously thought it had nothing to offer to them*.* Jennie Aitken says “*we knew that people needed us”* and adds that BBC Stoke was providing *“a community service by just helping people out, telling them where to go”,* as people often have a habit of ringing their local radio station first when they need practical information. In a way, the pandemic helped emphasise why local radio has an important role in society and local communities.

While broadcast hours for stations in England are much longer and therefore allow for more non-news output, things changed with the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a big impact on programming and news coverage. It changed both schedules and news bulletins.

“*We just started doing a Covid take on everything*” (David Delday, BBC Radio Orkney).

Steven Duff says for BBC Aberdeen one of the dilemmas was whether to go with local bulletins at a time when the news agenda was dominated by a big national and international story. The decision to keep them was influenced by more news and announcements coming from local authorities as the pandemic went on. This major international health crisis presented news editors with significant challenges in terms of story selection too.

“*At the beginning, for weeks the whole bulletins were Coronavirus, it was the only news story we were running. After that, it gradually kind of scaled back. We're running other stories, because, you know, life is carrying on*” (Angela Soave, BBC Borders).

Some of the interviewees offered examples of how local newsrooms in their coverage of the pandemic broke important stories or found significant local angles. For BBC Orkney one such story was the fear and even animosity amongst some in the local population towards recent arrivals to the island of people with Covid. Much of the Covid-related coverage was about local community initiatives set up to deal with the health crisis. Some of the stories even led to policy change. BBC Aberdeen ran a story about a lack of Covid testing for households with health workers, which led to change in policy on testing by the local health board.

With a major national emergency under way, there was also an understanding that radio should serve as a message board for various government agencies dealing with the pandemic. Stations broadcast announcements on isolation requirements, testing facilities, school arrangements etc. Angela Soave says she saw broadcasting of such announcements as part of the station’s remit. Dave Gray goes further and says that by giving people practical information at a time of a major emergency radio serves a “*vital function*”.

The pandemic also had a significant, though short-term, effect on schedules (more recent changes to local BBC radio in England will be discussed later). Some of the non-news programming or more niche shows were removed from schedules, either to make way for extended news coverage of the pandemic or because of the logistics of working under lockdown conditions. David Delday says BBC Orkney started tweaking the format of some of the programmes and running interviews a bit longer. Sometimes new programmes were added to the schedule specifically because of the pandemic. BBC Shetland launched a quiz on Friday nights, with parts of Shetland playing against each other: “*Just while folk were in lockdown, to give them something to do*” (Daniel Lawson, BBC Shetland). Some stations launched programmes to help vulnerable groups. BBC Orkney thus broadcast a talking newspaper for blind people as the local charity that normally does that was unable to distribute CDs during the lockdowns. These and other similar one-off programmes introduced during the pandemic, together with emphasis on public messaging, highlight not only the public service role of radio, but also its continuing ability to foster or maintain a sense of belonging to a community.

***Theme 6: BBC stations must remain distinct***

Local BBC radio today attracts fewer listeners than before (RAJAR 2023a), operates with reduced budgets (BBC 2023b) and its future is uncertain. Journalists interviewed for the present study acknowledge the changes and challenges that lie ahead. Most of them agree that they now have fewer resources than before. Jennie Aitken says BBC Stoke does not any longer employ district reporters with specialist knowledge of local authority areas. Angela Soave makes the same point and adds that retaining talented staff is increasingly difficult in more rural areas such as Scottish Borders. Reflecting on the recent efforts to standardise BBC schedules and formats across the regional network, Andrew Bowman says that for the regional stations the key is to remain distinct in their news coverage: “*The sort of diversity of voices that we can get to broadcast is different from any other part of the BBC*”.

With regional BBC radio in England facing further cuts (BBC 2023b), could being an opt-out with short but heavily focused news bulletins actually be an advantage? Steven Duff certainly thinks so.

“*I want to see quality over quantity. It's our best stuff. It goes on our bulletins, there's no need to fill. And I think that is what the audience had become used to, perhaps, in Scotland. I think it's maybe the best way of delivering it, rather than, you know, a two-hour long breakfast programme from Aberdeen.*” (Steven Duff, BBC Aberdeen)

He seems to suggest that the precious opt-out time motivates producers to ensure the content they develop makes a difference locally and is distinctive. Yet, Angela Soave is worried that some parts of Scotland are under-served by the BBC. She points to Dundee, parts of Perthshire and parts of Angus and Ayrshire where there is no BBC presence and where, she is keen to stress, commercial radio is doing rather well. Then there are also Glasgow and Edinburgh where the BBC does not have any local news coverage on radio.

While acknowledging that the BBC struggles to attract younger audiences, Andrew Bowman sees that as its strength. He mentioned earlier that regional radio listeners are usually people aged 55 and over, who are keener to know what is happening in their local community. “*No other part of the BBC really serves that audience well*”. This is a view recently echoed by the former editor of BBC Radio Leicester, Liam McCarthy (2023), who thinks that the over 50s are a growing demographic that should not be neglected by local BBC radio. Furthermore, Andrew Bowman adds that regional BBC attracts a more socio-economically diverse audience, the kind of audience that is “*very valuable to the BBC because, particularly out of London, it's a group that the BBC struggles to reach*”. His claim is confirmed by the BBC’s own data on listeners (BBC nd).

Bowman also says that the state of local commercial radio in the UK - with its gradual moving away from local content and flavour thanks to waves of deregulation - is an opportunity for the BBC to remain distinct and relevant. Jennie Aitken agrees but adds that the “*demise*” of commercial radio is bad for journalism. Will Flockton points out that the disappearance of independent local commercial radio helps the BBC as it brings new listeners.

Orkney is one of those rare places where the BBC has no local radio competitors at all. There and everywhere else, though, local newspapers still seem to provide competition to the BBC. Steven Duff says that Aberdeen is a particularly competitive market, with a BBC opt-out, two local commercial radio stations, local TV news bulletin and a still strong local newspaper - Press and Journal. Debbie Muir says she would like to see more collaboration with local competitors, particularly newspapers. Will Flockton, however, thinks that local newspapers are a competitor only thanks to the BBC and its funding of the Local Democracy Reporter scheme, on which many local newspapers rely for copy.

Most journalists interviewed for the present study recognise that the resources are getting ever tighter and that remaining distinct will be ever more challenging. Is there therefore any room for optimism about the future of local BBC radio?

**Theme 7:** ***The future is uncertain***

Journalists interviewed here acknowledge that the future of local radio is very uncertain. Dave Gray says that one of the challenges is the changing listening habits, characterised by a move from linear listening to listening on demand, which places new demands on programme makers. Debbie Muir agrees that people consume less scheduled, linear radio. She then makes an important point by saying local radio will have to embrace social and digital media more than it does today, as a way of reaching younger listeners or people in more remote areas. Jennie Aitken also says the BBC cannot ignore the shift among the listeners towards hyperlocal social media where people not just consume news, but also engage with it. The BBC has embraced listening on demand and digital news provision as soon as the technology enabled it, with some tentative and uneven steps in local news provision on social media too. Will Flockton however thinks that audio delivery in real time will remain valued, partly for practical reasons - “*You can't look at a website while driving” -* or because of the immediacy of live radio*.* Live radio indeed continues to be the most popular form of audio, with 88% of adults tuning in for an average of 20 hours each week (Ofcom 2023c).Andrew Bowman says that news on social media is hyperlocal in a way the BBC cannot be, but at the same time, he says, local radio can bring people together, which is the kind of power social media does not have. He then repeats his point that BBC radio has to remain distinct to survive and thrive.

“*Whether that be by regional accent, or socioeconomic status, or even age, I think what local radio will continue to offer is an alternative that we're not trying to be Radio Two or Five Live. And I think the more networking goes on commercial radio, the more important our services are to demonstrate that.*” (Andrew Bowman, BBC Merseyside and Lancashire)

Indeed, when Bauer Media announced in 2020 the rebranding of almost 50 local stations into a national Hits Radio network, the BBC seized on this consolidation in the commercial radio market by repositioning its local stations around personality-led local programmes (Waterson 2020a).

With the above-mentioned challenges in mind, will local radio be here in ten years’ time and if so, in what form? Will Flockton is optimistic because he thinks local BBC radio serves people who “*actually care about where they live and what's happening around where they live”,* echoing what Andrew Bowman previously said*.* He then cites the Covid-19 pandemic as an example of BBC radio being a *“valuable asset to have for local communities*”. Citing the example of her station, BBC Stoke’s Jennie Aitken expects further shrinking of local BBC radio. The latest wave of redundancies (BBC 2023b) suggests that her fears are justified. For Sophie Law, the main challenge for local radio will be to attract the next generation of listeners, which is why stations like BBC Oxford, she says, try to be on social media as much as possible. Nevertheless, she thinks the talk of local radio’s demise is premature, as it was in the past every time new technology arrived.

“*I think the [pandemic] has shown the importance of local radio for community information, for community togetherness. And there are people who don't want that and they'll come to us for specific things, but that's why we're doing [a] smart speaker three-minute bulletin that's rammed full of specific info for your local area.*” (Sophie Law BBC Oxford)

Thinking about the future of the Scottish opt-outs, Debbie Muir does not think they can grow, but is not worried about their imminent demise. She says she would like to see new opt-outs, primarily for Glasgow and Edinburgh, but accepts that is unlikely: “*I think the BBC is moving towards more online content*”.

Finally, in the current climate of great uncertainty, maybe keeping what you have is the best one can hope for. For Dave Gray, the fact that BBC Orkney is still there is a sign of success.

“*I think we have to be realistic in a small rural community. The fact that Radio Orkney exits here at all is actually quite encouraging. I'm not entirely sure whether if BBC Radio Orkney didn't exist and you came up with a business proposal, whether it would happen nowadays, because they would say, well, hang on a minute, you've only got 22,000 people and you've already got a Radio Scotland, so […] it would be difficult to make a case for a small local radio station like this from scratch.*” (Dave Gray BBC Radio Orkney)

Angela Soave fears the community aspect has gone from the BBC stations in Scotland, “*except Orkney and Shetland*”, while Daniel Lawson is of the view that stations like Shetland and Orkney are actually an ideal model for local BBC radio as it is “*hyper local and folk take ownership of it*”. But he also accepts that the expansion of the Scottish opt-outs is not likely. Given the overall uncertainty over the BBC in general and the recent cuts to local BBC radio, it is not surprising that most interviewees do not expect local BBC radio to grow and would be happy just to see any further decline halted.

“*Everybody says: Yes, we'd love to have more. And it would be great to have more resources, more staff, more everything. I think at the moment my main ambition is to maintain what we have now.*” (Dave Gray BBC Radio Orkney)

In discussions on the state of local radio in the UK, some BBC journalists made comparisons with commercial radio, owned by media giants such as Bauer or Global. Some see it as local BBC’s main competitor, in the areas where it exists alongside local BBC radio, while others disagree and say that because it is moving away from news and current affairs, networked commercial radio actually provides the BBC with an opportunity to remain distinct. In the next section, views of those working for commercial networks will be presented.

## **Commercial networks interviews**

Following the waves of deregulation outlined earlier in this study, commercial radio stations owned by large parent companies such as DC Thomson or Bauer Media Group have moved away from speech-based programming and today mostly provide news only in the form of brief bulletins on top of the hour, with very little or no room for extended news reporting, news analysis or discussion. How do those working for network commercial radio see their own role? As the themes that emerged from the interviews in this section will show, they say that news is not their primary focus but that they have to comply with the regulatory requirements and offer news to their listeners. The themes included in this section indicate that commercial networks are primarily focused on entertainment, that their output is increasingly networked and that there is optimism regarding long-term prospects for this model of local radio.

**Theme 1: *Entertainment within local regulations is our focus***

Interviews with those working for commercial networks started by focusing on station descriptions. The aim was to find out more about stations’ approach to programming, teams and news provision. Alex Wallis says that Global NW runs two broadcast centres, in Manchester and Liverpool, with a total of 16 journalists between the two cities. Andrew McMurry says that DC Thompson currently has three stations in Scotland - Pure, Original 106 and Kingdom FM - with plans for expansion. He says the network’s strategy is entertainment with the Scottish flavour, “*but within the local regulations*”.

“*Playing the best of Scottish music and Scottish banter, [which] is completely different from the banter south of the border, and that's why our strategy is trying to bring that Scottish humour a bit.*” (Andrew McMurry DC Thomson)

Michael MacRae explains that for Bauer Media, Forth One in Edinburgh is the local “*heritage commercial radio station in the area*”, broadcasting for over 45 years across Edinburgh and the surrounding areas. He highlights Forth One’s breakfast show, which at the end of 2022 reached over 300,000 listeners or 22.2% of the population of Edinburgh and the surrounding areas (NEN 2022).

**Theme 2: *Output is increasingly networked***

One of the key features of modern commercial radio is increased networking of output, where more and more programming is centrally produced and broadcast simultaneously across the stations belonging to the same parent group. Alex Wallis, for example, says that on Global NW, only the two key shows - Breakfast and Drive time - are produced and broadcast locally, while the rest of the output is “networked” or “syndicated”. She adds, however, that local stations are still able to react to breaking news on their own, thanks to technology that allows individual stations to opt-out of the national output if and when necessary. She says on Global NW this is often used for local travel updates. Michael MacRae says Bauer’s approach is similar but points out that in Scotland, its networked programming is mostly limited to Scotland with very little input from other Bauer centres in the UK. Like Alex Wallis, he adds that local stations are still able to opt out of networked programming when needed, which is again usually for local travel updates.

**Theme 3: *We focus on localness in everything we do***

Despite increased networking and ever looser regulatory requirements on locally produced content, all interviewees emphasise localness as their station’s main feature. In some cases, localness is reflected through the topics presenters chat about on air. Those topics, Alex Wallis explains, are usually chosen by the programming teams. The interviewees also say their presenters and programme controllers are from the local areas, so they know “*what's happening on our doorstep*” (Andrew McMurry, DC Thomson). This is why Michael MacRae describes Forth One as “*one of those stations that lives and breathes the area”.* He goes on to say that emphasis on local cultural identity and values is what brings the audience to the station.

*“When you listen to our presenters, it feels like they're one of us, it doesn't feel like it's this big celebrity presenter, it could be just your pals on the radio.*” (Michael MacRae, Bauer Media)

While these claims about localness certainly correspond to what the BBC journalists said, they raise a question of how commercial network radio can maintain its emphasis on localness if it is being increasingly networked.

Staying with the localness theme, Andrew McMurray says that DC Thomson is “*focused on bringing through local talent*” as part of its strategy. He adds that commercial campaigns are also local as much as possible and that listeners appreciate the effort to always have a local angle in the stations’ programmes. Michael MacRae says Bauer Media used that focus on localness well during the pandemic by asking listeners to nominate their local heroes: doctors, nurses or neighbours buying groceries for those shielding.

***3.1 Our news is always local***

One of the key requirements for local radio is to run regular hourly news bulletins, which are expected but not always required to focus on local news. Alex Wallis is keen to point out that localness is one of the key news values for Global, even in those parts of the schedule when networked programmes go out. Michael MacRae agrees and cites “*an old classic” -* people listening to Forth One on a snowy day to learn if the schools are closed and children can go out to play. He then adds that the same approach is used in sports coverage: “*If you put on your local station, we'll be talking about your local team*” (Michael MacRae, Bauer Media). Brian Copland points out that the Covid-19 pandemic reminded them of the relevance of local radio when an elderly lady asked the station not to stop broadcasting daily Covid updates.

**Theme 4:** ***Our news bulletins are short but comprehensive***

While the BBC stations, including the Scottish opt-outs, broadcast news bulletins of between 3-5 minutes and have other programmes dedicated to news, local commercial radio stations run by the networks mostly broadcast shorter bulletins of up to two and a half minutes. They employ journalists who cover local patches and can also take advantage of the synergies of the kind available to the likes of the BBC. Alex Wallis says Global NW has 16 journalists on the team between Manchester and Liverpool. They have access to external agency feeds and Global’s own news service: “*We write our own scripts, we're collecting our own audio and we also feed into LBC News*” (Alex Wallis Global NW). Similarly, Brian Copland says DC Thomson stations benefit from having access to material produced by its network of newspaper reporters. Those reporters, he adds, help their radio colleagues with coverage and analysis of big stories and the material they produce is also used for online news. This is an interesting example of cross-media use of journalists and material, worth exploring further. Bauer in Scotland benefits from having newsrooms in several cities so it can produce news bulletins from each area, or from the central newsroom in Glasgow at weekends or other less busy times.

The four interviewees say that their stations try to provide comprehensive coverage of the main news of the day, be that local, national or international news. This is what distinguishes commercial radio from BBC stations, with the latter’s strong focus on local news only, in particular on the Scottish opt-outs.

“*I think our listeners want to come away from our bulletins knowing what's going on in the world. So, they're knowing what's going on in their patch, but also they're knowing what's happening nationally as well.*” (Alex Wallis Global NW)

Michael MacRae acknowledges that their stations would also cover national and international news but adds that the main things for Forth One listeners is to get a brief local update. He then points out that for Forth One’s listeners politics is not a priority: “T*hey'll take the 30 seconds from the news, and then they'll go on with their day*”. Brian Copland however says that for DC Thomson the focus is always first and foremost on local news, which he sees as the stations’ key selling point. Essentially, what Alex Wallis and Michael McRae seem to suggest here is that their stations serve the *monitorial*, rather than the *good* citizen, as previously defined by Zaller (2003) and Schudson (1998).

Being large national networks, Bauer, Global and DC Thomson have a variety of approaches to news between the various stations under their umbrellas. Alex Wallis says that for Global NW that means variations in story selection and news writing styles between stations. She explains that a station like Smooth would have “*a more formal news bulletin”* with more political and local council stories, while those on Capital would be more *“showbizzy”* to suit the target age group*.* These variations in story selection are, she adds, reflected also in how the stories are written, so that even the same story is written differently depending on the station or “*brand”.* A similar approach is taken by DC Thomson. Brian Copland says their news output in Aberdeen, which heavily relies on oil and gas industry, has more emphasis on business news than is the case with their other stations in Scotland.

***4.1 By sport we mean football***

For commercial radio in Scotland, sports coverage is an important part of its appeal to listeners. Radio Clyde in Glasgow - part of the Bauer network - runs a very popular football news and discussion show Superscoreboard. Bauer media is trying to capitalise further on the popularity of the show by moving it to a new TV studio and showing it live on YouTube and Twitter (Colins 2023). Michael MacRae says the focus of the show is obviously on the two big Glasgow teams, Celtic and Rangers. Launched in 1978, the show has been a big hit with listeners on whose passion to discuss football live on air it relies. A major feature of the show is its “indefatigable” sense of humour (O’Donnell 2002). MacRae adds that Bauer recently tried to emulate the success of Superscoreboard in the rest of Scotland by launching a show that focuses on top tier football in the country. He points out the new show is popular not just among traditional male football fans, but also among women who, he says, it provides with cultural capital or “*social ammunition, something they can learn and be able to chat about”*. Brian Copland says DC Thomson stations don’t run dedicated shows and only cover sport in regular news bulletins where they try to focus on local teams. Alex Wallis explains that on Global NW, which serves two major football centres such as Liverpool and Manchester, sport is only covered occasionally: “*If there is a big signing, or if Man United's made lot of money that year or something like that*”.

***Theme 5: The pandemic had a big impact on news and schedules***

All interviewees say that the pandemic had a big impact on both the way they worked and their business. Alex Wallis says that when the first lockdown was introduced, all members of staff except news readers moved to working from home. Brian Copland says it was “*refreshing*” to see how quickly DC Thompson was able to switch to broadcasting under the new conditions, with staff working from home. He is also keen to point out that financially the first few months of the pandemic had a “*devastating effect on revenue”.* Figures for advertising revenue for commercial radio certainly show a drop of more than 40% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2020 and a move to positive territory only in 2021 (Statista 2023). Local advertising revenues between 2019 and 2020 were down 33% year-on-year in real terms, significantly more than national spot advertising revenues, which were down 6% (Ofcom 2021).

As expected, the Covid-19 pandemic had a big impact on programme schedules and news bulletins on commercial radio. Alex Wallis says Global NW extended its news bulletins during the height of the pandemic, while Michael MacRae points out that for Bauer Media in Scotland it was actually the other way round; they reduced some of their main news bulletins because “*there actually wasn't that much news going about unless it was about Coronavirus*”. He adds that at the same time Bauer added coverage of the pandemic to its most popular shows - Breakfast and Drivetime - by including interviews with the First Minister of Scotland during the first lockdown. Bauer’s Hits Radio network of stations provided additional on-air segments with summaries of the pandemic-related advice and guidance, while a special team looked at good news stories that explored the human impact of the pandemic, including the uplifting examples of community spirit (Radiocentre 2020) mentioned earlier. Brian Copland says that during the pandemic there was an influx of national stories, which they at DC Thomson then tried to localise in order to maintain focus on local news.

The four interviewees agree that the sense of urgency and the scale of the story such as the global pandemic seem to have helped radio regain its importance and popularity.

“*People were relying on the radio, I think, to get their updates because we can do it quicker. It's quite nice to hear that radio is actually up there again.*” (Alex Wallis Global NW)

Data released in July 2020 by Radiocentre, the industry body for commercial radio, shows that commercial radio broadcast 25% more news than before the pandemic, but also that news was not among the main reasons people tuned in; it was significantly behind reasons such as ‘Staying in touch with the outside world’, ‘Keeping me company’ and ‘Makes me feel happy’ (Radiocentre 2020).

So far, we have heard that the pandemic had an effect on revenues and news bulletins; Michael MacRae says it also caused one of the biggest changes in scheduling on commercial radio. It shifted the morning peak hours for radio as people had to stay at home and got up later than usual. The lockdowns made programme makers and schedulers think about possible long-term changes to listeners’ habits, as more people were expected to continue working from home after the pandemic. Andrew McMurry confirms similar changes took place on DC Thomson’s stations where in addition to schedules, content was adjusted too, with fewer promotions and more emphasis on entertainment.

“*Obviously, habits have changed, so programmers had to adapt to that regarding content, music, moods of music etc. And we will see the shift slightly going back again*.” (Andrew McMurry DC Thomson)

To an extent, audience habits have already shifted a little after the pandemic and the balance of where and when people listen to the radio is changing, because work and travel habits are changing.

The changes to scheduling and the thinking that informed them tell us that commercial radio has the ability to quickly understand the changing environment in which it operates and adapt to it. This key characteristic of commercial radio will be addressed in more detail in the final chapter.

**Theme 6: *Local radio is here to stay***

While their BBC colleagues think the future for local radio will be challenging, journalists and programme makers working for commercial network radio are more optimistic. Their optimism seems to be based in their belief that radio remains a popular and trusted medium (Radiocentre 2021). DC Thomson’s Andrew McMurry says people trust radio because they see it as a friend, which is what he thinks will ensure its longevity.

“W*hether it be on FM, whether it be on DAB or smart devices, however you consume your audio, local radio will be there for a long, long time.*” (Andrew McMurry DC Thomson)

What McMurry seems to be suggesting here is that there is a strong link between trust and brand, whether the brand is publicly owned or commercial. What is key in the relationship between a station and its listeners is probably a station’s ability to tune into particular cultural values in a region. McMurry further believes that regulation has an important role to play in preserving radio because it ensures the provision of local news, which listeners expect and value. Alex Wallis expects radio to become more fragmented, allowing people to build their own schedules and content. At the same time, she does not exclude the possibility of a return to tried and trusted forms of radio.

“*It can [also] go full circle and all of a sudden they might go, I've had a great idea, let's do regional throughout the day.*” (Alex Wallis Global NW)

After demonstrating its resilience throughout the pandemic, commercial network radio in the UK is maintaining, and in some places increasing, its popularity by focusing on light entertainment often provided by big-name DJs who enjoy nation- or region-wide popularity, while maintaining some cultural links with local communities. At the same time, the majority of the remaining independent local stations are struggling to stay afloat.

## **Independent Commercial Radio Stations**

Over the years the big three commercial networks in the UK have acquired a significant number of local radio stations. The remaining independent stations seem to have been left out just because buying them up would not make business sense. While this claim is worth investigating in more detail, the aim of the present study is to find out more about the role independent commercial radio in the UK plays at the moment. The themes that emerged from interviews with station managers and journalists suggest that independent radio maintains strong links with the local community, that it struggles to provide active journalism and that because of its limited resources and strong competition it has largely abandoned its role as a forum for debate. Despite all of that, those interviewed for the present remain largely optimistic about the future of local independent radio.

**Theme 1: *We are truly independent***

Interviews with independent radio station managers and journalists started with a focus on station profiles. The first thing that becomes obvious is that independent stations are almost as a rule smaller operations than their network rivals. Alex Gray says that Two Lochs Radio is “*the UK’s smallest licenced commercial radio station by population*” (having visited the station, I would say it is probably the smallest in the UK by physical size too). Andrew Baxter proudly describes Central FM as an independent station, adding: “*I don't think there are many independent ones left in Scotland*”. He says he feels the station punches above its weight and cites the example of Central FM managing to get access to First Minister’s Coronavirus briefings, alongside bigger competitors such as Radio Clyde or the BBC. Steve Mowbray uses the same expression to describe Radio Jackie, which he refers to as “*one of the original pirate radio stations which started in 1969*”*.*

*“Our strap line back then was the Sound of Southwest London, and our strap line now is the Sound of Southwest London. It's a strap line that we take very seriously.*” (Steve Mowbray, Radio Jackie)

Mowbray then says that being an independent is “*brilliant*”, something he would recommend to “*anyone who wants to make great radio*”. Also in London, Lorna Waters says Time 1075, which started almost 30 years ago, is on paper a semi-independent station as its parent company owns two more stations. However, she adds, her station is completely independent of the other two; they don’t share resources or programmes.

Based on interviewees’ descriptions, KMFM in Kent and Radio Essex seem to be the closest to network radio in terms of their programming, which is based on chart music and light entertainment. Rob Wills describes KMFM as a “*regional pop music station*”, owned by a media group whose portfolio he says also includes a news website and local newspapers. He points out the station’s voices are presenters who are “*just like you and I, and we're having a conversation*”. Stevie Shillinglaw describes Radio Essex as a “*hit music station*” adding it was the only commercial station in Essex “*after the demise of the Heart franchise*”.

At the opposite end of this limited spectrum are stations such as Heartland FM, Argyll FM, North Angus Radio or Mansfield FM which are more similar to volunteer-run community radio. Heartland FM’s (now former) manager Alistair Smith is keen to point out that Heartland sees itself as a “*media hub*” which includes the radio station, social media presence and a digital magazine. Ian Anderson says that Shetland’s SIBC is “*the only local station in Scotland entirely owned by the operators*”, which is himself and his wife. Tony Delahunty says that Mansfield FM is a “*very fortunate radio station*” as its three owners are businesspeople who do not own other media and “*don’t interfere with the running of the station in any way*”.

Something most of these independent stations have in common is that they rely on volunteers, with only a small team of paid staff at each. As Stevie Shillinglaw half-jokingly says: “*Now, we are a team of, I'd say, two and a half people*”. Colin Middleton says Argyll FM relies on 20-25 volunteers only and “*we don't even have a sustaining service*”, meaning they don’t rebroadcast another station’s output when their own programme is over for the day. Malcolm Finlayson says North Angus Radio relies on 55 volunteers, most of whom are presenters. But, he adds, “p*eople come and go all the time, being volunteers*”. It is similar at Radio Skye, where its manager Suzy Lee says all presenters are volunteers.

And then there is Your Harrogate, an online-only station in Yorkshire. The station is run by Adam Daniel and his business partner who were both made redundant after a local radio station in Harrogate, Stray FM, was acquired by Bauer Media. They set up a website and only ventured back into radio following requests from local advertisers.

“*Just because every single person we went to see said, when's the radio coming, we'd back a radio station, we’ll pay for advertising. So, it just sort of seemed as a bit of a no brainer to launch the local radio in Harrogate. And the support we've had for that since we've done it has been phenomenal.*” (Adam Daniel, Your Harrogate)

***1.1 Commercial or community?***

Some of the stations classed as independent in the present study have a somewhat ambiguous status as they are often referred to as community rather than commercial radio. Their representatives were asked to clarify the stations’ status. Alex Gray says that Two Lochs Radio is licenced as a commercial radio station but operates as a not-for-profit and is “*in fact a charity. I'm the only paid employee, everybody else is a volunteer*”. Alistair Smith says that Heartland FM is an Ofcom-regulated “*full licence*” station but as a registered charity it gets discounted access to certain services, as it is “*just looking to keep our head above the water and make enough income to cover our costs*”. Colin Middleton points out that similar to Heartland FM and some of the other stations in this section, Argyll FM got its licence when there was no community radio in the UK and adds that the status of commercial radio does not really suit it: “*We would have access to more funds if we were community radio*”. Suzy Lee explains that Radio Skye is in a similar position.

“*We are a local community station for Skye and Lochalsh. [But] we're technically a small commercial station. We are for-profit. We don't get community radio station funding. All our funding comes from advertising and project funding.*” (Suzy Lee, Radio Skye)

***1.2 Small patch with a large population or the other way round?***

Most of the independent stations in Scotland seem to cover large, sparsely populated patches. Suzy Lee says that Radio Skye covers the whole of the island of Skye as well as the district of Lochalsh, with a combined population of “*just over 13,000*”. Alistair Smith says Heartland FM’s patch is similar and, just like on Skye, it swells during the summer months with the influx of tourists. Alex Gray says that Two Lochs Radio experiences the same phenomenon but adds that some of the visitors then tend to stay with the station online. The only exception to this pattern of small stations in Scotland covering sparsely populated areas seems to be Central FM which, according to Andrew Baxter, serves “*maybe* *200,000 people”* in the Central belt of Scotland.

In England it often seems to be the opposite because most of the independent stations are located in cities or large towns. As Steve Mowbray says: “*Southwest London geographically is not very big, but in terms of people, it's absolutely huge*”. The same goes for East London and Essex, where out of almost 700,000 residents Lorna Waters says Time 1075 reaches “*about 33,000 people*”. She describes the station’s listeners as middle-aged, “*edging towards the older listener”,* which, she adds, is a reflection of the area’s population*.* Alex Gray says Two Lochs Radio’s listeners are between the ages of 60 and 70, but that younger people and whole families listen to the station too.

Speaking of stations’ audience, Stevie Shillinglaw says Radio Essex’s listeners are politically rather uniform as the patch is “*wholly Conservative*”. Adam Daniel thinks Your Harrogate’s audience is rather unique as it has a strong “*community feel, in the sense of businesses wanting to help out and support one another.*” This, he believes, is not easy to find in the rest of the UK.

***1.3 My role is not easy to describe***

As is to be expected with small stations, people at the top often assume more than one role. This is mainly because their resources are much more limited than in commercial networks. Alex Gray says that as station manager he is responsible for the Two Lochs Radio’s output, the quality and legality of it, and for making sure they have enough volunteers to cover the schedule.

“I*t's very hard to get volunteers to do administrative and background tasks. Most males are happy to come and sit and play music and do a radio programme. But beyond that, it's quite hard. My wife is very heavily involved. She does a lot of programme preparation, editing of programmes.*” (Alex Gray, Two Lochs Radio)

Heartland FM’s Alistair Smith says he was brought in as station manager but then his job evolved into “*broadcasting, creating podcasts, video interviews, interviewing people online from the other side of the world etc*”. Colin Middleton says he, as chairman of Argyll FM, does everything “*from cleaning toilets to trying to repair masts*”. When not at the station, he says, he works in a supermarket. SIBC’s Ian Anderson says he is “a*n engineer, accountant, newsman, music broadcaster”* whose only help is his wife and two sons who do “*IT stuff for us*”. Friday is, he adds, when they “*grab vacuum cleaners and clean the studio*”.

**Theme 2:** ***Our main purpose is to serve the local community***

The interviewees in this group say their stations, regardless of their formal status, primarily exist to serve the local community by providing it with information and entertainment. That is what would be expected of any local radio station, be it public service or commercial. As already stated, what makes these remaining independent stations different is that in spirit and the way they operate, they are actually much closer to community radio than the other two groups. While BBC and network stations employ professionals to broadcast to local communities, most of the independents in this study include members of the community volunteering as well. Malcolm Finlayson says that all the programmes on North Angus Radio are “*100% focused on the local community*”. To illustrate this point, he highlights a project aimed at attracting young people to radio by setting up studios in schools, which is something that community radio often does. Skye FM’s Suzy Lee describes Radio Skye as being the “*loudspeaker for the community*”, while Andrew Baxter says Central FM is “*the voice for the local area.*” Steve Mowbray reflects that sentiment when he talks about Radio Jackie’s programming and advertising being “*all local, local, local*”. Colin Middleton points out that Argyll FM is even physically in the heart of the community it serves, as the studio is “*just off the main street, so people just pop in with requests or information*”. Rob Wills says that everyone at KMFM “*understands the local area*” as they all live and bring their children up there.

“*We are the same people going to the same ice cream parlours, the same restaurants, the same beaches as you. And I think that's what makes the community feel, it feels inclusive, it feels like you're part of a family. And I think that's the key to what we're trying to do here.*” (Rob Wills, KMFM)

What does this mean in practice? This emphasis on “local” certainly makes the independents more similar to community radio and gives them a flavour the entirely professional BBC and commercial networks cannot easily replicate. It also sounds noble, but does it make good commercial sense? For Lorna Waters, the key is to be a community station in sprit but not in formal status.

“*It's getting the balance of being in a community, being loved by the community without being too much of a community station in order to be commercially viable. You have to get that balance right.*” (Lorna Waters, Time 1075)

***2.1 We have a strong relationship with our listeners***

Furthermore, interviewees in this section seem to support the notion that strong links with the community result in listener loyalty. Lorna Waters says Time 1075 has a “*very, very positive*” relationship with the local community, as reflected in audience research figures she quotes: “*Our average [weekly] hours per head are about 16 and a half, whereas most stations get four and a half, five*”. She then adds that frequently having vox pops on air is a way of building the links with the people in the community. Part of the trick here, she points out, is that people like to hear themselves on the radio and it gives the station “*that real coolness”* of having local voices all speaking in their local vernacular. This all adds to the notion of shared cultural values, which is a key element of local radio.

Still, several interviewees say that in this day and age it is difficult to speak of radio serving a single community anymore. Ian Anderson says even on Shetland there is myriad communities, based on language, wealth, age or social status. He speaks of “*tribes*” instead and says it is increasingly difficult to *satisfy everyone*. Steve Mowbray agrees and says that a broadcast area like southwest London is too diverse for him to speak of a single community. Speaking of sub-communities, Alex Gray points out that Two Lochs Radio gets a particular level of engagement from a rather unexpected group of listeners - people in residential care homes or “*bits of the community that even outside of the times of the pandemic aren't out and about and mixing with others”*. He also adds that one of the interesting things about their area is that newcomers seem to be engaged in local life, public consultations and debates and, as a consequence, in local radio more than the people who have lived in the area for a long time.

Suzy Lee says Radio Skye’s listeners are mostly older local people, which is why she is trying to “*develop more of a youth listenership through youth programming*” and is keen to have a local celebrity on its roster of presenters. For Radio Jackie’s Steve Mowbray, the key is to have presenters who are “*relatable*”, who can talk about “*grown-up things, lifestyles, and what it means to work, rest and play in and around Southwest London*”.

As with all radio stations and other media organisations, engagement with audience these days primarily takes place via social media. Adam Daniel says this kind of immediate engagement is “*probably far easier than what it once was”*. Two Lochs Radio has taken the relationship with its audience to another level as through streaming it is able to attract listeners in areas far from the north-west of Scotland. The station tries to use these links as an income generator and offers its listeners paid membership. This is a model that has been tried in other countries too. In the 1980s several stations in Switzerland introduced memberships of their listener clubs. The club fees of $10 to $20 did not add substantially to the stations' revenues, but they seemed to impress local businesses, some of which then offered special discounts to club members and also

advertised on the station (Browne 1991).

**Theme 3:** ***From no competition to strong competition***

Independent radio stations, which do not have the backing of large parent companies and cannot use the synergies available to bigger competitors, operate in a very challenging environment. Over the years and after waves of acquisitions, their number has been significantly reduced. Hence, it was important to get a better understanding of the kind of challenges they face. In this part of the interview, stations’ representatives were asked to comment on local competition. Most of them say they have no direct competitors in their area. Alex Gray mentions a weekly newspaper which he says covers a much bigger area than Two Lochs Radio, and a local fortnightly printed newsletter that covers the area specifically. Adam Daniel also mentions a local newspaper and a news platform, but adds they are not seen as competitors.

“*We work with a local newspaper. [They] have a feature on our radio station every Thursday to talk about headline stories and that week's edition of the newspaper, something which we support completely.*” (Adam Daniel, Your Harrogate)

As if to contradict the example from Harrogate, Ian Anderson says all of them - his SIBC radio, the two island newspapers and BBC Shetland - are all “*fiercely, fiercely, competitive*” and would never work together*.* Others also say local newspapers can be a competitor, while pointing out they have no direct competition from local radio. But then several interviewees say they see national or regional radio as their main competitors. Mansfield FM’s Tony Delahunty says his main worry are the four “*well-funded, full of staff*” BBC regional stations available in the area. Radio Exe’s Paul Nero also thinks local BBC is a significant competitor to stations like his because it has much bigger resources and more staff.

Nevertheless, he says, during the pandemic Radio Exe started carrying BBC Devon’s news bulletins, which “*makes sense*” as the two stations have distinct audiences and the deal allows “*licence fee funded news bulletins [to be] heard by a broader audience that otherwise wouldn't listen to BBC Radio Devon*”. Nero then adds that he sees the biggest threat in large commercial groups which “*do not deserve their local licences*” since, in his view, they are not local anymore, after deregulation allowed for increased syndication.

“*You have Bauer and Global operating their network brands, essentially as national stations operating on local licences, which were not intended to be national stations, so it's one of my bugbears that something like Heart can close their Exeter studio and do virtually all their programming from London. They have to do three hours a day for what they call the West of England, but the West of England, from Penzance to Gloucestershire, it is a four-hour drive, that's not local radio, but they can still sell local advertising. So, they compete in the market for local revenues whilst providing no local content.*” (Paul Nero, Radio Exe)

Nero goes even further and says that community radio is also an unfair competitor as it relies on unpaid volunteers and pays reduced rates on certain fixed costs. While strictly speaking community radio operating in the same area is a competitor, by its nature it offers different kind of programming and essentially a different approach to radio from its public service or commercial rivals.

**Theme 4: *Covid had a big impact on our business***

Operating on smaller budgets than commercial networks or the BBC, independent stations were hit hard by the loss of advertising revenue during the pandemic. Colin Middleton says this was a big concern for Argyll FM and it meant possible cuts to transmitters. Paul Nero says that Radio Exe had to stop its news provision because of financial losses. It was similar at Mansfield FM where they were unable to hire additional journalists. Lorna Waters, however, says that in the early stages of the pandemic Time 1075 did well as local businesses - those that stayed open - were diversifying and wanted to let people know of that. She also says the Government helped with grants and by paying for public messaging. Indeed, in 2020 and 2021 the UK Government was the largest single advertiser on UK commercial radio, which was a form of indirect subsidy for the sector (Ofcom 2022a).

***4.1 How we worked during the pandemic***

With small teams and a large number of elderly volunteers, independent stations were faced with numerous challenges during the pandemic. Tony Delahunty says some of the “*freelance*” programmes on Mansfield FM were impossible to do as the station did not have anyone to “*operate the production roles*”, while for Suzy Lee the presenters’ age created a challenging situation and forced the station to rely heavily on archives, as did Heartland FM for similar reasons. Alistair Smith says Heartland FM got remote broadcasting software for free from its regular supplier, to help it adapt to working during lockdowns. Alex Gray says he was able to get enough equipment so his volunteers could broadcast from home. And with some quick redesigning of the studio space, he enabled a show with three presenters to continue, with two in the studio and the third one on Zoom. This type of resilience and adaptability is typical of independent commercial and community radio in the UK.

Central FM’s Andrew Baxter says that doing basic journalism during the lockdowns was more difficult because they could not go out to get interviews or do “*things like vox pops, which is sort of a staple of local radio*”. Malcolm Finlayson from North Angus Radio says in some cases the regulator Ofcom helped by relaxing the rules on the number of hours of programming stations had to produce.

***4.2 During Covid we gave people the information they needed***

As it did on BBC and commercial network stations, the pandemic has affected the news coverage on independent radio as well. Alex Gray says Two Lochs Radio increased broadcast hours and focused on practical advice for its listeners, “*basically acting as an information channel for local specifics, food bank or community car schemes*”. Andrew Baxter reflects that by saying Central FM also focused on community groups in the beginning, before turning its attention to businesses opening up and new travel schemes being introduced by the government. Alistair Smith says Heartland FM regularly broadcast press releases by the local health board and interviewed one of the local GPs several times, while Colin Middleton says Argyll FM had one of its presenters, who is a member of the local health board, record regular health updates. KMFM in Kent increased the proportion of local content in bulletins in order to focus on more relevant issues for their listeners (Radiocentre 2020). Tony Delahunty says Mansfield FM was quite ambitious as it introduced a daily half-hour long programme about the pandemic that included interviews with the local director of primary care, political and legal experts, politicians, local charities and even homeless people. Radio Skye’s Suzy Lee says they ran interviews with the local MP, covered the coronavirus outbreak in the local care home and spoke to the chair of the regional education committee about school closures.

**Theme 5**: ***Our news teams are small but we broadcast regular news bulletins***

All of the independent commercial stations are Ofcom-licenced and regulated, which requires most of them to have some form of news output. But where is news in their programme priorities? And how do stations meet their requirements with such limited resources? After all, formally these are commercial stations; do they view news as just a regulatory requirement or essential part of their remit?

The majority of independent stations would have a news team, albeit very small. Central FM’s, for example, consists of two people working in separate shifts, which, as Andrew Baxter says, means that they have to pre-record news bulletins when they need to go out and cover stories on the ground. Tony Delahunty says Mansfield FM faces similar challenges with only one person in the newsroom at any one time: “*Don't ask me what we do if we have two stories at the same time*”. Adan Daniel also says Your Harrogate has only one journalist, as does Time 1075, although Lorna Waters says they also use freelancers who, she adds, are not easy to find: “*People think that they can just read the news. That's just a misconception that they have*”. Lack of journalists impedes stations’ ability to meet its obligations and provide local news coverage; in early 2023 Time 1075 was found by Ofcom to be in breach of its Format (formal description of a station which contains a list of its programming requirements) for not broadcasting any local news. In its response the station said that its local news journalist had left and that it had difficulty recruiting a replacement, explaining that “*it has been very hard to fill the role*” (Radio Today 2023). Two Lochs Radio does not employ journalists but nevertheless manages to produce several bulletins a day. Alex Gray, however, says doing news is “*quite a big burden*” for small stations as they lack the resources to do it.

“*We are committed to producing local news bulletins each day.* *We don't have the resources to do a lot of active journalism, it's mostly quite passive. It's a matter of being sent information, releases, bulletins, just snippets of things that are happening or might be of interest to others, plus trawling through all the other local news media [and] the regional media, for items that might have a specific relevance to us.*” (Alex Gray, Two Lochs Radio)

With such small news teams, or no teams at all, the most stations manage to produce is a couple of news bulletins a day, with some repetition of individual stories or entire bulletins. Nevertheless, SIBC’s Ian Anderson is keen to say that his two-person team - “*myself and my wife*” - manages to produce “*over 160 local news bulletins [or] about 12 and a half hours of local news a week*”. The only station included in this section with a somewhat bigger, multimedia news operation, is KMFM, which shares journalists with the parent company’s other media outlets.

Unlike the networks or the BBC, independent commercial radio stations often can’t even afford subscriptions to agency services such as Press Association (PA) or Independent Radio News (IRN). That is why some stations broadcast news bulletins made by external providers, either as a substitute for their own or when they are not broadcasting their own programmes. As mentioned earlier, Radio Exe carries bulletins by BBC Devon, while Radio Skye used to broadcast bulletins by the now defunct Money First Radio. Radio Skye, however, now employs its own journalist. Several stations broadcast entire externally made programmes, such as The Week in Holyrood, a weekly round-up of the proceedings in the Scottish Parliament made by a freelancer. Argyll FM’s Colin Middleton says he was considering taking Scottish news from Radio News Hub, a Leeds-based independent producer of radio news, but realised that “*a lot of our presenters don't have the technical skills to do that*”. To overcome some of these challenges, Two Lochs Radio resorted to occasionally using citizen journalists.

“*Recently, because of the pandemic, we started a special bulletin produced by people in the Loch Broom area, that's the area to the north of us, around Ullapool, where we have the radio licence, but from which there was no specific radio production. And they started going out and actually doing journalism, in effect going out and interviewing various people or interviewing them by zoom in the community.*” (Alex Gray, Two Lochs Radio)

***5.1 Covering local politics is our main task***

Most interviewees say they are proud of their stations’ coverage of local council affairs which they see as essential part of their remit. Alex Gray says the decisions made by the Highland council are of direct relevance to Two Lochs Radio’s listeners and “*there's no other media covering them for the area*”. Lorna Waters points out her Time 1075 covers three councils, which means there is no shortage of stories. She adds that the leader of one of the councils, Barking and Dagenham, comes once a month for a Q&A with the listeners. Radio Jackie’s Steve Mowbray says that being in London they have access to quite a few MPs from the area, in particular during election campaigns. Suzy Lee also says Radio Skye covers local council meetings and regularly interviews MPs and MSPs from the area. But then, as Malcolm Finlayson says, North Angus Radio seems to be at the opposite end of the spectrum by deliberately staying away from politics - though not from other news - so as not to risk being in breach of Ofcom regulations.

Although the Local Democracy Reporter is a BBC scheme aimed primarily at local newspapers, some of the stations in this section also use its services. Paul Nero says Radio Exe won a local LDR contract for Devon and before the pandemic started training three young journalists to work on the scheme. Ian Anderson says SIBC also has access to LDR from which it gets up to three reports a day. Alex Gray, however, thinks LDR does not really work for Two Lochs Radio as it covers too broad an area - the Highland Council, which is by size the largest local government area in the UK.

***5.2 And in other news…***

In addition to local council affairs and more typical, everyday local news - “*Today we had this sinkhole near the University*” (Andrew Baxter, Central FM) or “*a man got caught stealing goods from his workplace*” (Lorna Waters, Time 1075) - independent stations focus on aspects of local life that are often unique to the area. Ian Anderson says that in Shetland one of those topics that invites a wide range of views is fishing, which is a large industry on the island: “*Fishing reports are really major sort of staple of the news output*”. Adam Daniel says that in Harrogate listeners in particular value stories about local life or “*social currency type stuff*”, such as vandalism in a local park and similar. Alex Gray says Two Lochs Radio listeners particularly value news on things like “*crofting, fishing and cultural happenings, particularly in the Gaelic and traditional music world*”. For Radio Jackie, the focus, at least at weekends, is on local good news stories.

“*I had an example the other day of some shopkeepers who had been in the area for many, many years. Now their shop was featured in some online advert for the Euros [the football tournament] and they were getting hundreds of people turning up, having selfies taken outside. It was all lovely.*” (Steve Mowbray, Radio Jackie)

Malcolm Finlayson says North Angus Radio would report on “*various volunteer organisations and organisations dealing with health and welfare*”, while Alistair Smith highlights the community updates Heartland FM broadcast during the lockdowns, giving out the phone numbers for and interviewing those in community groups, which is essentially a staple of community radio.

And then there is one-off coverage of local issues outside of news bulletins. Heartland FM’s Alistair Smith cites the example of a debate on a possible closure of a local school: “*We gave the parent council a voice, to guide people through the process*”. In the end, he says, the council decided not to close the school. Then there is Heartland FM’s monthly Neighbourhood Watch where they talk about local issues in the area, “*whether it'd be scams or thefts or whatever*” or a one-off feature on social distancing in one of the villages with a very narrow bridge, which makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross. Smith is particularly proud of a story, turned into video as well, covering wild camping around the lakes in the area, “*with people coming in and leaving a mess*”. KMFM’s Rob Wills highlights the My Kent Family segment where people talk about family life and its challenges. He adds they also run GCSE and A-level surgeries where they invite students who have just received their results to ask questions about their options. KMFM also runs programmes focused on public health. Suzy Lee says she is keen for Skye FM to do more outside broadcasts in collaboration with the local events company as a way of further engaging with the community, while Tony Delahunty says Mansfield FM is “*one of the very few commercial stations in Great Britain who actually carry commentary on its local football team*”.

**Theme 6:** ***Local radio is not a big forum for debate***

We have seen that local BBC maintains its role as a forum for public debate, except in Scotland where that role is reserved for the national BBC Scotland, and that local commercial networks have almost entirely abandoned that role. How do small independent stations see their role in facilitating public discussion? Most of the interviewees in this section insist they are aware of that important role of local radio and do their best to maintain it, but sometimes find it difficult to do so. Lorna Waters says Time 1075 runs regular monthly phone-ins where they get local politicians to answer listeners’ questions. Alex Gray says Two Lochs Radio does not usually run debates because of the specifics of the local audience.

“*People from families that have been here for generations are very reticent to engage in debate publicly, very reticent. They don't like it basically. They’ll chat for ages in the street, no problem. But they don't like publicly those kinds of forms.*” (Alex Gray, Two Lochs Radio)

Suzy Lee says she sees similar attitude on the island of Skye, where people would easily express their opinion on social media but not on radio. This is something her BBC colleagues from Shetland and Orkney also talked about earlier in this chapter. Tony Delahunty thinks for phone-ins to work a station needs to have a large enough audience, so the debate is not dominated by the “*same half a dozen people who'd ring in every single week*”, which was, he says, a problem for Mansfield FM’s sports show. Radio Exe’s Paul Nero, however, points out that getting listeners to speak on air depends a lot on how “*engaging and able the presenters are*”.

Nevertheless, during election campaigns stations try to provide a platform for the listeners to speak to politicians. Andrew Baxter says before the last election Central FM interviewed “*all five party leaders*” and invited listeners to send in recorded questions. He also adds that sometime getting listeners to engage and give their views via social media works better.

Bearing in mind all of the above-mentioned challenges and the fact that the number of independent local radio stations is shrinking, in the last part of the interviews the aim was to find out how the interviewees see the future of local radio.

**Theme 7: *The future is bright***

BBC local radio is going through cuts in budgets and programming, while network radio is continuing to reduce its local content. Independent radio station managers interviewed here agree that numerous challenges lie ahead but are still optimistic. Alistair Smith thinks the whole picture of radio has changed and the medium faces a lot more competition these days because of the rising popularity of podcasting, streaming and smart speakers - developments which present stations running on small budgets with significant challenges. KMFM’s Rob Wills seems to agree and sums it up by saying “*this isn't a radio battle anymore; this is an audio battle*” in which independent stations face competition from big commercial radio, internet radio, streaming services, YouTube etc.

For Steve Mowbray the purpose of being an independent station is not to “*make lots of money* *anyway*”; it is “*to make great radio*”. He adds that fears that podcasting and streaming would kill radio are exaggerated because radio’s biggest strength remains, he says, its ability to combine informing and entertaining, as well as “*just keep people company*” (Steve Mowbray, Radio Jackie). Stevie Shillinglaw goes a step further and says there is still demand for listener interaction which radio provides better than other media.

Suzy Lee is concerned that listeners expect the same standards from small independent stations as they do from the BBC or commercial networks. “*They expect us to be trained journalists and be able to challenge politicians with key issues, where we don't have that sort of training”.* She is worried that perceptions and high expectations can be a serious issue for local radio going forward. KMFM’s Rob Wills agrees and says that “*people's expectation of what things need to look and sound like have changed*”. Stevie Shillinglaw argues that radio is now increasingly becoming a visual medium, with stations filming their shows for use on their website or social media, while their news provision is increasingly multimedia too. This sems to raise an important point - standards have changed, radio is increasingly a multi-platform medium and a big challenge for small stations is whether they can actually keep up. Indeed, according to some industry forecasts analogue radio listening will further decline and by 2030 will account for just 12%-14% of all radio listening, or only 8-10% in 2035 (Mediatique 2020, cited by DCMS 2020). To be able to compete, independent stations will have to find the resources to invest in new ways of reaching the audience.

Radio Exe’s Paul Nero thinks the legislation in the UK works in favour of large network brands, which in his view explains why only a few independent commercial radio stations have remained. Rob Wills, however, makes a point that being bought by a big brand was the only way for some of the previously independent stations to survive. Lorna Waters says she hopes Time 1075 would avoid going down that route because it would be “*bad for the local community [which] would lose that asset*”.

***7.1 Resources are tight***

Why is there a risk of the remaining independents disappearing? Simply put, most of them operate as for-profit businesses in an ever more challenging financial environment and competitive market.

“*Finances are always going to be a problem. The costs of doing local radio don't scale down. We have a population coverage of about 5,000 but our costs aren't a 1,000th of a station that's covering 5 million people.*” (Alex Gray, Two Lochs Radio)

Tony Delahunty says some of his team have to do two or three different jobs but stay in local radio because they believe in it. Steve Mowbray, however, sees the lack of resources as liberating in the sense that without big advertising deals with strings attached, radio makers are free to make the programmes they wish and talk about issues close to their hearts. Stevie Shillinglaw, however, thinks that independent radio has to be more entrepreneurial and look for business opportunities wherever it can if it wants to survive. But then Alistair Smith goes back to the challenges of generating sufficient income or obtaining funding in a sparsely populated area. He says that stations like Heartland FM can relatively easily obtain grants to build, say, a new studio but find it almost impossible to afford a full-time journalist. As if to illustrate this point, Suzy Lee offers a lesson in perseverance when she speaks of the hoops she recently had to go through to secure funding for a full-time journalist for Radio Skye for only a limited period of time. Finally, because of tight resources and increased competition, Lorna Waters expects tough times ahead.

***7.2 There is still market for local radio***

Despite all the challenges, Adam Daniel is optimistic. He thinks Your Harrogate’s success is evidence that there still is a market for local radio. He says the kind of support from the local business community his radio station has enjoyed may not be easily found elsewhere, but then adds:

“*I certainly think there is an appetite for local information and local news across the country, [and] that certain elements of what we do could be adopted*”. (Adam Daniel, Your Harrogate)

***7.3 Possible future models***

Given both the threats to its future and widespread view that there is still demand for local radio, what is the way forward? What possible future models do the interviewees see? Rob Wills thinks independent radio isn’t about just producing audio anymore; it is now a multimedia platform, which means stations will have to invest in facilities and talent that can provide that. Andrew Baxter and Suzy Lee think small stations like theirs could benefit from increased collaboration with local newspapers. Suzy Lee sees that collaboration primarily in attracting and sharing advertising.

“*So, we advertise for them, they get a discount on the radio and vice versa. They struggle with advertising, we struggle with advertising, so let's find a way of making it work together.*” (Suzy Lee, Radio Skye)

Andrew Baxter would, however, like to see collaboration between local radio and newspaper journalists that would bring benefits to both, as well as the listeners. Reflecting on Radio Exe’s existing collaboration with the BBC, Paul Nero thinks that extending “*public service, licence fee funded journalism on commercial radio”* might be a model for the future. He also says that with the rise of small-scale DAB, independent or community stations could set up additional stations which would focus on journalism. He says he is looking to replicate the format of a New York-based 1010 WINS radio station and get a licence for a station that would play on rotation 20-minutes of news for Devon for four hours before switching to the next 20-minute bulletin. Or maybe the way forward, he says, is to create a new tier of radio in the UK if a funding model can be found: “*a community interest company along the kind of community radio station model, but with professional training*”.

So, is independent local radio here to stay? The views are mixed. Alex Gray is among the optimists. He thinks that for stations like Two Lochs Radio, which are more akin to community radio, “*the future seems fairly stable and fairly bright”.* His optimism is partly rooted in his conviction that stations in places like the north-west of Scotland, with *“very distinct needs and populations”* are not of interest to the big commercial groups. Central FM’s Andrew Baxter is hopeful independent local radio can survive as it plays “*an important role in the community*”, while Mansfield FM’s Tony Delahunty thinks local radio will “*have to look for more and more unique selling points*”. Time 1075’s Lorna Waters thinks independent radio is working and people like it, although it is “*actually dying a slow death*”. Radio Exe’s Paul Nero says he is not ready to go without a fight: “*We're the last of a dying breed. And I am determined to make a success of that for as long as we can*”.

Ian Anderson is adamant small independents like SIBC do not have a future. He thinks the commercial network model works best despite its move away from localism. “*I think the long-term, Bauer’s template is probably the one that will survive the longest*”. He refers to the *hit-music-with-news-in-brief* template. Radio Jackie’s Steve Mowbray agrees that the “*established brands will do well*”. He says that the Covid-19 pandemic reminded people how important local radio is and showed that there is strong appetite for radio, with an important caveat: “*local radio can be great, but it doesn't make us a pile of money*”.

Rob Wills makes an important point certainly worth investigating further when he says that radio stations are only following the audience which, in his opinion, is moving away from local news in many places. For Suzy Lee, the way to survive is to nurture the next generation of listeners and radio broadcasters, which she admits is “*quite tough*”. And finally, in his thoughts on the future of independent local radio, Adam Daniel goes back to the basics - know your audience.

“*If you're going to have a radio station, you need to know the people you're trying to get to listen to you, basically. And what you do is you find that person or people, and then you give them what they want. Now, I don't necessarily think the right word is ‘risk averse’, I think what you do is you produce a product you want your listeners to listen to. As owners or directors or programme controllers, it's our number one job to make sure people like our products.*” (Adam Daniel, Your Harrogate)

In this chapter, the views of those making local radio in England and Scotland were presented. Their views indicate that local radio journalists and programme makers have a clear understanding of their roles in the overall media ecosystem. They all insist their stations are integral parts of the communities they serve, where they still help foster the sense of community and belonging. This role of local radio, they add, has been highlighted and strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic. BBC journalists say their focus is always on local news, which is often not the case on commercial stations, with networks combining local and other news, and independent stations often struggling to cover news at all. All interviewees acknowledge the diminished role of local radio as a forum for debate. While there is generally optimism about the future of local radio, it is notable that the most optimistic are those working for commercial networks. They believe their model is superior and provides listeners with what they want, including news in brief form only. The colleagues from independent stations think local radio can survive but will struggle to be profitable, while those working for the BBC highlight the many uncertainties facing local public service radio today.

In the next chapter, the views of the people local radio serves in Scotland and England will be presented so that answers to key questions such as whether listeners (still) value local radio and local news, how their listening habits have changed and how that affects people’s perceptions of local radio can be answered.

# CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS PART 2: FOCUS GROUPS WITH RADIO LISTENERS

Previous chapter established that journalists and others working in local radio have a good understanding of their own role and place in the UK media environment. This chapter will present the findings from the four focus groups - two with radio listeners in Scotland and two with radio listeners in England - conducted with the aim of establishing how radio listeners see local radio and how much they value local news. This chapter will also provide insight into consumption habits at a pivotal moment for the radio industry.

From the analysis of the four focus group discussions, a number of themes emerged. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the participants highly value radio while they are unsure whether podcasts are an extension of or competitor to radio; they see radio as a friend in the background, but don’t see it as a valuable forum for debate. And, crucially for this study, they don’t seem to value local news, and local radio in general, as much as it was assumed when the present study was being designed.

In this chapter, the findings from the four focus groups are presented together, without mentioning where a participant was from unless that was necessary for context. Also, quotes in this chapter are presented without attribution, for ease of reading and as it was not deemed necessary for context.

**Theme 1: *We like speech radio***

All focus group participants said they like radio - “*I'm a big radio fan, it's a great medium*” - and listen to it, some “*a lot*” and some only “*because I’m in the car*”. Car listening, which accounts for about a quarter of all live radio listening (RAJAR MIDAS Spring 2020), is often determined by whether a vehicle has digital radio (DAB) enabled or not and how many people are travelling in it. Digital radio listening is certainly becoming more popular, and it now takes up 67% of all radio listening, with 40% on DAB, 24% online and 3% on digital TV (RAJAR 2023a).

One participant said they listened to podcasts rather than live radio as “*that’s what basically is now radio for me*”. This blurring of lines between podcasts and radio has been a recurrent theme throughout all four focus groups and will be addressed here in more detail later.

As expected, the participants talked about a variety of listening habits and preferences. What emerged from the discussions was that speech radio, mainly on the BBC, seems to be popular. Those participants who mentioned other speech-based stations, such as LBC, Talk Radio or Times Radio, said they were not impressed by them because “*They’re not varied and they’re just […] a lot of these phone-ins.*”

Then there are participants who listen to the radio both for music and news. Those who come to radio for music first say that speech-based content is irrelevant or even annoying. News and other speech is, they say, consumed passively: “T*he adverts and the news, they’re just there. You can’t tune out [but] I suppose you mentally tune out.*”

Listening to radio online, via apps and web-based platforms is on the rise (RAJAR 2023a) and the participants in the four focus groups in the present study reflected that, although they named only BBC Sounds as a platform they know of and go to. Existence of BBC Sounds prompted a discussion on whether such platforms count as radio. Some participants think they do, while others point out that platforms also offer programmes specifically made for online listening on demand only. There were also those participants who said they have abandoned traditional live radio completely.

* 1. ***What is a podcast?***

In line with the general population, the focus group participants said they increasingly listen to podcasts but are still unsure what to make of them. Some participants see podcasts as an extension of radio, while for others podcasts are a competitor to radio. One participant summed up the views of the latter group like this:

*“I think it’s definitely in competition. People have only got so much time that they can sit and listen to things, so if they’re listening to podcasts and not radio, then definitely competition.”*

Furthermore, while some participants think podcasts offer more choice than radio, for one that is precisely what puts them off podcasts: “*How do you know which is the right one to listen to, there’s quite a lot of noise*”. There is scepticism over reliability of news, with one participant describing podcasts as “*a more filtered version of the news*”. Some participants also raised the issue of production quality of podcasts, with one describing them as “*just a badly produced radio programme*”, and another one saying they don’t like the presentation style: “*they all use the same kind of tone. It feels like they’re presenting a kids’ show or something.*” One participant said podcasts are too “*chatty*”, before pointing out he prefers “*a well-formed programme that has a beginning, a middle and an end*” on the radio. Another participant offered a new perspective on the format by saying it is now also a substitute for printed newspapers, referring to podcasts produced by national newspapers and political magazines. Despite their growing popularity, podcasts certainly still have some catching up to do to match the popularity of radio (Ofcom 2022b; Wetherhill *et al* 2020). In the focus groups, the participants confirmed this and became more engaged when the discussion focused on the role radio plays in their lives.

**Theme 2: *Radio is a friend in the background***

In the next part of the discussion, the focus was on what radio as a medium means to the participants. Several participants said they see it as a friend, “*sitting in the background, keeping us company*”. One participant said the magic of radio is in the human voice, in listening to people talk, even when it is only about the weather.

Although surveys show that music is still the most popular type of content on the radio, the focus group participants had mixed feelings about that. Some said streaming services is where they go to for music these days, while one added radio is good for “*a few sort of new music programmes, but not general music*”. Some participants said they enjoy listening to music on the radio because they get the type of music they like and the information related to it. Others pointed out that the strength of radio over streaming services is in curating the content or offering music “*I wouldn’t normally have in my bubble of songs.*” And some participants admitted they liked being challenged by radio DJs.

“*Accessing the radio when I was younger, you had a certain trust in DJs, perhaps wrongly in some instances, but you know, with people like Annie Nightingale and Bob Harris, you kind of bought in what they were playing, there was an element of taste there. So, I think there was a kind of trust established between listener and DJ.*”

Several participants talked about listening to music on commercial radio, but when later asked specifically whether they listened to commercial radio, they were adamant they did not. Most cited advertisements as the reason to avoid it and said they preferred the BBC. With this in mind, Scottish participants were asked to comment on BBC Scotland.

***2.1 BBC Scotland is good for music and sport***

The participants had very strong views on BBC Radio Scotland, even when admitting they did not listen to it. Some said they thought it was good for music and sport “… *but you've got to be very particular what you listen to*”, while some participants highly commended its long-standing football show: “*You can’t get any better than Off the Ball on the radio, can you?*”

Overall, however, BBC Radio Scotland did not rate well amongst the participants in the Scottish focus groups, for a variety of reasons. Some said the station only offers what they can find elsewhere, for example on BBC Radio 2 or BBC Five Live. One said BBC Scotland *“just happens to be based in Scotland, rather than [be] a true Scottish radio station*”, while another one said it cannot compete with BBC Radio Four on quality of journalism. Some participants felt the BBC does not offer them the kind of content they like, or they could not “*connect*” with it, while one said BBC Scotland does not understand its audience. Several participants felt BBC Scotland needs to invest more in staff and journalism, as at the moment “*it's just not as bright, or as vibrant*” as London-based national BBC radio. One participant said he thought BBC Scotland was politically too biased without elaborating on the kind of bias he sensed. This sense of bias on BBC Scotland is a recurring theme, in particular amongst the supporters of Scottish independence. A couple of participants said they were just indifferent towards the BBC in Scotland, which they said they don’t listen to at all or not anymore.

“*If we didn’t have it, would we really be, you know, marching out on the streets? I don't think so.*”

Scottish focus groups participants were then asked to comment on the current BBC local radio setup in Scotland. One said they preferred things the way they are and would not want the BBC in Scotland to spend more on local stations, while others were in favour of more local BBC radio in Scotland. One participant even suggested a formula that would, in his opinion, merge local with national radio and in that way help the BBC retain talented staff from each region.

“S*aying, like, Thursday is Highlands and Islands Day on BBC Radio Scotland, or something, could work better, maybe.*”

Another participant said he preferred a BBC Scotland that devoted more time to the regions, while maintaining its Scottish and national coverage, which is something the BBC says it already does (Kocic and Milicev 2019). Where on a local level it does not fulfil one of its fundamental roles is in being a forum for debate. Hence, it was valuable to find out what the participants in general made of that role of radio in the age of multiple public discussion channels.

***2.2 Radio is not a forum for debate***

For the majority of participants debate on radio usually means phone-ins or vox pops. One participant finds phone-ins irritating to the point that “*If those programmes come on, I tend to grab the radio and hurl it across the room*”. Another one thinks the quality of debate on radio depends on the presenter and how they moderate it. Some listeners think radio debates are good, except on particular stations or programmes. One described phone-ins on BBC Scotland as ”*intolerable*”, while another said they disliked people with grievances who appear on BBC Radio 2’s Jeremy Vine show and “*the sort of faux balance*” they think the station must ensure.

Despite reservations, participants said that debate programmes on radio are important, and that there are “*some very good ones*”, which they want to listen to even when they disagree with the views expressed. One participant said they would listen to discussions on radio when they are bored or tired of listening to music only. This participant pointed out that phone-ins are particularly important to lonely people.

“F*or some people, it’s almost a lifeline that they can ring into a radio station and chat to somebody, especially if they’re lonely.*”

While the discussion so far established that the participants still value radio despite some reservations about its role today, when the conversation reached the topic of news, it became clear that listeners feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of sources available.

***2.3 We know about community radio but don’t really listen to it***

Participants were by and large aware of community radio, even though they said they did not listen to it much. Almost with a sense of guilt, one participant said he should listen to his local community station; another one said he listened to his local one only occasionally without following the station’s schedule and one pointed out that the community stations he knew of were all music stations, which is not what he wanted from radio.

**Theme 3:** ***News is everywhere and that can be overwhelming***

‘A bit of everything’ is probably the best way to describe where the participants go for news. As recent research on news consumption habits shows, people use a variety of sources to get their news, with TV and internet leading the way, followed by radio and printed newspapers (Ofcom 2022b). Several participants mentioned BBC Radio 4 and the BBC and Guardian websites as their primary sources. One participant interestingly described radio as a “*gateway*” for news, with BBC Radio Four leading the way. Some participants said they would also go to local radio or commercial news stations such as LBC or Times Radio as “*the only ones doing serious news*”. For those participants interested in Scottish news, the obvious choice would be BBC Radio Scotland.

As expected, none of the participants said they would go to commercial, music-based radio for news; listeners go to such stations primarily for music. Several participants said they had a sense commercial radio only provides news because it has to, which in their view impacts the quality and, for one participant, reliability. Some participants said their sense is that commercial radio often repeats the same news stories during the day, which is true but is also common on public service radio on slow news days or after peak hours.

For one participant, a daily news fix comes from television, via the 30-minute bulletins with the roundup of the main national and international news, followed by regional news. Another participant pointed out that during the pandemic television took over from other sources of news.

Participants’ experience of using social media as a source of news varies a lot, ranging from: “*I certainly don't use social media for news*” to “*Twitter has been amazing*”, with one participant making an important point by saying that the main sources of news on social media are still the traditional and trusted providers, such as the BBC and similar news organisations.

***3.1 There is media overload***

Regardless of where they get news from, all participants agree that the amount of news and news sources can be overwhelming, which puts some people off news or forces them to become more selective in what they follow. One participant said that unlike in the past, when they would read a newspaper cover to cover, they now go for “*depth rather than breadth, which means I'm woefully uninformed on a lot of things.*” This is a reflection of a wider trend, recognised by the Cairncross Review (2019) on sustainable future for journalism. It suggests that the old division between the *Good* and the *Monitorial* citizen may not be sufficient anymore (see Zaller 2003; Schudson 1998).

As the focus of the present study is on local news provision, the focus group participants were asked to discuss the importance of local news.

**Theme 4: *Local politics is less sexy***

Although by and large the participants said they follow news, they had mixed views on local news, ranging from “*Yes, it does [matter]*” to “*It’s not something that I’m particularly tuned into*”. Where it does matter, local news is important to the participants either because it is about local democracy or everyday impact on local people’s lives, such as planning decisions, which was mentioned by one of the participants. Some participants, however, admitted, almost with a sense of guilt, they are not drawn to local news very much.

“*I know things like local services etc, you know, how well the council collects its bins is important, but it just doesn’t sort of rate as important as what’s happening on the national and international stage.*”

One participant said that local politics is not “*particularly sexy”* because the national news at the moment (during the pandemic) *is really dramatic*”. Another one said they don’t actively follow local politics and council decisions, but eventually find out about them “*when I need to, rather than just taking a general interest in what’s going on*”.

***4.1 I Struggle to find local news***

Regardless of the level of interest in local news, some participants said that in the current media environment they don’t know where to look for it, especially in the parts of Scotland where there is no local BBC radio. Several participants said their *go to* place for local news these days is social media, to which one participant added: “*I rely on social media but know that it comes with a health warning*”. A London-based participant said they used a combination of print and social media because their local area, or any other single part of London, is too small for BBC London to cover. For some participants, hyperlocal community pages on social media have now become a source of news: “*You know, the next door neighbour’s getting new windows kind of thing. It’s really local*”.

***4.2 Radio is still good for local news***

Although some participants were keen to say that they struggle to find local news or are not interested in it as much as they used to be, there were those who thought that radio is still a good source of local or regional news. In an interesting illustration of the changing perceptions of what radio is today, several participants said they get local news by following local radio on social media. One participant said they were a keen follower of BBC Leicester, while another one mentioned Heartland FM, one of the stations included in the present study.

“*It’s not so much that you pick up the news from the radio station per se as from their Facebook group. So, it’s kind of a hybrid of social media, but the social media attached to a small independent radio station.*”

But there were also participants who avoid radio for local news either because they are not aware of local stations in their area or don’t think they will give them enough. One participant said they preferred the internet:

“Y*ou kind of get the big brush strokes, don’t you, on the radio, and then if you want more detailed brush strokes, you start and follow up and look elsewhere.*”

***4.3 We are aware of local newspapers but we don’t buy them***

The majority of the participants say they don’t buy local newspapers very much, reflecting the now established trend of declining sales of local newspapers (ABC 2023). The participants are by and large aware of the local newspapers but say they don’t read them often or ever. If they do, they read them online only. Some participants say they don’t read local newspapers because of the perceptions about a decline in their quality: “*I used to get the Herald, it used to be a good paper, but it's just rubbish now*”, which was echoed by several other participants who said they thought the number of news pages in local papers has gone down - “*it’s very thin indeed* ”, which one participant attributed to lack of resources and manpower:

“*You get the impression that newspapers and journalism in general has sort of really cut back to the bone; whereas they might have had lots of reporters working on local stories, they make do with the bare minimum nowadays. So, I’m disappointed in what I’ve seen in terms of local news, particularly from the newspaper angle.*”

**Theme 5: *Radio is less local because* t*here is less local identity today***

Participants were then asked to reflect on the concept of localism and assess what localness means to them. As if to confirm the previously mentioned research in this field, one participant said there is “*less local identity*” today, while another one linked that to people “*probably moving around more*”.

“*I think people in general are less local, they’ve got less of a local, regional, feel than they probably did in the seventies, you know, which is as far back as I can remember, really. I just think because things have just got more worldwide and in general, communications and the availability of films and television, there’s less of a local feel.*”

Some participants felt that localness is what brings them to local radio and would like to see more of it. One said he had the impression that local radio has lost localness, while several pointed out that they liked to listen to local voices and people who know and connect with the area.

“*I think it is nice, if you’re listening to a presenter and they are local and they understand the local area, i.e. they live there, then the talk that they do come up with as part of their links can usually be a bit more convincing than national radio.*”

This is a reflection of the points made previously in this study by several interviewees and will be discussed further in the next chapter. In the focus groups, the local flavour that broadcasters bring to their programmes appeared to divide listeners who could not agree on how much of it is desirable. While some said they did not pay much attention to presenters’ accents, others pointed out they found presenters with strong local accents annoying:

“*I think they start to lack authority when they’ve taken the accent to the extreme. Maybe that’s what I’m finding irritating with it.*”

In the conversations about local news, it became apparent that the Scottish participants were unsure what actually counted for local, regional or national news. One participant said for them news from Scotland falls somewhere between local and national, while another pointed out that this dilemma is a reflection of the blurred lines between “*strong national and local identity”* he felt was present in Scotland. One participant commended a TV programme focused on national politics in Scotland while another, who had recently moved to Scotland from England, said Scotland feels neglected by the media.

“*In the north of England we always kind of complain about the media being southern-based, but I think in Scotland, it's definitely worse up here, you know, there's a big gap.*”

**Theme 6:** ***Local radio matters where there is strong local identity***

Considering participants’ mixed views on the importance of local news and localness in general, the final part of the focus group discussions centred on the relevance of local radio and its future. Some participants felt local radio did not matter anymore: “*It’s not the top of my priority*” or as one participant put it:

“*If something really important happens in my region, it will be on the national news, so I think I could live without the local radio.*”

One participant said they found the idea of local radio “*a little bit, sort of, trivial*”, while another thought local radio made sense only for sports: “*the odd football match, but other than that, no*”. Then, almost with a hint of sadness, another participant added that local radio “*should matter*”. One participant’s view is that local radio is more popular among the working class, a view previously expressed by some of the journalists and confirmed by research.

“*I think, where there's a bit of local identity, or like a strong local identity, I think local radio can be really important. But I will say my experience of that sometimes comes into a bit of a sort of class divide, where there's sort of middle class, people seem to be more inclined to listen to national radio, whereas more working-class people seem to be more inclined to listen to the local radio. When I was a kid there was, like, the middle-class families always had BBC Radio 2 or Radio 4 on in the car, and the more working-class families would have commercial local radio stations on in the car.*”

One participant suggested that the local/national divide has a lot to do with listeners’ age, with older people listening to the local radio more. This is certainly true in the case of BBC local radio, although not as much in the case of commercial radio (RAJAR 2023a). Staying on with the generational divide, one participant doubted that younger generations will ever embrace local radio, as they find social media more appealing.

Another view on local radio was that it is not much more than a breeding ground for national radio to recruit talent, which is something Angela Soave from BBC Borders alluded to in the previous chapter. This notion of local media serving as a springboard for talented journalists and other media professionals is long-established and accepted as a given by the industry.

***6.1 Local radio should be a place to go for all news***

Participants had a range of ideas about what kind of local radio they would like to see. Some said they would like more programmes about local culture. Others would like to see more genuine local stories rather than just local angles on bigger, national stories. This, in the opinion of one of the participants, would require more funding for local radio. Some participants said they would like their local BBC station to be a ‘go-to’ place for all the news they need. One said local BBC should combine local with national and international news, possibly by opting into BBC Five Live or BBC Radio Four more.

***6.2 Radio will survive***

The final part of each focus group was dedicated to participants’ views on the future of radio. Participants were very supportive of radio as a medium but had doubts about its long-term future. They seem to agree that the medium of radio is changing profoundly. One participant noted that “*there’s a lot more radio stations in the last two or three years*”, which she saw as a sign the industry is in good health. Other participants said the biggest change is in how radio is consumed. For one participant it is not just the sheer number of stations available, but also the ability to listen on demand, which “*seems to be an expectation now*”. Speaking of the convenience of listening on demand, one participant mentioned podcasts as an extension of radio. Yet for others, the main appeal of radio remains the fact that it is live and often in the background, “*a great sort of companion for the daily routines”* such as cooking, dog walking or washing up. This participant pointed out that radio is *“highly portable and very convenient to consume*” and highlighted the “*transient nature of the radio*” as one of its biggest advantages.

“*I find I just can’t sit through either radio on demand or podcasts, I get bored far more quickly. If it’s live, then there’s something that keeps you hanging in there until something really exasperates you, and then you flick channel.*”

Participants are, however, aware that the main threat to radio’s future is its struggle to attract new generations of listeners. One said they could not see what at this moment would threaten radio, while another said that appreciation of radio is a generational thing, with younger people turning to social media first for news and entertainment. Several other participants agreed, citing the examples of their own children. Then one participant expressed the old concern that young people’s ignorance of news will be “*a death knell for news radio in ten, 20 years’ time*”, to which another one responded:

“*Do you not think that was always […] the case though, because if I look back to when I was 16, I just wouldn’t… you kind of grow into it a bit, don’t you?*”

The four focus group discussions presented here demonstrate that radio listeners still highly value radio while they may be confused about what constitutes radio today or overwhelmed by the choice of news and entertainment sources available. Somewhat surprisingly, they value local radio less and justify that by talking about the changing links they have with their local area or an impression that local radio cannot rival national radio in terms of production quality. The listeners participating in this study say they still value local news, but in the current global context find local politics less exciting. They see radio as a friend in the background, but don’t see it as a valuable forum for debate. Nevertheless, they remain cautiously optimistic about its future.

In the next chapter, the views of the two groups of participants will be put together so that the three research questions can be answered.

# CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

Previous two chapters summarised the findings from the three sets of interviews with local radio professionals and four focus groups with radio listeners in England and Scotland. All three groups of interviewees in the present study insist that localness is what defines them, although how they achieve that in practice and how they see their role in the process, varies. They also acknowledge that the role of local radio as a forum for debate has been reduced or almost abandoned. These findings make a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on local radio in the UK and its journalists. In this chapter, these findings will be used to answer the research questions aimed at providing a better understanding of the radio journalists’ and listeners’ perceptions of local radio in the UK and its future. The discussion which follows will focus on four key areas identified in the analysis of interviews and focus groups, as well as the literature review. Those are:

* Difference in professional ideologies amongst journalists
* Role of radio as a public sphere
* Role of local radio in news deserts
* Transition of radio into a multimedia product.

All three groups of interviewees agree that the area their station covers, regardless of its size, is diverse. All local stations in England and commercial network stations in Scotland cover more populated areas than most of the Scottish BBC opt-outs or independents, which for the journalists in the last group brings a unique set of challenges. Also, all stations employ small teams of journalists, although with significant variations in terms of what ‘small’ actually means.

**Difference in professional ideologies amongst journalists**

The starting premise for the present study is best summed up by McNair (2006: 37) who says that studying local journalism culture is important, as “local journalism is part of the social cement which binds communities together and is widely and rightly viewed as an essential element in the construction of local identity”. It is Hanusch (2015) who points out that many studies of journalism culture tend to focus on the national level for analysis, while it may be more meaningful to concentrate on differences in journalistic culture within nation states, rather than across them. The present study does that by focusing on differences among radio professional in three local radio branches. The study helps us understand how local radio journalists in the UK see their profession and its role in the current media environment in the UK; essentially, how they see themselves as professionals. This is what Schlesinger (1978) and Golding and Elliott (1979) call journalism’s ‘occupational ideology’, or what Deuze (2005) refers to as journalists’ professional ideology - a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including the general process of the production of meanings and ideas within that group. Crucially, professionalism, professional identity and journalistic roles are never static; they are subject to continual discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation (Hanitzsch and Örnebring 2019).

The present study finds that journalists working in local radio have a very clear understanding of their own and their stations’ roles, which is largely determined by the position their stations occupy in the wider media ecosystem. Also, the journalists’ perceptions of the role of local radio seem to reflect their individual sector’s ethos. The interviews with local radio station managers and journalists reveal an understanding that the resources are shrinking, which leads the BBC and commercial networks to increasingly use the synergies their respective structures offer, while the independents struggle to engage in traditional on-the-ground reporting. Crucially, while the BBC radio focuses primarily on local news, its commercial network rivals combine local with national and international news and do so in brief only, while the independent stations do what they can or sometimes struggle to provide any regular news coverage.

In line with research cited earlier in this study, BBC journalistsinterviewed heresee holding power to account and keeping people informed about public affairs as their most important role. Essentially, they first and foremost see themselves in the traditional ‘watchdog’ role, focusing on local politics and hard news. Their view is that working for a public service broadcaster, their main duty is to cover local politics and reach underserved local communities. They say their focus is always on the news from and about their local area and they see themselves in the traditional watchdog role, while adding that to resonate with the audience, not all stories in their bulletins have to be hard news. This is in stark contrast with Firmstone’s (2016) study which found that radio journalists saw public interest news as an ‘add on’ rather than a driver of their news bulletins. At the same time, participants in the present study spoke of greater emphasis these days on campaign-oriented good news, which is understood to appeal to audiences, as previously established by Firmstone (2006) too. Furthermore, while not explicitly saying this, some BBC journalists interviewed in this study seem to confirm the findings of a study by Mathisen (2021) which showed that local journalists express a feeling of inferiority and lack of professional capital compared to colleagues in larger newsrooms.

BBC journalists in the present study also say their roles are usually narrowly defined on paper, while in reality they often have a variety of duties each. They are practically required to be multiskilled, whether they are in presenting, reporting or production roles. They are in effect experiencing significant changes to their roles. Local BBC radio journalists are increasingly multimedia journalists, acting also, as Canter (2014) argues, as the verifiers of information gathered and distributed by others in the online environment. Singer (2001) and Hermida (2009) see the modern journalists as sense makers, who filter the glut of information online, communicating what they believe to be important to the public. In terms of output, the interviews in the present study and a brief review of schedules clearly show that by design local BBC stations in England produce significantly more speech-based content than the other two groups. The Scottish opt-outs are designed to serve a different purpose though, except for Orkney and Shetland which sit somewhere in the middle between other opt-outs and stand-alone stations. BBC teams in England are usually bigger than those in Scotland and they produce longer news bulletins than their commercial rivals. Nevertheless, most of the BBC journalists in the present study speak of having fewer resources than before, which is indicative of the reduced place of local radio in the wider BBC strategy for the near- and mid-term future. With the recently announced changes, the BBC plans to follow a similar model employed by commercial networks, so that its local stations share more content and broadcast less programming unique to their own area of coverage (BBC 2022). Under these plans all 39 stations in England will continue to broadcast their own dedicated local programming from 6am to 2pm on weekdays, but after those times unique local programming will be reduced, although all live sport and local news bulletins will be protected. Greater programme sharing will lead to 139 fewer jobs, but the BBC says it will create some 131 additional roles across local news as it will create multi-media news operations across the country, bringing together its local news teams across radio, TV, and online (all from House of Commons 2023).

When describing their station, the BBC journalists in the present study often use interchangeably the terms ‘local’ and ‘regional’, in the same way that the media, some researchers and most of the listeners do when they talk about those stations. This is in large part caused by the size of the areas their stations cover, which are usually bigger than those covered by the competitors. There were no such variations in interviews with both sets of commercial stations, which all preferred the term ‘local’.

Commercial radio networks are primarily focused on entertainment, while maintaining a role in the local news provision only to the extent they are expected to do so by the regulator. Most of the commercial stations in the present study could be described as local “heritage commercial radio station in the area”, to borrow a phrase used by one of the participants, as each station had had a long-established presence in their own area before acquisition and is a known brand. It is questionable though how long commercial network radio will be able to maintain that claim as it moves further away from localism. Participants representing this sector acknowledge that news provision on local radio is an obligation, rather than a mission. They broadcast shorter bulletins, which include not just local but also national and international news. The views on the role of local commercial network radio are probably best summed up by one of the Scottish participants who described it as: entertainment with the local, in this case Scottish, flavour, “*but within the local regulations*”. A focus group participant put this in layman’s terms when they said commercial radio covers news “*because it has to*”. And for now, as outlined in the UK Media Bill referred to earlier in the study, they will still have to cover local news, while being allowed to increasingly use news hubs and stop employing local journalists. Commercial network stations at the moment employ journalists who cover local patches, but they also often run regional news hubs. With increased centralisation of their news operations, commercial networks can enjoy the benefits of having access to a larger pool of reporters and material, be that material produced by other radio stations in the network or, in the case of DC Thomson in Scotland, by its network of newspaper reporters. In effect, this is similar to the way local BBC stations have access to the national BBC news-gathering resources. Where the two groups differed was in that output on the BBC was first and foremost local, with only occasional opt-ins into BBC national networks for breaking news (and regular opt-ins after the scheduled broadcasts on local radio ended), while the output on commercial networks was and is increasingly “syndicated”, although local stations are still able to opt-out and react to breaking news in their own area. Now, the BBC is reducing the output of local radio without, as far as we know from what has been announced, retaining the possibility of interrupting re-transmissions of national radio for local breaking news.

Nevertheless, those working for the commercial networks understand that for their listeners politics is not a priority and they don’t seek to delve deep into news; in other words, commercial radio’s listener is more of a *monitorial* than a *good* citizen. Also, as commercial radio often runs promotional and other campaigns, those working in it confirm Bowd’s (2011) findings that local journalists tend to see themselves as community promoters and advocates, although in commercial radio campaigning often has a commercial background.

Those working for independent commercial radio say their main role is to maintain strong links with the local community in a variety of ways, depending on the resources. Their stations by default do not run news hubs and in most cases do not have access to third-party services provided by agencies such as Press Association or Independent Radio News. That significantly limits their ability to offer a comprehensive news coverage. While legally required to focus on local issues, independent stations often struggle to engage in ‘active’ journalism with reporters on the ground. Some stations, such as KMFM in Kent and Radio Essex, resemble network radio on a smaller scale in terms of programming, while at the opposite end of the spectrum are stations such as Heartland FM, Argyll FM, North Angus Radio or Mansfield FM which are, for all intents and purposes, community stations in spirit if not in name. As most of the independent stations in Scotland operate in sparsely populated and relatively remote areas, they don’t compete for listeners against other radio stations in the area, but instead see local newspapers as their main rivals. In England, the situation is more complex.

That in a way explains why those working for independent local radio stations see themselves primarily as the voice of the community, providing what is often referred to as social glue. Earlier in the study, local BBC journalists spoke of having to be multiskilled, as the role of the journalist is being redefined in the multimedia world with limited resources. At independent commercial radio stations, the situation is similar but more amplified, as team members also have multiple roles within the stations. But those roles often combine journalistic, technical, administrative and other duties. The same applies even to station managers. What is unique to these stations is that some of their staff also have jobs outside of the radio station too, as salaries in the sector, for those lucky to get them, are usually lower than in the other two sectors.

Olsen and Mathisen (2023) say that local journalism has a dual social responsibility to serve not only as society’s watchdog but also as an integrative force that ties people and communities together. This role as local community glue appears, they point out, to have much less impact on professional reputation and prestige, which is why they argue that the social glue function of local journalism should be promoted as a professional value on a par with investigative, watchdog journalism. The present study, while not explicitly focusing on this issue, demonstrates to some extent an instinctive understanding among local radio journalists that their role is to provide social glue and an implied recognition that that role is undervalued.

Related to this are huge technological changes, which are redefining radio as a medium. Previous research (Chung 2007; Robinson 2010) established that some journalists are reluctant to adapt and accept that their role is changing while others are ready to embrace change. The present study has demonstrated that local radio journalists are aware of the changes affecting the medium and their profession, and are ready to adapt, with or without hesitation.

The three sets of interviews also revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic made local radio stations not only react quickly to a fast-developing story of immense scale and importance but also learn how to adapt quickly and smoothly during the lockdowns. Most interviewees highlighted their team’s ability to switch to broadcasting under the new conditions, even with limited resources, as was the case with the majority of the independent stations. The lockdowns had a big impact on the pattern of radio listening and on scheduling too, in particular on commercial networks. During the first lockdown in March 2020 listening figures among commuters dropped from 36% for adults overall and 33% for adults aged 15-34 to 10% and 8% respectively, before partially recovering later for both age groups (Ofcom 2021). Despite significant challenges, the reaction to the pandemic and lockdowns demonstrated the sector’s relevance, resilience and great skills of its staff.

While the commercial network stations everywhere and local BBC stations in England have access to detailed data on audience and its listening habits, the remaining independents and BBC opt-outs in Scotland do not. Subscription rates to RAJAR, a UK radio audience research body, vary from £9,000 - £26,000 appx, depending on the area of coverage population size (RAJAR 2023b). This is a luxury for many small independent stations, though probably not so much for the BBC. At a time of uncertainty for the BBC local radio, it would be important to know more about how many people listen to the opt-outs and what their views are, as there are suggestions expressed in the present study that opt-outs might be a way forward for local BBC radio in the UK. The small independents are also disadvantaged and would therefore benefit from having access to data on listeners, the likes of the BBC and commercial networks use to plan their strategies and schedules. This inequality of access to audience data between the independents and the rest of the local radio sector, as well as the majority of local newspapers who also have access data on readership, suggests they are subject to a vicious cycle – with lack of access to granular audience data hindering greater commercial success and, by extension, their ability to expand and invest in order to generate even bigger audiences.

The listeners in the present study insist they still value radio as a medium, but not so much local radio or local news. They still think of radio as a friend in the background, or kitchen, where some researchers like to place it, but admit that it is not their main source of news. Several participants felt overwhelmed by the amount of news and news sources on offer, saying they have become more selective in what they follow. These findings indicate that radio listeners expect radio and local journalists to be good neighbours, while they implicitly see themselves as *monitorial* citizens, at least when it comes to local news. Furthermore, for the study participants local radio does not have a valuable role as a forum for debate and they are split over the extent of localness they like to hear on the radio. These findings fit into Nielsen’s (2015) warning that we should not exaggerate the bonds that tie local communities, local journalism and local media. He says that the very social significance of what for example ‘journalism’ means may be changing as people access information from more and more different sources. Not only the organisational, but also the cultural forms of news are changing today. Though most people clearly have certain expectations and ideals that local news media can leverage to define a broadly speaking positive and important role for themselves in local communities, local journalists cannot simply assume that their work is appreciated and valued or that it will be valued in the future; this is especially true for younger people and people who live less locally rooted lives. That is why local news media and local journalism have to constantly prove their relevance and earn people’s trust (Nielsen 2015). To do that, Merritt and McCombs suggest the news media need to be creative watchdogs and agenda setters, scanning the horizon for the gaps in current public life, functioning as social radar, not just a chronicler of what government and other institutions are doing right. This means discovering the concerns of citizens and defining what the public needs to know in very expansive terms (Merritt and McCombs 2004). In this context, the present study makes a contribution to our understanding of the relationship between local radio and its listeners as it offers an insight into what the listeners value on and expect of local radio.

**The role of radio as a public sphere**

If we go back to the way radio contributes to deliberative democracy, by sustaining a public sphere where citizens can exchange ideas, acquire knowledge and information, confront public problems, exercise public accountability, discuss policy options, challenge the powerful without fear of reprisals, and defend principles (Chambers and Costain 2000: xi), then the present study provides evidence that local radio in Britain still makes that contribution. Local radio remains an important disseminator of information, a platform for exchange of ideas, discussion of policy options and more. As the radio journalists interviewed here confirm, local radio still offers a variety of access programmes, defined earlier by McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger (2002: 33). Local radio still hosts regular or one-off single-issue studio debates on a variety of topics. On commercial radio, those would usually be limited to sport, mainly football, while on the BBC they would cover local or national politics and current affairs. Even the Scottish opt-outs, with their limited output, would on occasion run such debates on a one-off basis.

When it comes to the most common of access programmes - the phone-in - the situation is rather different. Local BBC radio in England still dedicates significant airtime to political interviews, discussions and phone-ins, but some of its journalists say running those has become more challenging as the nature of public discourse is now more ‘toxic’, for which they blame social media. Due to their setup, Scottish opt-outs are unable to run phone-ins. Some BBC journalists in Scotland say in their areas the debate on radio has never been popular and add that now debate anyway mostly takes place on social media, which is what some of their counterparts from the independent sector have confirmed too.

On commercial networks, phone-ins and other access programmes have now been reduced to special occasions or sport, and football in particular, with the latter heavily present in dedicated sports shows such as the very popular Superscoreboard on Bauer Media’s Clyde Radio in Glasgow. Direct listener participation also occurs in competition and entertainment programmes. Sports coverage on commercial radio is a very interesting example of a lively broadcast public sphere which brings in a previously difficult to reach audience, as illustrated by the case of Bauer Media’s Superscoreboard for Scotland, now apparently popular not just among traditional male football fans, but also among women who, its regional content director says, it provides with cultural capital or “*social ammunition, something they can learn and be able to chat about”*.

The picture regarding the role of radio as a forum for debate on independent local radio is more uneven. Some stations steer clear of debates either because of concerns regarding regulatory rules or because of lack of interest among the listeners; some stations give their listeners the opportunity to speak to politicians only during election campaigns; while some echo their BBC counterparts and simply acknowledge that the debate has largely moved to social media.

This is all in line with Criders’s (2003) point that local radio is increasingly unable to serve as an avenue for discussion of topical issues in local communities where it relies on listener interaction. Radio’s role as a broadcast public sphere, where people can gather to critically debate the important issues of the day, joining the conversation by calling, texting, or directing social-media posts to the station (Poindexter 2016), is diminishing and there are several reasons for that identified in the present study. Local radio is reducing either its overall output, as in the case of BBC radio, or its speech and news-based output, as in the case of commercial networks. The remaining independents are already struggling to provide any substantial news coverage and access programming. Journalists interviewed in the present study report that the debate is increasingly moving to social media; either to sites run by stations themselves or elsewhere. But more importantly, they note that public discourse has become more confrontational.

Another explanation for the reduced role of local radio as a forum for debate is the changing nature of the listeners’ relationship with radio. People’s connection to places where they live is not as strong as it used to be, which reduces the extent of their interest in local affairs. Also, as focus group participants in the present study confirm, listeners do not seem to appreciate the access role of local radio very much. They equated debate on radio with often “*irritating*” phone-ins or vox pops, while acknowledging that phone-ins are important to lonely people, which is another recognition of the role of radio as a friend.

In the wider context of the public sphere as a notional space existing between civil society and the state (Thomson 1992), and in the globalised multimedia environment we live in, it is no longer feasible to speak of a unified public sphere (Keane 1995) but rather of several public spheres. For radio, the threat is increasingly coming from analysis and discussion podcasts, whose popularity is growing and which now serve as a new public sphere. The growth in podcasting is particularly noticeable at the national level, although there is limited evidence of a growth in podcasts focusing on local issues too. A focus on issues of local concern through podcasting could bring together a new interest group of listeners, while also opening the door to discussion between opposing viewpoints and that does not need to be simply about politics; the informational function of a local public sphere is served just as well through discussions of a local music scene, dining scene, or even the sharing of common life experiences that happen within a certain community (Harrison 2006). For now, the present study demonstrates that podcasts still have a long way to go to rival radio, as some listeners are often confused about what to make of podcasts or because they view them as an inferior media product when compared to professionally produced radio.

So far, the discussion has been limited to what is often referred to as a minimalist form of media participation by the citizens or participation *through* the media (Carpentier, Dahlgren and Paquali 2013). This form is based on the understanding that the citizens are somewhat passively involved in the public sphere, where they have opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and self-representation, or in other words where they can can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices. This is how most citizens interact with the media. Participation remains articulated as a contribution to the public sphere but often mainly serving the needs and interests of the mainstream media system itself (Carpentier, Dahlgren and Paquali 2013). In the context of local radio studied here, that includes the BBC and commercial networks almost entirely, and the remaining independent stations to some extent.

The other, less common but increasingly studied and practised form is participation *in* the media, where citizens take an active role in the production of media output and in media organizational decision-making, or, in other words, in content-related participation and in structural participation, respectively (Carpentier, Dahlgren and Paquali 2013). Community radio is a model of the maximalist form of media participation. In the present study, we have seen that some stations representing the independent commercial sector - such as Skye FM, Heartland FM or Two Lochs Radio for example - actually operate under this formula, as community stations in all but name. Those are stations owned and run by the members of their local community. Interestingly, a version of this model is employed by BBC Orkney and BBC Shetland too, which have a long tradition of involving the members of the respective local community in programme making, while offering them BBC’s resources and professional support. Although community radio, in all its variations, is the least resourced and popular of the three local radio sectors, it offers a template for how the future of local radio and its role as an important broadcast public sphere might be preserved, which is something future research shoud address.

**The role of local radio in news deserts**

The present study is looking at the role of local radio through the prism of localism - a commitment to local news and public affairs programming, to making programming decisions to serve local needs and to providing opportunities for local self-expression as well as developing and promoting local talent. Essentially, localism is about allocating resources to address the needs of local communities (Cowling 2005). In the UK, radio still plays an important part in the overall local media environment and in the set of policies aimed at preserving the provision of local news and meeting other needs of local communities. At the same time, local radio is going through a profound change which can, at the risk of simplification, be described as a move away from localism. As explained earlier, the BBC is reducing the output of its local radio in England so it can redirect resources to the digital provision; commercial networks are increasingly reducing their local presence, while maintaining local news coverage only to the extent required by law; and the remaining independent stations, while maintaining their commitment to localism, fail to attract large audiences due to lack of resources and all that is associated with it, such as recruitment of journalists and star presenters, higher production standards, promotions and so on.

Crucially, the listeners seem to be accepting this and are increasingly losing interest in the more local elements of local radio, as the present study demonstrates. Those taking part in the four focus groups in this study spoke of great appreciation for radio, which was largely expected since they agreed to take part in this study in the first place. Furthermore, most of them said they liked speech radio, mainly on the BBC, while at the same time pointing out that radio is for them just one of the sources of news, behind television and the internet. It is, as one participant put it, a “*gateway*” to news. Recent research confirms this as it shows that television remains the most popular source of news including local news (Ofcom 2022b). The participants also said they see commercial radio as offering music first, and added they would not go to it for news. For some participants the amount of news and news sources available can be overwhelming and in some cases off-putting, making them become more selective in what they follow. This is a reflection of global trends, which show that despite the political and economic threats facing many people, fewer than half (48%) now say they are very or extremely interested in news, down from 63% in 2017. The proportion of news consumers who say they avoid news often or sometimes is 46% in the UK and 36% globally. The UK is actually one of the leaders in news avoidance, with many respondents saying news has a negative effect on their mood (all from Newman *et al* 2023).

More importantly, and more worryingly for the journalists, the listeners think that local radio does not matter anymore, that it is even a “*a bit trivial*” or that it is not much more than a breeding ground for national radio to recruit talent, which traditionally has been one of the key roles of local media and has been discussed in earlier research (see Franklin and Murphy 2005). It has also been mentioned briefly in the present study, where some interviewees spoke of talented journalists leaving local areas, or of struggles to recruit local journalists. This had also been established in earlier studies, which noted that pursuing a career in local news is less attractive for trained journalists who are likely pulled towards larger news organisations. Local journalism is at best portrayed as a “stepping stone” or a “starting place” for a journalistic career (Hess and McAdam 2023). Consequently, small news operations may struggle not only to attract but also to retain qualified staff in a situation where, as observed by Borchardt *et al*. (2019), there is a talent shortage in journalism in general.

Focus group participants also expressed reduced interest in local news and had mixed views on the importance of it, with some saying it still matters as it impacts people’s lives, and others, somewhat reluctantly, admitting they are not drawn to local news very much. The participants were not strictly split between Merton’s ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘locals’ (Merton 1968, cited by Elvestad 2009: 105), but rather confirmed Elvestad’s (2009) point that cosmopolitanism and localism are not mutually exclusive, and that being a local does not necessarily have to be the opposite of being a cosmopolitan. For those participants who are still interested in local news, radio is a good source, while for those who primarily follow national and international news, it is social media where they go to look for local news, even if it means going to social media pages of local radio stations.

Research by Ofcom (2022b) shows that adults in Scotland and Wales are the most likely to say they are ‘very interested’ in news about their nation, whereas those in England and Northern Ireland are more likely to be ‘quite interested’ in their region/nation.

Interestingly, some Scottish participants in the present study expressed a degree of confusion over what actually counts as local, regional or national news, which, for one of them, reflected the blurred lines between “*strong national and local identity”* they felt was present in Scotland. This kind of confusion has already been identified by researchers; Costera Meijer (2020) recently wrote that what counts as local, community or regional journalism may be clear from a production perspective; from a consumer angle it depends on people’s feelings of connection to a particular space, for some neighbourhood, for others a province.

The participants in this study had mostly negative views of BBC Radio Scotland, although some said it was good for music and sport. They felt that most of what BBC Radio Scotland offers could be found elsewhere on the national BBC and that BBC Scotland was politically biased. Their views on the current BBC local radio setup in Scotland were somewhat contradictory, with the participants split between those who would want more local BBC radio in Scotland and those who would not.

Representatives of the independent stations insist their role is to serve the local community by providing it with information and entertainment, local or otherwise, although, as more than one participant put it, it is difficult to speak of radio serving a single community anymore. Most of the participants say they are proud of their station’s coverage of local council affairs, which they see as an essential part of their remit. Some stations, however, do not cover local politics actively because they lack the means to do so.

Localness and emphasis on local cultural identity and values are what commercial networks say defines their local stations too. As previously mentioned, most of the local stations owned by the networks were originally independent stations with strong local presence and identity. Their output was entirely made locally in the beginning and was gradually replaced by networked programming, as summarised earlier in this study. As a further illustration of this trend, in early 2019 and after approval by the regulator Ofcom, Global media announced the launch of UK-wide national breakfast shows on its Capital, Heart and Smooth radio brands. Across the three networks, dozens of local shows and around a hundred jobs were lost (BBC 2019). A year later Global’s rival Bauer announced it would bring almost 50 of its local stations in England into a national radio network dominated by syndicated programmes made in London, although without affecting local journalist and travel reporter roles (Waterson 2020a). Further reductions in local content will be made possible when the current UK Media Bill (UK Government 2023) becomes law. Among the questions this raises is whether localness - as in focus on local news and content, as well as the value of local news - is still key to commercial success of commercial radio. The answer seems to be - No. Commercial networks, as outlined earlier in the study, pull in more listeners than the BBC and are commercially strong. Future research should focus on the reasons behind this and try to understand why local commercial radio listeners do not seem to value local content anymore.

Nevertheless, several BBC journalists in the present study say that commercial radio’s gradual moving away from local content and flavour is an opportunity for the BBC to remain distinct and relevant. This may be the case with the BBC’s main demographic - listeners who are 55 years of age and older. But what about the rest of the listening public? Do they still value localness and want it? Does it matter to them that presenters or editors are from local areas? The industry believes only local news and travel updates are really valued by listeners; they are not concerned much about where a presenter on a music station is speaking from (Waterson 2020a). However, some focus group participants in this study insisted that localness is exactly what brings them to local radio; they would like to see more of it. Others disagreed and seemed to confirm what research (see Harvey 1989 or Nielsen 2015) often tells us - that there is less local identity today as people move around more than before. Equally, the focus group participants were split on the strengths of local flavours on the radio - some like to listen to local voices and people who know and connect with the local area, while others do not pay much attention to presenters’ accents, although one found presenters with strong local accents annoying. Furthermore, several participants talked of listeners who tune in online to local radio in the area(s) where they previously lived and still have connections with, or because they visited the area, liked the music or other content on the local station there and continued listening to it remotely from home. While certainly expanding the reach of local radio stations and bringing in new editorial and business opportunities, this kind of listening also presents programme makers with new challenges regarding news values and overall approach to localness. Digital media pull us further from the comfort of geographically defined places (Ali 2012), creating a new condition of no sense of place (Meyrowitz 1985). This poses significant challenges when it comes to the regulation of the broadcasting industry more generally, and local news in particular (Ali 2012). Is local news still specific to an immediate geographic locality and which is of interest to the local population, or is it news produced within the locality? In other words, what should “count” as local (Ali 2012)? In the present study, local radio journalists speak of local news they produce in traditional terms, seeing it as their mission to serve local place-based communities. Radio listeners, however, seem to be more divided over this, as some of them value localness on radio less while others now enjoy the benefits of technology to maintain through local radio links with more than one local community they have ties with, essentially combining their sense of belonging in both communities of place and communities of interest.

The importance of local news and information was especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people were required to stay at home and were subjected to lockdowns, which confined them to a physical locality. The pandemic demonstrated a key role of local radio in the overall news provision. While such a big global story was followed primarily on television, the coverage of the local aspects of it helped highlight the important role of local radio amongst local communities. As evidenced in this study, local radio focused on public messaging, practical advice and human angles of the story, being a messenger to but also a part of the community. It also kept people company, which has always been one of its key roles and something that makes it unique. One focus group participant made the same point about radio by referring to it as a friend, “*sitting in the background, keeping us company*”. The focus group participants did not say much on the role of radio in the coverage of the pandemic, except for those who made general statements about local news taking the back seat during the pandemic. Nevertheless, audiences demonstrated a need to know what was going on in their “patch” and to contextualise and make sense of a global crisis.

The role of local radio during the lockdowns has implicitly highlighted both the advantages and challenges facing the sector at a time when local newspapers are disappearing, while alternative local and hyperlocal media are still essentially in their infancy. Traditionally in the UK it was the newspapers that dominated local news provision. Deregulation of local radio did not matter much when the local newspapers were strong. But today the situation is significantly different, with the (remaining) local newspapers struggling and local radio abandoning or at best struggling to maintain its focus on local news and content. More and more areas in the country are identified as news deserts, and those are usually the most socioeconomically deprived ones.

Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis (2023) from the Public Interest News Foundation identify 38 news deserts in the UK - local authorities not served by any dedicated local news outlet. They say a total of 4.1m citizens live in these areas, the vast majority in England and Wales, with the East of England and South-East of England as the poorest served regions. They also point out that the greatest proportion of local news outlets operate in print and online (46%), while 26% are radio, 23% online-only, 3% TV and 2% print-only. With a population of 67m, the UK has roughly one local news outlet per 40,000 people, with some local authority areas in Scotland and Northern Ireland having a greater number of outlets than those in England and Wales (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis 2023). News deserts contribute to cultural, economic and political divides in a country (Abernathy 2022). Among other consequences of the emergence of news deserts is a decline in vibrancy and engagement in the affected local communities (Ferrier 2014); less efficient and scrutinised local governments (Napoli, Matthew and McCollough 2018); weakening in citizens’ civic engagement (Shaker 2014); and less informed citizens and increased democratic deficit (Nielsen 2015; Rubado and Jennings 2020). PINF points out that there are also areas of the UK that are served by a wide array of local news outlets. Cornwall, Bristol and Dorset stand out as ‘news oases’ for the nominal number of outlets. Controlling for population, PINF researchers say they see that areas with smaller populations are often well served versus the average. This includes several Scottish council areas as well as some rural districts in England, and no areas of the UK’s largest cities (Mitchell, Roche and Milburn-Curtis 2023).

The shortcomings of efforts such as PINF’s is that they count media outlets available in each area of the UK without looking into the content those outlets offer. When it comes to radio, a quick survey of PINF’s map shows either some omissions, including a great number of local BBC stations, or inclusion of stations which do not offer any meaningful news coverage. For a better understanding of the contribution local radio makes in the overall local news provision, a detailed content analysis of stations’ schedules and programming would be needed. As a possible starting point in such efforts, the present study offers a good overview of the amount and type of news local radio offers and the challenges it faces. An understanding of the current setup and the perceptions of local radio journalists is crucial for future research of the ability of local radio to play a part in mitigating the problem of news deserts. In a study focused on what would replace local newspapers in the US, if they went away, public broadcasting is suggested as a solution, because of its proven record in news provision. The study notes that in the US context public service broadcasting would not be able to replace the newspapers but could be a good second-best, as it is ‘doing the best that it can’ (Abernathy 2020: 66).

In the UK, local radio is more regulated and public service broadcasting is stronger than in the US, so the starting position for local radio is arguably stronger. In addition to its long-established local news coverage on radio, the BBC is also running the Local Democracy Reporter Service, a scheme set up under its Local News Partnership and dedicated to the coverage of local councils and other public services. Participants in the present study had mixed views about the scheme, which is broadly similar to the evidence collected by the UK House of Commons (2023) in its report on the sustainability of local journalism. The report noted the positive impact the scheme has had in increasing the coverage of local councils; the BBC itself highlighted several cases where LDRS coverage had brought important stories to light that may otherwise have been missed, and its Director of Nations, Rhodri Talfan Davies, told the House of Commons inquiry the scheme had delivered about 250,000 stories by 2023. At the same time, the report included concerns that Local Democracy Reporters are not always used for their intended purposes and are instead pressured by editors to pursue stories outside of the LDRS’s remit. In the present study, one participant raised concerns about the reporters favouring local newspapers over the BBC. Elsewhere, LDRS has been criticized for favouring large newspaper publishers, both in terms of reporters it funds and publications those reporters serve (House of Commons 2023). Currently, only two local radio stations in England are listed as providing reporters to the service; it is not known how many non-BBC stations have access to the Service.

The BBC has committed to funding the Local News Partnership until the end of its current Charter in 2027. The Corporation should be encouraged to continue funding the scheme, which might need to be redesigned to include more local radio stations, some of which should be community radio stations, as well as small-scale digital news providers. Independent publishers operating at a more hyper-local level face less overlap with the BBC’s local news provision, and some even indicated that the BBC’s operations were complementary to their own activity. For example, The Bristol Cable said that they had successfully partnered with the BBC to produce major stories, while noting that on all occasions it was the Cable that approached the BBC (all from House of Commons 2023). Nevertheless, this kind of collaboration is something that might benefit BBC’s local radio output as well as its local digital offerings.

Crucially, for any such scheme to work, there has to be sufficient interest in local news amongst the citizens. Listeners interviewed in the present study had mixed views on the importance of local news and their ties to the local community, although more research, and on a larger scale, would need to be done to establish the real level of interest in local news in the UK and the reasons behind it. Such research should involve a wider cross-section of the public and not limit itself to those who self-select themselves as regular radio listeners. What is known already is that people’s willingness to pay for news online, and particularly for local news, is much lower in the UK compared to other countries (House of Commons 2023). While some newspaper publishers argue that this can largely be attributed to the presence of freely available online news offered in the UK by the BBC, the present study would, based on its findings regarding the attitudes of local radio listeners, recommend that this issue is addressed in urgently needed media and news literacy efforts. Such efforts are also recommended in the Interim Report by the News Futures 2035 project, which is looking at ways to secure the provision of public interest news in the UK (Nel and Rymajdo 2022). In the meantime, the fact that UK audiences are not prepared to pay for local news in large numbers should present local radio with an opportunity, at least in the short-term.

**Radio as a multimedia product**

As noted at the very beginning of this study, local radio in the UK is at a turning point, with its future rather uncertain. The medium of radio in general is - again - facing increasing competition from other types of media at a time of major structural and regulatory changes. On top of that is the process, currently under way, of the very meaning of radio being redefined. Radio today exists on airwaves, analogue and digital, on the internet in both audio and increasingly video forms, as well as on social media. More and more researchers, but also radio professionals and members of the audience, are asking the question: “what is radio today?” Maybe, as Hilmes (2013) suggests, a better question would be “What isn’t radio today?” The medium is going through a profound change as it tries to embrace the opportunities the new technologies provide. The gradual transition of radio into a new medium has been going on for quite some time, as the technology progressed and people’s consumption habits changed. This transition often requires significant investment, which makes it particularly challenging to achieve for local radio. The BBC in general has the resources to make radio a truly multimedia product, as it already does with its national radio stations and programmes. But at the local level, that transition has been much slower and more modest. Commercial networks seem to have gone much further, thanks in large part to their move away from localism and increased use of shared programming. The remaining independent stations are lagging significantly behind as they simply do not have the resources to invest in the new opportunities.

The modern-day expansion of radio into other forms of media started with streaming. Today, the BBC and commercial networks offer live and shifted listening to their stations’ programmes via dedicated platforms, while the independent stations still do it via their websites, which usually offer only the basic option of live listening. Nevertheless, this enables small stations to reach previously unreachable audiences or, as several of their representatives confirmed here, hold on to those who discover their station while visiting the area. One station included in the present study - Your Harrogate - offers an example of a small-scale local radio station available only via streaming yet managing to break even, thanks to its strong links with a rather affluent community.

The discussions in the present study also confirmed that radio’s traditional role as a music provider is now being increasingly challenged by the streaming services. For some study participants, the magic of radio is in the human voice, in listening to people talk, even when it is only about the weather. Some of them said they preferred listening to music on the radio because they get the type of music they like and the information related to it. Others pointed out that the strength of radio over streaming services is in curating content or offering the kind of music “*I wouldn’t normally have in my bubble of songs.*” And some participants admitted they liked being challenged by radio DJs. At the same time, streaming services have seen significant growth; music streaming accounts for half of young people’s total audio listening and a fifth for adults overall, but the reach of these services has plateaued in the last two years at 47% (Ofcom 2023c).

The attitudes towards the way radio is consumed, expressed by the listeners in the present study seem to map onto predictions for the future of radio by radio experts and professionals in a recent multinational study by Jauert *et al* (2017). With some variations, participants in that study predicted that by 2025 broadcast radio will continue as an important medium, that digital radio will grow but that FM will remain, and that in combination, these two platforms will dominate radio listening, with online growing but still a smaller part of listening. They also agreed that personalization and automatization of radio content delivery would play a big role, with apps and platforms offering content that suits the individual listener desires, but also that the lean-back attitude would survive, where the listener would use what is offered on (broadcast) radio or streaming services; which has been confirmed by the listeners in the present study.

Given the already available multitude of ways in which radio can be consumed, listeners in the present study seem to be confused over what today actually constitutes radio. There is, in particular, confusion over podcasts. For some participants, the amount of podcasts available is precisely what puts them off; some are sceptical about the reliability of news in podcasts, while some see podcasts as a substitute for printed newspapers. And there are those who raised the issue of production quality of podcasts, which they see as inferior to radio. This is nothing new or surprising, as the boundary between radio and podcasts, as Berry (2023) points out, is fluid. Berry also says that podcast emerged as an alternative to radio, which is what independent podcasters see as relevant, but that podcasts and radio do share a common palate of skills (editing, recording, scripting, etc.). They are becoming allied yet diverging forms of media, where each serves a different purpose (Berry 2023). This may be clear to radio and podcast makers, but not yet to the listeners. What adds to the confusion is the changing nature of podcasts, which are now, like radio itself, increasingly offered as video as well. Data from the US shows that 20 per cent of podcast listeners are using YouTube as their preferred app for podcasts (Podcast Consumer, cited by Webster 2021). Despite their growing popularity, podcasts certainly still have some catching up to do to match the popularity of radio (Ofcom 2022b; Wetherhill *et al* 2020). With a reach of 8% of the population, news podcasting in the UK is still a minority activity which resonates only with educated and younger audiences (Newman *et al* 2023). At the same time, spending on podcast advertising has seen significant growth (Ofcom 2023c). Research also shows that growth in podcast use appeared to slow during the pandemic, with 15% of adults listening to podcasts on a weekly basis in Q1 2021 (Ofcom 2021).

In the interviews in the present study, both with the journalists and listeners, social media has been mentioned often, as a source of local news, an extension to radio and a forum for debate. Radio listeners had mixed views regarding the value of social media as a news source, ranging from avoidance to embrace, with an important caveat from one listener who said they follow traditional and trusted news sources on social media. Social media did not invent interactivity on the radio, but it has transformed it by enabling producers to open the radio to its listeners (Bonixe 2012). Via social media, the listeners can engage in discussion with the station, at a time of their choosing rather than by phoning into a live show, they can participate in the content creation and, crucially, interact with one another, which was previously not possible. Several study participants highlighted some of the advantages of social media for their local station, namely that listeners who are otherwise reluctant to phone in, would comment on social media or email a station to express their views. On the other hand, several journalists blamed social media for making a rational and civilized debate on local radio more difficult to run, as people are more polarised and less open to opposing views. Such comments amount to a reversal of an earlier observation that online participants often look very similar to offline participants (Ceron and Memoli 2016; Hindman 2009).

One of the main aims of the present study is to find out how those making and those listening to local radio see its future. Overall, the participants have expressed cautious optimism about the future of local radio. Those working for the BBC by and large think that local radio will not grow but that, at the same time, the talk of its demise is premature. The latest changes to the way local BBC radio operates in England will see further reduction in team sizes and broadcast hours, but not any station closures. Meanwhile, no plans for any changes to the Scottish opt-outs have been announced. BBC journalists don’t think their stations will grow, but at the same time do not worry about the possibility of their imminent demise. Interviewees from commercial networks say that local radio has a future because people trust it and see it as a friend. While some of them say that local news will stay on commercial radio because that is ensured by regulation, changes recently announced by the UK government aim to relieve commercial radio of some of its current requirements around local content (UK Media Bill 2023). Looking at the history of local radio regulation in the UK, it is obvious that the sector has been allowed to gradually but steadily move away from localism. Is that a cause for concern? According to the listeners interviewed in the present study - not much. They are doubtful about the future of radio in general and seem to value local radio more as an idea than an actual medium they spend much time listening to. Some radio commentators seem to agree; Lloyd (2020) expects both listener loyalty and radio’s reach to decline, but also predicts that there will be an increasing appetite for high quality, dependable, trusted news and expert analysis. Some of the journalists working for the remaining independent stations seem to agree; they say the commercial network model works best as it follows the audience, which is moving away from localism, and that stations like theirs do not have a future. Others are more optimistic and think that local stations which are closer in both practice and spirit to community radio have a stable and bright future, as long as their goal is not to “*make lots of money*” but rather “*to make great radio*”. These findings challenge some of the earlier research on localism and its importance to citizens and contribute to a rather limited body of research on journalists working in local radio.

All interviewees seem to agree that local radio is at a turning point and that its future is

uncertain. There is a recognition both amongst the journalists and listeners that radio is changing profoundly and that the listening habits are changing too, as we are witnessing a move away from linear listening to listening on demand and multimedia consumption. BBC journalists think that local radio will have to embrace social and digital media more than it does today but also that local radio will continue to offer an alternative to the national networks. In this context, some of them see more networking on commercial radio as an opportunity for the BBC as they see local BBC radio serving people who “*actually care about where they live and what's happening around where they live”,* in the words of one BBC journalist. This sounds noble but increasingly less realistic given the BBC’s recently announced plans to shrink local radio in England. In the meantime, those representing independent radio think that a shift to a multi-platform medium will present small stations with significant challenges; something that apparently does not seem to worry the much better resourced commercial networks.

What is the way forward for local radio in such circumstances? Several of the BBC and independent radio journalists interviewed for this study say there should be more collaboration with local competitors, particularly newspapers. There is some anecdotal evidence of that happening already, and such models should be explored further. Similarly, in a recent review of radio the UK Government included a recommendation for the BBC to explore new partnerships with community radio and community purpose audio organisations (DCMS 2020), which is something this study also proposed above. More than 15 years ago Lax suggested that small community stations should have a right of access on a non-commercial basis to their local multiplex, in the same way that ‘must carry’ rules insist that the commercial multiplex operators carry their local public BBC service. That would make radio more accessible to a wider range of citizens, who would be able to contribute to debates within their communities (Lax 2007). Others suggest that the Scottish opt-out model, particularly the one used on Orkney and Shetland, could be replicated elsewhere. That would mean further shrinking of local BBC radio in England but with more focus on local news bulletins.

The listeners reasonably could not be expected to offer specific solutions, but they did have a range of ideas on what they would like to hear on local radio - mainly, more programmes about local culture and more genuinely local stories rather than just local angles on bigger, national stories. This is reflected in other recent studies on local news habits, with Heawood and Padania (2023) finding that people think local news should be truly local and not ‘cookiecutter’ versions of local news where the same stories are simply repackaged for different audiences. For this to happen a change in strategic thinking, and also in newsroom cultures, would be needed. Commercial networks are unlikely to revert back to extended news reporting and go beyond the legally required minimum in terms of local content production, while the BBC would need to consider reversing some of the recently announced changes to its local radio. Independent commercial stations are keen to assume a bigger role in news provision, as is community radio (Kocic *et al* 2021), but they lack the resources to do so. This is part of a much bigger challenge of how to secure the provision of news in the public interest. The current Conservative government has rejected proposals for state funding to be used to support public-interest journalism in the UK, saying that intervention by the government would damage a free press (Waterson 2020b). At the same time, the state does provide support for news publishers through various forms of tax relief, some dating a while ago and some introduced more recently as part of the Cairncross Review, although most of these measures target print and digital newspaper publishers and do not include local radio (House of Commons 2023). Some support for community radio is already in place, but the funds are small and insufficient for stations to hire trained journalists (Kocic *et al* 2021). There were other schemes to help local journalism, including two launched by digital giants Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram) and Google (House of Commons 2023). Both however bypassed radio and Meta has recently announced it is winding down its community news scheme altogether. A recent project by the Public Interest News Foundation has found that local stakeholders are keen to support new funding models for local news and proposed that the funding for local news is guided by local communities themselves (Heawood and Padania 2023), although that project also by and large bypasses radio.

Several BBC and independent radio journalists think the main challenge for local radio will be to attract the next generation of listeners. Based on recent audience figures the UK Government expressed concern that young audiences do not seem to sufficiently grow into radio later in life to compensate for the current decline in listening among 15-24 and 25-34 year olds between 2010-2020 (DCMS 2020). This is where the embrace of video and social media might help. Those among the independents who are doing well point out that independent radio must be more entrepreneurial and look for business opportunities wherever it can if it wants to survive. Adam Daniel says that the success of his online station Your Harrogate demonstrates that a market for local radio still exists. While the listeners may still be there, the advertisers need to believe it is still worth investing in that market. According to Cridland, radio advertising in the UK is 70% national and 30% local. Local advertisers will go to the local station, no matter who owns it; but for the national ad agencies to get involved scale is important as advertisers buy airtime based on cost-per-thousand people their ads reach and this is where small-scale radio struggles (Cridland 2019). Maybe the way radio might attract a new generation of listeners is through hybridisation, as illustrated by the example of Bauer Media’s Superscoreboard on Clyde 1 in Glasgow. One of the show’s presenters, Gordon Duncan, says that Superscoreboard is now being streamed on social media as a way of attracting a new audience to it (Duncan, cited by Colins 2023). It will be interesting to see whether the idea pays off so it could be replicated elsewhere. Also, the success (or not) of hybridisation projects like this will tell us to what extent audiences are keen to embrace the crossover of radio into a multimedia platform. Nevertheless, the participants see independent commercial radio as being “*100% focused on the local community*” or being the “*loudspeaker for the community*”, as they believe that strong links with the community result in listener loyalty. They, and others, point out that one the oldest qualities of radio is still here and is what makes the medium relevant and alive - radio is still part of people’s everyday routines. It provides news, weather and traffic information to millions of people in the morning, while they are on the way to work and back, as well as in the kitchen while they are preparing dinner with radio as a companion.

# CONCLUSION

The present study set out to provide a better understanding of how local radio journalists perceive their role and place in today’s challenging media environment and juxtapose those against the perceptions of radio by those who listen to it. It aimed to identify the main characteristics of local radio as experienced by its journalists in the UK and map them against the expectations of the listeners, before exploring the views of the two groups on the future of local radio.

The study has found that both those working in local radio and those listening to it are aware that this is a turning point for the medium in the UK, with numerous challenges lying ahead. Journalists understand that resources are shrinking while the competition for consumers’ attention is growing. They say that traditional roles of local radio as a provider of local news and a forum for debate are under threat as new, digital platforms offer an alternative at a time when the interest in local news is in gradual decline.

As it has been demonstrated here, some of the reasons for the decline in local radio’s traditional roles are internal, related to strategic decisions made by the sector itself, or external, influenced by the challenging market conditions. Another key reason for this trend, however, is that audiences are often overwhelmed by the abundance of news and entertainment sources available at a time when links to the local community are not as strong as they used to be, in part thanks to the significant changes in lifestyles in a more globalised and interconnected world.

The study further shows that despite all the challenges, there is still optimism regarding the short-to-medium future of local radio amongst those who make it. This is significant as it reinforces the view that radio is a resilient medium which has successfully overcome threats to its popularity and relevance in the past. What makes this moment different is that the decline in localness of local radio comes at a time when the other traditional key source of local news - the local newspaper - is in serious trouble and in many places struggles to survive, while the emerging alternative sources of local news, such as community news projects and hyperlocal pages on social media, are still relatively minor players whose potential to grow is questionable.

Research cited earlier in the study (Aalberg, van Aelst and Curran 2010; Esser *et al* 2012; Goidel, Gaddie and Ehrl 2017; McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger 2003) shows that knowledge of local news is of key importance for the functioning of democracy and community engagement and cohesion. Going back to the three determinants for news learning opportunities - the media environment, people’s content preferences and a sense of civic duty (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1990; Prior 2007) - the present study demonstrates that the media environment does not favour local news as much as it used to. Furthermore, the study shows that people are gradually moving away from localism, while trying to make sense of the fast changing and increasingly overwhelming media ecosystem, in line with research by Aalberg, van Aelst and Curran (2010) on the uncertainty about whether recent changes in the media environment are supporting or impeding increased public affairs knowledge. Finally, the listeners participating in this study still say they value local radio and listen to it; they also express a desire to stay informed, but somewhat reluctantly admit that in the current context local news does not matter to them very much and that, also, they are exploring new and alternative sources of both information and entertainment. The listeners’ sense of civic duty is implied but does not seem to be the major determinant of listening habits. This confirms a previous study by Ofcom (2004), which showed that when asked, TV audiences say they support the public service obligations in terms of content on the main terrestrial broadcasters, as laid out in the Communications Act, while actually preferring to watch more entertainment programmes when they have the choice.

Similarly, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) noted that the acquisition of information depends not only on availability or supply but also on attentiveness or demand. The present study further shows that Bennet and Iyengar were only partly right when they said that the demand side of the information function is most affected by changes in the media landscape, as it demonstrates that when it comes to local news, changes in lifestyles, which impact people’s links with their local area, also play a significant role. Crucially, the present study finds that localness on radio is not simply a function of provision but of demand too, which contradicts Starkey’s (2011) assumption that the survival of localness on radio will depend entirely on the will of legislators and regulators to keep it alive. What this study has established through focus groups with listeners is much closer to earlier research by Høst (1999) and Stamm (1985), who showed that interest in local news is related to different kinds of ties to the community. The study also confirms Harvey’s (1989) point that the importance of local has been eroded by advanced capitalism, which intensifies the disassociation from places.

Regarding journalists’ perceptions of their own work, the present study reflects Picard’s (2015) findings that journalists in the West expect journalism to be a harder job with less institutional support in the future. The study also reflects Hanusch’s (2015) point that local journalists exhibit strong support for the community forum and advocacy role, but with significant differences between them, based on the characteristics of their sector. In line with Deuze’s (2005) concept of journalism as an ideology, BBC journalists in the present study express strong adherence to the public-service ideal. They, more than the others, see themselves in the watchdog role. Those working for commercial networks are fully aware that their listeners are not news hungry, which is partly why they see themselves more as community promoters and advocates. In the independent sector, practising local journalism is often very hard if not impossible for reasons outlined earlier in the study, which is why those working in the sector see themselves as providing social glue more than anything else; they say their main role is to maintain strong links with the local community in a variety of ways. This is where the present study helps fill an important gap in research as it addresses the perspectives and experiences of practice of those working in local radio in the UK. After all, studies of this kind are of particular relevance at a time when journalism’s identity is existentially shaken, and journalistic ideals have become more ambivalent and liquid (Koljonen 2013).

While the study builds on previous research on the importance of public interest news for the functioning of democracy and the concept of localism, it makes an original contribution to the increasingly neglected field of radio studies. The study helps fill a gap in our understanding of the role of local radio as a public sphere. In the current turbulent media environment, it does so by analysing the perceptions of radio journalists and listeners, with both groups being somewhat neglected in research, at least in the UK. It provides a much-needed overview of the perspectives of those working in local radio in the UK regarding the sector’s current challenges and its future. Furthermore, it puts those perspectives against the views of the radio listeners regarding their appreciation for local radio and listening habits. Crucially, the present study establishes that local news is not as important to citizens as it used to be, especially in the context and at the time of a major international health crisis. The study also finds that local radio today competes for attention against a much bigger range of news and entertainment sources. Radio listeners, as the present study further demonstrates, expect production quality standards to be high and often find local radio lagging in those behind national radio. But they are confused about what radio is today and how to make the best use of an abundance of news and entertainment on offer. The study also shows that local radio journalists are aware that radio is undergoing major changes in the ways it is produced and consumed. Commercial radio seems best placed to take the advantage of the new technologies available, while the BBC and independent stations see their strengths in providing for under-served communities.

As such, this study serves to challenge researchers in the field to investigate further the state of local radio and its future, with a particular focus on listener perspectives, which have by and large been neglected so far. The study should also help the local radio sector itself make better sense of the current environment in which it operates and develop solutions for the future that would justify the optimism expressed here. Last but not least, the study should inform the growing number of on-the-ground projects currently under way or in planning stages, aimed at coming up with solutions for securing the provision of public interest news in the future. Of particular relevance and urgency is to establish the role local radio plays or could play in news deserts, where research so far has focused on newspapers and small-scale digital news projects. In the UK, there are several models of local public service radio; some of their key differences have been highlighted in the present study. Future research should explore these models further or look at alternatives. Research on community radio is growing; it should also focus more on the sector’s potential to provide news in the public interest.

There are several limitations to this study, some practical and some methodological. From a practical perspective the biggest limitation is that data collection was undertaken during the Covid-19 lockdowns, which had a somewhat negative impact on participant recruitment and prevented the researcher from visiting most of the participants and their radio stations. Meeting the participants in person would have allowed for a more in-depth data collection process as it would have included more non-verbal reactions and probably resulted in longer interviews. Visiting the stations the participants work for or run would have been helpful in understanding their work environment and learning more about the practical challenges they deal with or the resources they have and lack. From a methodological perspective, the study would have benefitted from including more journalists from commercial networks. Response rates from the networks to invitations to take part in the study were disproportionately low when compared with the other two groups. Furthermore, the four focus groups were all conducted online, which was inevitable during the pandemic. While there are advantages to conducting group interviews online, one of the shortcomings is that online interviews give the researcher less control over the conversations than in a face-to-face setting, while group interaction can sometimes be affected by technical issues. Also, the focus group recruitment process relied to a large extent on personal contacts and snowballing, which helped make the groups more homogenous but at the risk of resulting in a narrower range of perspectives expressed.

Future research should aim to overcome these limitations and, more importantly, focus in more detail on some of the aspects of local radio addressed here. Research should focus on newsroom practice and cultures, as well as news values most used in local radio. We know how much news coverage local radio in England and Scotland offers, but we know much less about the quality and impact of that coverage. In the case of the remaining independent commercial stations, future research should focus on the challenges related to having limited resources, and on the blurring of the line between community and commercial radio for some of them. On the audience side, future research should address local radio listening habits, local news consumption and, in Scotland, a thorough evaluation of the opt-out model which in the current study emerged as a valuable alternative to the decline in the number and output of stand-alone local radio stations.

The present study makes a contribution to a limited body of research on contemporary local radio. It does so at the time of significant changes the medium is going through and against a great deal of uncertainty regarding its future. While there is cautious optimism that radio will remain present and relevant for the foreseeable future, no participant in this study expressed a view that local radio can grow. This is a sobering conclusion which makes further research on local radio more urgent. For now, it is appropriate to conclude by citing one the study participants who said this on the future of local radio:

“*Keeping what you have is the best one can hope for*.”

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**BBC WRITTEN ARCHIVES**

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BBC WAC R78/611/1Local Broadcasting Part 5

BBC WAC SC1/64/1 - Radio Scotland

BBC WAC R102/69/1 - Local Radio: Individual Cases 1965-70 Vol II

BBC WAC R102/46/1- Local Radio Experiment: Policy 1966-1969 (on offers by cities; none from Scotland)

# APPENDICES

## **Appendix 1 Consent Forms**

### **1.1 Interview Participant Consent Form**

# Interview Participant Consent Form

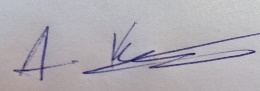
GUEP Approval Number GUEP (19 20) 909R Participant number [ ]

**Research Project Title:** **A comparative examination of local radio models in Scotland and England**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Please initial box | |
| I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated [**insert date**] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project |  |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and withdraw my data within 14 days of receiving the transcript of the interview without giving a reason, and without any penalty. I understand that beyond those 14 days it may not be possible to remove my data from the study. |  |
| I understand that my responses will not be kept anonymous and I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my responses. |  |
| I consent to being audio recorded. |  |
| I give permission to be quoted directly in research publication(s) against my name. |  |
| I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database so I can be contacted about future studies. |  |
| I agree to take part in this study |  |

**Name of Participant Signature:**

**Date:** Click here to enter a date

**Name of Researcher: Aleksandar Kocic Signature:** 

**Date:** 27/09/2020

### **1.2 Focus Group Participant Consent Form**

# Focus Group Participant Consent Form

GUEP Approval Number: GUEP (19 20) 909R Participant number [ ]

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Please initial box | |
| I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated [ ] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project |  |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and withdraw my data within 14 days without giving a reason, and without any penalty. I understand that beyond 14 days it may not be possible to remove my data from the study. |  |
| I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous and I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. |  |
| I consent to being audio recorded. |  |
| I understand how audio will be used in research outputs. I am aware that I will not be named in any research outputs, but I could be identified by people I know through the stories I tell. |  |
| I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database so I can be contacted about future studies. |  |
| I agree to take part in this study |  |
| I am 18 or above |  |

**Research Project Title: A comparative examination of local radio models in Scotland and England**

**Name of Participant Signature:**

**Date:** Click here to enter a date

**Name of Researcher: Aleksandar Kocic Signature:**

**Date:** 17/09/2021

### **1.3 Interview Participant Information sheet**

**Interview Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Project Title** A comparative examination of local radio models in Scotland and England

**Background, aims of project**

Scotland occupies a distinct communicative space within the United Kingdom. It is a stateless nation, with great deal of autonomy but not in broadcasting. For the BBC, it is a national region, served by a semi-autonomous BBC Scotland. Unlike England, Scotland lacks significant regional and local news provision by radio. It actually finds itself in a peculiar position of not having any local public service radio, neither in major urban areas such as Glasgow or Edinburgh, nor in those rural ones such as the Borders or Highlands (except for few, limited BBC Scotland opt-outs). I would like to invite you to take part in this study that aims to establish whether the current local news provision in Scotland - dominated by a network of commercial radio stations and supplemented by a national BBC station and a range of community stations - serves Scottish audiences well or not. The study will do so by comparing the Scottish model with the English one, where in addition to national radio there exists a network of local BBC-run public service radio stations, serving distinct parts of the country, urban and rural alike. The study focuses on the characteristics of the current setup and possible ways forward.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited because of your first-hand experience in producing local journalism to radio audiences in your area. Your input will help the researcher gain a better understanding of the importance and relevance of local radio to local communities. The aim of the study is to evaluate the existing models of local radio provision in Scotland and formulate ways it can be improved.

**Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation within 14 days of receiving the transcript of the interview without needing to explain and without penalty by advising the researcher of this decision. If you decide to withdraw within that time, we will not collect any more data from you. You will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to either sign a consent form or confirm your consent orally, depending on the Government guidance regarding social distancing at the time.

**What will happen if I take part?**

You will be interviewed by Aleksandar Kocic in person, at your place of work, or by email/Skype/MS teams or similar. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes. We may also contact you again after the initial interview for a brief follow-up interview.

**Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

There are no foreseeable risks in taking part.

**Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There will be no payment for taking part in this project.

**Legal basis for processing personal data**

As part of the project we will be recording personal data - name and job title - relating to you. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest/the official authority of the University.

**What happens to the data I provide?**

Personal information will be stored on a University of Stirling secure server and only the researcher, his supervisors and transcribers will have access to research data *(but will have signed a confidentiality agreement – for assistance with confidentiality agreements please contact the Contracts Team* [*contracts@stir.ac.uk*](mailto:contracts@stir.ac.uk)*).*

Your personal data will be kept for 10 years on Research Drive – a secure data centre on the Stirling campus and then will be securely destroyed.

We will ask all participants for their permission to use direct quotes and they will be identified by full name and position, as that kind information is essential for this study.

**Will the research be published?**

The research forms part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in an academic journal and/or presented at a research conference. You will be identifiable in any such publication.

The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publicly accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

**Who has reviewed this research project?**

The ethical approaches of this project have been approved via The University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.

**Your rights**

You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required. You have the right to withdraw from this project within 14 days of receiving the transcript without giving reasons and without consequences to you. You also have the right to object to us processing relevant personal data, however, please note that once the data are being analysed and/or results published it may not be possible to remove your data from the study.

**Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone, please contact me at [aleksandar.kocic@stir.ac.uk](mailto:aleksandar.kocic@stir.ac.uk) or my supervisor Richard Haynes [r.b.haynes@stir.ac.uk](mailto:r.b.haynes@stir.ac.uk). You can also contact the Dean of the faculty of Arts and Humanities, professor Richard Oram, (rdo1@stir.ac.uk) if you wish to make a complaint. You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner’s Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>).

The University’s Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to [data.protection@stir.ac.uk](mailto:data.protection@stir.ac.uk) in the first instance. You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

**Thank you for your participation.**

### **1.4 Focus Group Participant Information sheet**

**Focus Group Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Project Title** A comparative examination of local radio models in Scotland and England

**Background, aims of project**

Scotland occupies a distinct communicative space within the United Kingdom. It is a stateless nation, with great deal of autonomy but not in broadcasting. For the BBC, it is a national region, served by a semi-autonomous BBC Scotland. Unlike England, Scotland lacks significant regional and local news provision by radio. It actually finds itself in a peculiar position of not having any local public service radio, neither in major urban areas such as Glasgow or Edinburgh, nor in those rural ones such as the Borders or Highlands (except for few, limited BBC Scotland opt-outs). I would like to invite you to take part in this study that aims to establish whether the current local news provision in Scotland - dominated by a network of commercial radio stations and supplemented by a national BBC station and a range of community stations - serves Scottish audiences well or not. The study will do so by comparing the Scottish model with the English one, where in addition to national radio there exists a network of local BBC-run public service radio stations, serving distinct parts of the country, urban and rural alike. The study focuses on the characteristics of the current setup and possible ways forward.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited to help the researcher gain a better understanding of the importance and relevance of local media, and local radio in particular, to members of the public like you. The aim of the study is to evaluate the existing models of local radio provision in Scotland and formulate ways it can be improved.

**Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part. Your participation is voluntary and if you decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation within 14 days of the focus group taking place, without needing to explain and without penalty by advising the researcher of this decision. Everything you said, and everything others said that can help identify you, will be removed from the study. You will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to either sign a consent form or confirm your consent orally, depending on the Government guidance regarding social distancing at the time.

**What will happen if I take part?**

You will be interviewed as part of a focus group with 5-8 other participants by Aleksandar Kocic in a library or similar quiet setting. The interview should take approximately one hour.

**Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

There are no foreseeable risks in taking part.

**Are there any benefits in taking part?**

You will receive a shop voucher as a sign of gratitude.

**Legal basis for processing personal data**

As part of the project we will be recording personal data relating to you such as age, gender and occupation, but not your name. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest/the official authority of the University.

**What happens to the data I provide?**

No personal data will be collected during the interview. Your personal data listed above will be collected through the participant information document you will be asked to complete before the focus group commences. The audio recording of the focus group will be stored on a University of Stirling secure server. Only the researcher, his supervisors and transcribers will have access to research data *(but will have signed a confidentiality agreement – for assistance with confidentiality agreements please contact the Contracts Team* [*contracts@stir.ac.uk*](mailto:contracts@stir.ac.uk)*).*

This data will be kept for ten years on Research Drive – a secure data centre on the Stirling campus and then will be securely destroyed.

We will ask all participants for their permission to use direct quotes, but they will not be identified by name.

**Will the research be published?**

The research forms part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in an academic journal and/or presented at a research conference. You will not be identifiable in any such publication. The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publicly accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

**Who has reviewed this research project?**

The ethical approaches of this project have been approved via The University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.

**Your rights**

You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required. You have the right to withdraw from this project within 14 days without giving reasons and without consequences to you. You also have the right to object to us processing relevant personal data, however, please note that once the data are being analysed and/or results published it may not be possible to remove your data from the study.

**Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone, please contact me at [aleksandar.kocic@stir.ac.uk](mailto:aleksandar.kocic@stir.ac.uk) or my supervisor Richard Haynes (r.b.haynes@stir.ac.uk). You can also contact the Dean of the faculty of Arts and Humanities, professor Richard Oram, (rdo1@stir.ac.uk) if you wish to make a complaint.

You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner’s Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>).

The University’s Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to [data.protection@stir.ac.uk](mailto:data.protection@stir.ac.uk) in the first instance.

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You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

**Thank you for your participation.**

## **Appendix 2 Interview Schedules**

## **2.1 Interview Schedule**

A close up of a logo

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**Interview schedule/topic guide**

* Describe your radio station (area you cover, programme schedule, hours of programming etc.)
* Who are your main competitors in the area?
* Who are your listeners?
* Describe your role.
* To what extent your station produces its own material?
* To what extent is your programming focused on the local community?
* Which programmes in your schedule cover local issues and how?
* To what extent do you cover your local council and local politics?
* What is your flagship programme covering local community/issues?
* To what extent your station provides a forum for debate about local issues?
* Local radio stations are supposed to play a role in fostering a sense of community. To what extent does your station do that?
* How much has the role of local radio stations and the place they have in the community changed with the recent technological changes and the media consumption habits?
* Can you tell me about any initiatives/projects aimed at the local community launched recently by your station?
* What role has your station played in keeping people informed about the Covid-19 outbreak?
* To what extent has the Covid-19 outbreak changed your programming?
* To what extent do you think has the Covid-19 outbreak changed your listeners’ perception of your station?
* Is there anything you would like to add about your station and its role?

## **2.2 Focus Group interview schedule**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**Focus Group schedule/topic guide**

* How do you get news in general? Which medium, how frequently?
* What kind of news are you most interested in? Politics, business, sports, arts…
* Are you interested in local news in the area where you live?
* Where do you find local news?
* What do you think of the news provision by BBC Radio Scotland (Scotland only)?
* Do you think radio in Scotland offers local news for the area where you live? (Scotland only)
* What do you particularly like about BBC Radio Scotland’s news provision? (Scotland only)
* Where do you think BBC Radio Scotland fails its listeners? (Scotland only)
* What do you think of the news provision by your local BBC station (England only)?
* What do you think of the news provision by your local commercial stations?
* Do you listen to community radio?
* To what extent your local radio station(s) provides a forum for debate about local issues?
* Local radio stations are supposed to play a role in fostering a sense of community. To what extent does your local radio station do that?

1. Simultaneous Broadcast. Refers to programmes broadcast simultaneously by more than one station. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The Beveridge Committee on Broadcasting (1949–1951) was charged with considering all aspects of post-war broadcasting in Britain at a time of political, social, economic and cultural change. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The first mass-produced car radio came onto the market in 1927 in the US, but in Europe car radio’s popularity had to wait until the post-war prosperity in the 1950s. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Pilkington Committee was set up on 13 July 1960 under the chairmanship of British industrialist Sir Harry Pilkington to consider the future of broadcasting. One of the Pilkington Report's main conclusions was that the British public did not want commercial radio broadcasting. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Council offered guidance on many key broadcasting issues over the years. It was replaced in 2007 by the BBC Audience Council for Scotland. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Appointed in May 1973 to examine the Broadcasting Authorities’ plans for a fourth television channel in the UK and for radio services in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and rural England. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Annan Committee on the future of broadcasting was established in April 1974 to discuss the UK boadcasting industry, including new technologies and their funding, the role and funding of the BBC, IBA and programme standards. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Currently, BBC radio Scotland’s output includes local news opts-outs for audiences in Orkney, Shetland, Inverness, Aberdeen, Selkirk and Dumfries. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In the end, due to insufficient turnout at the 1978 referendum in Scotland, the Scottish Assembly was not set up in 1979. After a few years in Edinburgh, Radio Scotland relocated to Glasgow where it has been since. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)