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## ***Crosscurrents Special Issue Editorial***

### **Small nations, the press and the digital challenge**

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#### **Abstract**

This editorial begins by discussing the current challenges faced by the Scottish press, in the run-up to the referendum on independence. It focuses on a gradual transition to a new business model that is combining print and digital content. The particular dilemmas faced in Scotland are also being addressed elsewhere, but in quite distinctive ways. A brief overview of comparable nation-states (Denmark, Norway) and stateless nations (Catalonia, Quebec) sets the stage for the five case studies that follow.

#### **Keywords**

content, comparison, digitization, newspapers, nation, Scotland, state

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This special issue of *Crosscurrents* contains work presented at two workshops held at the University of Glasgow in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's national academy, the purpose of these events was to assess the present state of the Scottish press – in a comparative perspective - in

the run-up to the historically important referendum on independence held on 18 September 2014.

This editorial has been written before we know the outcome of the referendum. But, whatever this might be, to have arrived at the possible dissolution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland after more than three centuries of statehood is a matter of some moment. Over that period, and especially since the late eighteenth century, there can be no doubt that Scotland's newspaper press has had an important role in articulating national and regional identity in the country and that it has played a part in articulating a distinctive Scottish national public sphere within the more encompassing one of the Union – the United Kingdom.

Taking a long view, technological and existential anxieties about the role of the Scottish periodical press are nothing new. After the Treaties of Union of 1706-07, Scottish editors and publishers framed their ambitions in terms that still resonate with the double challenge facing Scotland's national press today. How could they provide a dedicated focus for Scotland's cultural ambitions and distinctive civil society in the face of fierce commercial and technological competition, then, as now, from the London press? How could they promote Scottish national interests in a new constitutional framework and global economic context?

Whether it will ultimately have a role in a new independent state, or continue within a nation that remains within a wider multinational union, for the Scottish

press like its counterparts elsewhere, a double challenge remains. First, can print journalism adapt to the digital revolution, given a continuing decline in newspaper sales? Second, can the press perform its civic role in contributing to an increasingly distinct democratic culture north of the Border? There has been relatively little extended commentary on this state of affairs, with the exception of a rare think-piece by the prominent Scottish political columnist, Iain Macwhirter (2014), stimulated, in part, by his participation in the second Glasgow workshop, where the essays in this *Crosscurrents* special issue were first presented.

Oddly, such questions have been largely neglected in recent debate about the media and Scottish independence. In the course of its long campaign, the key protagonist of independence, the Scottish National Party Government in Edinburgh, set out its vision in *Scotland's Future*, widely referred to as its White Paper (Scottish Government, 2013). While this lengthy document discusses culture, broadcasting and communications, it is completely silent on the future of the press.

Several years ago, in a rare academic analysis, a study under the auspices of the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (McNair et al. 2010) concluded that while there was a profound challenge of falling circulations and advertising migrating online, new media developments could also bring new opportunities for the press. That transition is still under way, and no major Scottish titles have yet disappeared.

Scotland's press is certainly not unique in facing the impact of the online revolution. A key issue for newspapers everywhere is how to make their digital presence pay, as print sales continue to fall and advertising migrates online. That is why, in a *Herald* article, one of us called for a new business model for the Scottish press (Schlesinger 2011).

Can Scotland learn lessons from what's happening elsewhere? Our aim in organising the two workshops was to see how the press was faring in nations comparable to Scotland, which has a population of almost 5.3 million. To that end, we brought together leading national and international experts - academics, journalists, media executives and policymakers from Scotland and the wider UK, the Basque Country, Catalonia, Denmark, Norway, and Quebec.

Our choice of comparators was guided by several criteria. Like Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Quebec are 'stateless nations' in which movements for independence from the wider states in which they are located – the UK, Spain and Canada – have been prominent at various times. Both Denmark and Norway are nation states, which raises the interesting issue of whether statehood as such offers any key instruments for intervening in the field of communications unavailable in a sub-state polity. Scotland is part of the anglosphere, whereas in all of our other cases, the defence of distinctive languages and cultures is a major issue. In Catalonia and Quebec, language politics has been linked to independence, although, certainly not invariably. In Denmark and Norway, small national communities have pursued cultural policies aimed at sustaining their linguistic distinctiveness. In all these cases, the

role of media – broadcasting as much as the press – has been an important dimension of the pursuit of distinctiveness.

The debate in Glasgow showed that, at best, the constitutional question is a secondary matter for those running the Scottish press. That is because the fundamental issue of creating sustainable conditions for their enterprises dominates, regardless of whether Scotland is independent or not. It is interesting to weigh this conclusion against the particular configuration of political, business and cultural considerations found elsewhere.

In fact, at our workshops there was a consensus that in small nations in Europe and North America such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Quebec, as in the rest of the UK, the need for new press business models and the need to attract new readers stand out as the most urgent issues facing their press systems. That is because there is an increasing divergence in how news is consumed across generations, with younger ‘digital natives’ increasingly moving to mobile devices such as tablets - as well as using social media - to access news content (Reuters 2013). But that said, cultural and political questions remain inescapable, as our contributors to this issue show.

The quest for a new balance between print and digital has enormous implications for the way that newsrooms are organized and how newspapers actually produce daily copy. There is also a new challenge to how news judgments are being made that is increasingly posed by the editorial use of live web analytics – information about real-time use of content (Schlesinger and

Doyle, 2014).

The overriding focus of our international discussion was on technology and economics. What became quite clear was that each nation's institutional history and public sphere has affected the development of its press system. How each political culture has evolved has also influenced the extent of state intervention in subsidising national press systems and the reasons that are deemed ideologically acceptable for doing so.

While explicit public subsidy to keep a wide range of titles in existence would be regarded as dangerous political interference with press freedom and plurality in the UK, in Denmark and Norway it is simply taken for granted as part of sustaining national and regional identities and a broadly social democratic order. In Scotland, this kind of subsidy is familiar in public service broadcasting, where government funds flow to BBC Alba to sustain Gaelic-language production. Presently, it would be unimaginable for such a policy to be applied to the press.

In each national press, digitisation is re-shaping the economics and very identity of leading national newspapers, including *La Presse* in Quebec and *ARA* in Catalonia. Sustained by substantial language communities, both have sought to implement aggressive digital strategies as a means of actively engaging with the new multi-platform media landscape. They have gone digital in ways as yet unthinkable in Scotland.

Against these general considerations, a series of case studies of the state of play in five different national contexts follows.

Based on first-hand research among key executives, Marina Dekavalla analyses the present state of the Scottish press. She draws attention to highly competitive conditions in a market long shaped by the presence of Scottish editions of London-based titles and those 'indigenous' to the country. The picture she paints is an uneven one, but where one of the standout features, nonetheless, is the decline of print circulations, although not at the same pace everywhere in Scotland. This means that, as elsewhere, the traditional business model that coupled print sales and advertising revenues is in crisis. The big challenge, then, is for Scottish newspapers to manage the transition to a new business model, combining revenues from print and digital access to content. No titles have yet gone to the wall, and Dekavalla's informants seem optimistic that the Scottish press will survive.

Stig Hjarvard and Aske Kammer's contribution offers a different portrait. Whereas Scotland's press is part and parcel of the UK's economic non-interventionist approach, in Denmark other factors come into play. The state sees the press as quite expressly contributing to the political public sphere and as needing certain forms of support. Moreover, while Scotland is part of the anglosphere, Denmark, with its similar population of some 5.6 million, has a national language to protect. The drift away from print circulation has been slower than in Scotland. So, if exactly the same challenges of the shift to digital content distribution apply, the responses differ. Hjarvard and Kammer note a



platform-neutral extension in the system of subsidies, albeit still in a minor way – but tellingly for the future – to purely digital media. The new era of digitization has meant that the so-called ‘legacy’ press has to explicitly justify its claim to public support and be more publicly accountable.

There are some echoes of this account in Tore Slaatta’s analysis of the Norwegian press. Here too, he is writing about a nation of some 5 million inhabitants where the development of the press has been shaped both by its close linkage to party politics and territorial extent. As in Denmark, the press has been accorded a significant value in the democratic political system and has also shown relative resilience in holding its audience and keeping up the number of titles, although with a marked shift from print to digital content consumption. Here too, there is a strong interest in sustaining distinct forms of linguistic expression. As in Denmark, the role of subsidy has been notable for sectors of the press, although by contrast, it appears now to be a matter of increasing political contention. Exactly the same questions relating to shifting business models appear, as elsewhere, with diverse ‘value-added’ solutions being pursued by different media groups. The wide take-up of digital, mobile devices is contributing to the other factors that continue to sustain a wide range of titles.

Language plays a key role in Catalonia, where – in parallel to Scotland – autonomist demands have crystallised in the form of an independence movement, and pressure for the creation of a polity separate from the Spanish state. By contrast to the nation-states of Denmark and Norway, Catalonia – like Scotland – is a ‘stateless nation’ of 7.5 million inhabitants, most of whom speak

or write Catalan as well as Spanish. Emili Prado has sketched the particular post-dictatorship conditions that have made language and distinct expression through media such a potent force. He sets out the diverse ways in which both Spanish-language and Catalan media are distributed in Catalonia and the noteworthy role the latter have played in the process of language 'normalisation'. This does not mean, however, that language trumps the challenge of finding a new post-print business model. Falls in print circulation have been language neutral. But being able to count both on a distinct language community and highly charged political moment does appear to have stimulated innovation in the case of the multiplatform *ARA*. As elsewhere, Prado underlines the continuing importance of the press for political and cultural life.

In our final contribution, Gaëtan Tremblay supplies an account of another 'stateless nation', that of Quebec, whose population of some 7.9 million compares in scale to Catalonia's. In Quebec, the distinctiveness of the French language within the wider anglosphere of Canada remains a potent expression of a distinct identity. That said, Tremblay's account does not stress the specific dynamics that, in the recent past, have also led to claims for independence from Canada, although he stresses the importance of a distinct language press for the maintenance of Quebec's political and cultural identity. Rather, he is concerned with the contemporary question of the press's survival and adaptation as it confronts the challenge of digitization. In this regard, he identifies a number of quite distinct strategies for retaining market share that are being pursued by the groups that dominate the Quebec scene. Rather like *ARA* in Catalonia, we might note the strategy pursued by *La Presse*, which is particularly attuned to a mobile,

digitally connected readership, and ask whether this is at least one noteworthy route to survival for others to take into account.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The first event, 'Securing Scotland's Voice: The State of the Scottish National Press in the Digital Age', held at the University of Glasgow on 4 June 2013, brought together leading media researchers, media executives, policymakers, and journalists. The second event, 'Stateless Nations and Independent Nation States: Digital Press Ecologies in The Basque Country, Catalonia, Denmark, Norway, Quebec and Scotland', also held at the University of Glasgow, took place on 14 October 2013 and brought together academic experts from Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia, Denmark, Norway and Quebec to discuss the challenges posed to small-nation press systems by the digital revolution, through a comparison of nation-states and stateless nations.