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Scottish communicative space and the uses of academic expertise

Philip Schlesinger

Abstract

This essay offers some personal reflections regarding the impact of devolution on the author's research and public-facing activities. It begins with a discussion of research into the new post-devolution political system established at the Scottish Parliament and continues with an account of the author's subsequent involvement in a little-known communications audit in of that institution that took place in 2001. The essay concludes with brief remarks on a further use of academic expertise in representing the Scottish interest in media and communications regulation.

Keywords

Audit, communicative space, devolution, expertise, Scottish Parliament, political communication, media

Introduction

Although 1707 and 2014 are the landmark dates in this collection of pieces, we should not forget the moment of devolution itself. This brief essay reflects, in a personal way, on how devolution set the context for some of my work. It reframed both the agenda to be pursued and engendered new involvements. I have selected three distinct types of 'expert' activity, which succeeded one another: research, consultancy, and institutional engagement. These are not cut-and-dried categories but they do sum up the broad features of the practices pursued. The uses of expertise in political life have become highly contested and in the academic world, they have also been revalued in systems of accountability by an increasing emphasis on 'knowledge exchange' and 'impact' as criteria for legitimizing and justifying public expenditure on research (Collini, 2012; Collins, 2014; d'Ancona, 2017).

The overarching framework for placing this piece is the reshaping of Scotland's communicative space as a consequence of devolution. In a nutshell, from a Scottish

perspective, we can still think of the UK as having a dual public sphere: that of the UK as a whole and, complexly interwoven with this, the Scottish one (Schlesinger, 2009). To write these words in 2017, in the digital age, is to recognise that how we think about the public sphere has both changed significantly and will continue to do so. Nevertheless, almost two decades ago, during the moment of devolution itself, a recentring of political discourse and public-facing activity took place. At that time, the new, post-1999 institutional nexus was still undoubtedly viewed through the prism of what are now called ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ media.

As a constitutive part of that public domain, and as amply demonstrated by other contributors to this issue, the Scottish press had long conferred specificity on the national agenda, sustaining a complex, bounded range of imaginaries of the Scottish nation within the United Kingdom union-state, while also acting as a relay for routinely narrating Britishness in Scotland. Scottish broadcasting, mostly headquartered and fully regulated in London, and also from the start overwhelmingly constituted as a London-anchored network within the union-state, has also been hugely important in demarcating the particulars of the Scottish nation (mostly to itself) within the wider political order. However, one key difference from the private status of the press lies in broadcasting’s continuing public service legitimisation. This distinctiveness has kept open a public debate about its purposes north of the border and its role since devolution which has been especially politically contentious and has forced the pace – if not the extent – of institutional change. Outwith political circles, the Scottish Government having its say over the appointment of the Scottish board members of the BBC and the media and communications regulator Ofcom has not set the heather alight. The imminent prospect of a new BBC Scottish television channel to be launched in 2018, and the inception of STV’s local TV network, STV2, in April 2017, do speak to broadcasters’ changing perceptions of audience needs, although how

viable these platforms will be in the medium term, not least in the context of a ramifying online offer, remains to be seen.

Almost two decades on, although the digital revolution has changed the post-devolution communications landscape profoundly in many respects, all the major Scottish national newspaper titles have survived (despite plummeting print sales). Their future, though, is in doubt. As Iain Macwhirter (2014: 9) has succinctly put it: ‘Scotland has a national political system, but is in danger of losing a national media.’ So far, the key broadcasting players, BBC Scotland and STV, remain fixtures. The Gaelic broadcaster, MG Alba, has found an audience beyond the Gaels, but sustaining this will be a challenge. As elsewhere, both press and audiovisual media have sought to establish new business models in the face of transformed distribution systems and consumption habits (Doyle, 2016; Schlesinger and Benchimol, 2015). To some extent, during the 2014 indyref campaign, and since, a number of small-scale, new entrant digital media have begun to challenge conventional assumptions about the scope and composition of Scotland’s mediated public sphere: *Bella Caledonia*, *Wings Over Scotland*, *CommonSpace*, and the *Ferret* all have their followers—but this is not yet (if it ever will be) a transformation offsetting the influence of incumbent traditional media. Social media politics has also made its presence felt, most notably in the trolling of political figures and in establishing new solidarities. More broadly, we are living through a transitional moment in which, as elsewhere, the Scottish landscape is being shaped by global forces in the field of media and communications. Furthermore, in a so-called ‘post-truth’ politico-mediatic environment, along with the far-reaching socio-technical changes under way, how we think about the public sphere is already in flux (Ball, 2017; Nichols 2017); on the evidence, for instance, if we take patterns of media consumption and the use of communication devices as

our yardsticks, it appears that successive generations are growing up with increasingly divergent assumptions about their mediated lives (Ofcom 2017).

Setting up post-devolution political communications

Scottish devolution redefined the connections between ‘civil society’ (a term now hardly ever used in Scottish political discourse) and the formal institutions of political society in the country. Prior to devolution, the political distinctiveness within the United Kingdom of the existing ‘Scottish political system’ was well described in James Kellas’ (1989) eponymous book.

The key change in 1999 was the addition of a representative democratic arena to the Scottish Office, the country’s bureaucratic administration, coupled with the redesign of that bureaucracy’s Scottish and UK-wide components. The passage of the Scotland Act 1998, then, gave us the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive. Later (after some tough resistance in London) this was retitled the Scottish Government by the SNP, when it first took power at Holyrood. The Scotland Office was the much-reduced successor to the Scottish Office. Despite the sometime threat of abolition, it still hangs on, along with the Secretary of State for Scotland, London’s minder in the UK Cabinet.

It should be recalled – despite the distance travelled from devolution to the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, and subsequently to the present chronic institutional crisis engendered by the UK’s proposed exit from the European Union – that the creation of new political bodies in Scotland was, for some at least, a rather heady moment. Then, particularly in campaigning circles, expectations of a transformed polity were high. The chairman of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, the Episcopalian cleric Kenyon Wright, captured this

sense of a hoped-for new dawn in his book *The People Say Yes* (1997). The subsequent effervescence of the indyref campaign has largely eclipsed that memory.

It was the crystallising moment of devolution that impelled me to analyze the changes in political communication in Scotland. Undertaking academic research in the immediate wake of devolution in 1999-2000, then, was one expert academic response prompted by constitutional change. I shall come to the others.

After trailing around a succession of pre-devolution conferences and events in Glasgow and Edinburgh for several months, I concluded that while the metaphor of the ‘village’ can be overdone, it applied in no small measure to the familiar parade of faces encountered, some of whom I came to know quite well. Given my longstanding research interests, I wanted to see how the media were gearing up for the new political arrangements. At the time, I also began tracking the first organisational stirrings among public relations companies and other lobbyists as they sensed the opportunities offered by a new political marketplace. Coupled with a third theme – how the new Scottish administration would manage the media – in 1999 these interests became a project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), that I led at the University of Stirling.¹

The central question was how Scotland would reshape its political communications in the wider context of the UK. This followed on from an earlier ESRC study that I had led which (presciently, perhaps) had considered the multi-level workings of political communications in the EU, UK and Scotland. By the time the devolution settlement was enacted, there was already a burgeoning, if still quite small, body of work on media in ‘stateless nations’ that constituted a distinctive space inside larger state formations, with research on Catalonia and Québec to the

fore as comparators with Scotland (Centre d'Investigació de la Comunicació, 1992). For a decade, I had engaged with with academic colleagues in Spain and Canada in comparative discussion regarding our three national settings. Of course, a specific focus on political communication was part of a much wider, well-developed, discussion about the complexities of states, nations, and collective identities under way in political science, sociology and media and cultural studies (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Brubaker, 1996; Gellner, 1983; Schlesinger, 1991).

In Scotland, it seemed essential to try and capture a key, evanescent aspect of the devolutionary moment. One task for the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) set up to give an institutional framework to devolution involved writing a new set of the rules of the game for how political reporting and lobbying would be conducted. It was an open question as to how the new Executive would project and promote itself. A moot point was just how inventive these new practices could be – to what extent they could escape the Whitehall and Westminster templates. Moreover, once these new ways of doing things had been established, it seemed clear that how they were created would rapidly disappear from sight and memory. Indeed, so it has proved.

Thus, for instance, rule-making undertaken by the CSG's Expert Panel on Media Issues was of interest, because it was governed by an aspiration to openness and to differentiating the new Scottish Parliament from the Westminster model. There was much concern, for instance, about how the Parliament would be televised, who would be accredited as a bona fide journalist, whether an on- or off-the-record rule would be followed for interviews on the premises, and especially, how the new Executive would handle its media relations. The last point was simply ruled off the agenda. Related adaptations made by the civil service and ministers to manage a new, intense level of media scrutiny also required reinvention. Shortly after the rules were

established, the Scottish Parliament and the wider political system, as my colleagues and I documented in *Open Scotland?* (Schlesinger et al, 2001a), were rapidly faced with scandals that raised questions about the need to regulate lobbying. We concluded that the reinvention of Scotland as a new and open polity in the media and communications fields had not happened.

As it continues to resonate through the years, it is worth recalling that the position of the BBC at that time was particularly delicate as, in the phrase the BBC's historian Asa Briggs (1961: 335) plucked from the archive, it had always been 'an organisation within the constitution', and therefore a pivotal institution of Britishness. It was no accident that Tony Blair's Labour government decided that broadcasting should remain a 'reserved' power under the Scotland Act 1998. The continuing desire to maintain tight central control over broadcasting led to a notorious row over whether or not BBC Scotland might be allowed to produce a 'Scottish Six' – an integrated international, UK and Scottish news programme broadcast at 6pm, replacing the separate but sequentially scheduled UK network news from London and Scottish news broadcast from Glasgow. Powerful detractors in the UK Cabinet and BBC Director-General John Birt (2002) saw this proposal as a proto-nationalist threat to the unity of the state – an irony to be appreciated in retrospect, as the Nationalists' eventual political advance turned out not at all to require a distinct hour of news. The 'Six' row subsequently assumed a symbolic status that coloured pro-independence views of the BBC's status and performance, not least during the referendum campaign in 2013-14. One outcome of the ensuing political pressure, the proposed new BBC Scotland TV channel, will launch when scheduled nightly news is plainly of diminishing importance to anyone under 24 and many older than that (Ofcom 2017). The question of the BBC and how it represents the diversity of the union, will not disappear but rather will shift ground.

An audit for the Scottish Parliament

In 2001, as an outcome of the research that became *Open Scotland?*, I was asked by George Reid, then Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, to lead a ‘communications audit’ of the Scottish Parliament (Schlesinger et al, 2001b). Had I not been an observer on the Media Issues panel, the invitation to audit the Parliament’s communications would not have come my way. One form of expertise morphs into another. The research was a consultancy (the second of my categories) – but it was also more than that. Undertaken in a spirit of engagement with a new institution, it was premised on seeing the Scottish Parliament as a body whose presence in the nation needed to be fostered.

There has never been any public discussion of the communications audit; hardly anyone – its authors aside – seems to know about it or recall it; nor does the twenty-two page report appear to have been accessibly archived.² Because – rather like the writing of the new rules for media coverage – the audit has disappeared from history, this part of my essay is intended for the record.

The project team took the CSG’s four principles for the Scottish Parliament as its framework. They were: sharing power with the people and the Executive; accountability of the Executive to Parliament and of Parliament to the people; access and participation; and equal opportunities. Could anyone now readily quote these ideals?

We observed that:

All of these principles have a communicative dimension. Power sharing is impossible without knowledge of the political process,

which depends in turn on a flow of information. Parliament cannot be accountable to the Scottish people if its activities are not widely known and understood. Nor can Parliament be accessible and engender participation if its workings remain obscure. And finally, for all to approach it on the same footing also requires an informed political community.

In undertaking this audit the project team understands itself to be providing the initial foundations for a concerted communications strategy, which is presently lacking.
(Schlesinger et al. 2001b: 2)

The communications audit was urgently needed for a number of reasons, George Reid and Paul Grice, the Parliament's Chief Executive, told us. The Scottish Parliament (then still located on The Mound) had major problems in promoting its identity and faced a hostile press; it was overshadowed by the Scottish Executive (confusingly, the name for both government and civil service); there were growing problems of morale among the staff due to media and public hostility; the existing media relations strategy and capacity simply could not cope with the task; and any potential good news stories about the Parliament's work were hugely obscured by the continuing row over the still ballooning expense of the Holyrood building project – the permanent site for the Parliament at the bottom of the Royal Mile.

Our project was commissioned formally by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB). It involved interviews with 18 parliamentary staff in the most relevant areas, 19 MSPs,

4 key civil society groups, and in line with what was requested (quaint as it may seem today) 19 local and regional newspapers and journals.

The SPCB endorsed our report at a specially convened meeting just before its formal submission in August 2001. In the urgency of the moment, our ‘unconfirmed’ draft became the final one, as there was never a request for a further version. In all, there were nine sets of recommendations. Aside from the communication strategy, these covered: increased public participation; opening the Parliament to public outreach around Scotland; rethinking the role of the Office of Broadcasting and Sound Recording; a major upgrade and redesign of the Parliament’s website; holding committee meetings around Scotland; a review of parliamentary publications; closer links to be forged with civic Scotland; and a much more carefully targeted approach to the Scottish national media and their staff. Our key proposals *did* have an impact on the Parliament’s communications practice. Above all, we thought it crucial to appoint a Director of Communications reporting directly to the Chief Executive, in order to pull together then scattered external communications functions and ‘devise a coherent strategy ... aimed at increasing public awareness of Parliament and transforming its image’ (Schlesinger et al. 2001b: 2). In the short term, we said, a key priority was to take the initiative in communicating about the Holyrood building project. Of course, first and foremost, how to handle this long-running problem of runaway costs was a matter for the Scottish Executive. Over time, it is clear, the structural changes we recommended for communications were fully implemented, as the parliamentary administration’s current organogramme shows (Scottish Parliament, 2017).

A conclusion, of sorts

For academics, whether or not to engage in public matters is still largely a matter of choice, although the impact agenda pursued by the UK’s Funding Councils and Research Councils is

profoundly changing the rules of the game. For this writer, one key follow-on to the discussion – using academic expertise for external engagement (my third category) – has been my longstanding role in advising the UK’s communications regulator, Ofcom, whose reach extended in 2017 into regulating all of public service broadcasting, when the the BBC came under its aegis. Ofcom’s regulation is a highly ramified practice that operates both within and between the two distinct but deeply interconnected communicative spaces of the UK and Scotland. At this time of writing, I am completing close to fourteen continuous years of working with the regulator, latterly with service on Ofcom’s Content Board, which oversees broadcasting standards and considers strategic issues concerning the changing media ecology. To have a ringside seat has taught me a great deal about how things work in such a body and the scope and limits of what might be achieved by one’s own actions and collective advice through committees.

When Ofcom began operating in 2004, it set up statutory committees for each of the UK’s nations. I joined the Advisory Committee for Scotland (ACS) on its inception and then chaired it for over five years, from 2009-14. As chair, I sat on Ofcom’s Nations Committee, which was formed, in part at least, in response to collective lobbying by the chairs of the national advisory committees, to address the national diversity of the UK. On joining the Content Board, I became an ex officio member of the ACS.

From these vantage-points, one could observe over time how Ofcom had to adjust to the realities of devolution, and beyond that, to the sharpening of policy questions engendered before, during, and following, the campaign for Scottish independence. Changed governance arrangements inside the regulator (first, creating the Nations Committee, and subsequently, appointing a Board Member for Scotland) have been the most visible moves, along with the

relocation of the Ofcom Scottish office from Glasgow to Edinburgh and a substantial expansion of posts located in Scotland.

Inside the ACS, two big interconnected issues have required regular attention from a Scottish point of view. First, the unresolved question of how to achieve high-quality universal connectivity, as a condition of participation in social, political, cultural and economic life. Second, the reshaping both by the digital revolution and related policy intervention of the politics, culture and economy of the media landscape in Scotland. This has been a theatre in which academic expertise has had its uses, not least in trying to address the tensions engendered by systemic UK centralism, questioning the inherent dominance of market-oriented solutions over those of a public or associational kind, grasping and debating the wider forces that are reshaping public service media, and in the end, addressing the now routine, sometimes uneasy collision of two political systems, those of the UK and Scotland, in which control over communicative space in all its respects has become a prize of ever-increasing value.

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Notes

¹ The project, called 'The Scottish Parliament and Political Communication' was financed by ESRC Research Grant L327253003. David Miller and William Dinan were the other members of the research team.

² When John McCormick, as Chair of the Commission on Parliamentary Reform (2017), asked for a copy of the communications audit, he was told it was not available in the Scottish Parliament's archive.