

Local Television and the Scottish Digital Network



Philip Schlesinger, Professor in Cultural Policy at the [University of Glasgow](#) and Visiting Professor in Media and Communication at the LSE writes about the intersection between Scottish broadcasting ambitions and plans for Local TV.

It is easy to overlook how visions of the future broadcasting landscape differ in London and Edinburgh. If most news reports have concentrated on UK Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt's Local TV proposals, they have also failed to recognize how these might potentially cut across other conceptions of television's future.

Ever since the Scottish National Party (SNP) came to power as a minority government in May 2007, the future of broadcasting has been on the agenda north of the border in ways little recognized outside Scotland except perhaps in expert political and media quarters.

In August 2007, Alex Salmond, Scotland's First Minister, set up the [Scottish Broadcasting Commission](#) (SBC) to investigate Scotland's democratic, cultural and economic needs in the broadcasting field. The SBC reported in 2008 and its key headline recommendation was that a Scottish Digital Network (SDN) should be set up. It estimated that this would cost some £75m. The SBC thought that funding could come from the Television License Fee. After the settlement agreed with the BBC in 2010, the UK Government has said that [calls on the Licence Fee are now settled](#) until the BBC's current Charter ends in 2016/17. Another mooted source of finance for the SDN has been the upcoming sale of spectrum, whose revenues are also controlled by the UK Government.

The idea of launching an SDN has become firmly lodged in political discussion at Holyrood, the Scottish Parliament, where it has received cross-party endorsement. Following a subsequent review of progress towards the Scottish Government's [objectives by the Scottish Digital Network Panel](#), the goal of launching a new public service broadcaster in Scotland, along with a significant web presence, has – if anything – become more firmly entrenched in current Scottish Government plans.

In the Scottish elections of May 2010, the SNP was returned with an outright majority. Bringing change to the broadcasting landscape in Scotland is a keystone of the Scottish Government's programme.

As both Westminster and Holyrood progress the new Scotland Bill, the Scottish Government has set out its [agenda for increased powers](#) in June 2011:

- To have a right to establish public service broadcasting institutions;
- To be involved in future licence fee setting arrangements;
- To have responsibility for approving licensing decisions made by the UK Government for local televisions which will be broadcast in Scotland;
- To have the ability to intervene in local cross-media mergers that affect Scotland; and
- To have the power to add or remove events from the list of those that must be shown live on free-to-air television.

The Scotland Act 1998 – which set up the framework for devolution – underlined the fact that broadcasting was a 'reserved' rather than a 'devolved' power. In practice, the waters have always been slightly muddled, given – for instance – that the funding and regulation of [Gaelic](#)

broadcasting (now in the shape of BBC Alba) has required collaboration between Edinburgh and London. It remains to be seen to what extent the new Scotland Bill will address the Scottish Government's agenda.

This wider context should be borne in mind when considering Jeremy Hunt's Local TV plans. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport came to address Scottish interests on 9 September. In a well-attended meeting at Glasgow's City Halls, he set out his rationale for his project, central to which was his view that local news would strengthen communities and engage electorates and that there was an opportunity for local businesses to sell their wares through more targeted advertising.

Introducing the session, the chairman, Charles McGhee, former editor of *The Herald* newspaper and a former member of the Scottish Digital Network Panel, raised questions about the general health of the media sector in Scotland, alluding to the present crisis of declining press sales and the heightened competition for advertising revenues in a crowded market place. He also noted the Scottish Government's present commitment to launching an SDN.

Jeremy Hunt, asked from the floor about his views on Scotland's distinctive competitive environment and how the UK Government's plan might articulate with those of the Scottish Government, saw no incompatibility between the two. He said that he was delighted that the SDN was also under discussion.

DCMS' [Local TV map](#) has identified nine Scottish 'primary locations': Aberdeen, Ayr, Dundee, Edinburgh, Elgin, Glasgow, Greenock, Falkirk and Inverness. One of the key issues facing the launch of Local TV in Scotland as elsewhere in the UK is its financial viability and it will be interesting to see what mix of solutions emerges and how sustainable these are. [Ofcom's careful analysis](#) of the technical delivery options for Scotland in 2010 gave most attention to the viability of services in Glasgow and Edinburgh. While one cannot therefore conclude that commercial sustainability would result only in Scotland's largest cities, this analysis offers a starting point for debate.

The Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop, has [responded to the UK Government's consultation on Local TV](#) noting her 'real concerns about Jeremy Hunt's proposals which would leave gaping holes in provision, particularly in rural areas'. She went on to say: 'We firmly believe that a publicly-funded Scottish Digital Network is the best way to sustain and support local television services in Scotland. Our vision for a national network would serve viewers the length and breadth of the country – not just the largest centres of population which are commercially attractive – as well as meeting the need for choice in public service broadcasting in Scotland.'

Undoubtedly, there will be much discussion in Scotland about these divergent visions in the coming days.

For background, see the following pieces by Philip Schlesinger:

'Broadcasting policy and the Scottish Question, pp.155-161', in Tim Gardham and David Levy (eds) *The Price of Plurality: choice, diversity and broadcasting institutions in the digital age*, Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008.

'Communications Policy', pp.35-51 in Neil Blain and David Hutchison (eds) *The Media in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

'The SNP, cultural policy and the idea of the "creative economy"', pp.135-146 in Gerry Hassan (ed.) *The Modern SNP: from protest to power*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.



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