

Debate & Opinion



FROM Taggart to Lewis Grassie Gibbon, and all things in between, *The Scotsman* debate on what Scotland wants and expects from its media in the 21st century touched upon an array of topics. The event was held in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, where the panel and audience discussed matters that have loomed large in the debating chambers of Holyrood and Westminster in recent times, not least the notion of a separate Scottish television channel, and the ongoing row over Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross.

The evening unearthed also the favourite Scots programmes of those in the upper echelons of the main media organisations, and explored how best the proud tradition of Scotland's print media can evolve to usher in new readers.

The panel consisted of John Archer, independent producer and former chief executive of Scottish Screen, Maggie Cunningham, head of programmes and services at BBC Scotland, Bobby Hain, director of broadcasting at STV, and Margo MacDonald, journalist and MSP. The chairman was Stephen McInty, a *Scotsman* journalist and author.



Blake Stevenson

Media in the spotlight: the

AT ITS BEST, WHAT DO YOU THINK THE MEDIA CAN DO IN SCOTLAND IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

Margo MacDonald (MM): "Inform, educate, look out, look in and report without fear or favour. I'm not sure it does these things though. I'm concerned about the media in Scotland just now because there's such a pressure on print journalism."

John Archer (JA): "I expect the national media to be challenging, as well as entertaining and informing, excite our imaginations a little and show creativity. The role of the national media is to reflect the nation back to itself and help it grow and develop its identity. In Scotland, it becomes a challenge because with its new government, it's a new country. When I read the report from the Broadcasting Commission I got more and more angry - these things should have happened a long time ago. We've just launched a Gaelic channel, but it should have been here 20 years ago. In many ways, we're an undeveloped country far as media goes."

Bobby Hain (BH): "The first thing is survive, but ... one of its great characteristics is the way it brings people together to watch a football game, *The X Factor* or *The Apprentice*. A lot of people don't have much

THE SCOTSMAN DEBATES



Martyn McLaughlin

conversation if they're not talking about what happened on television last night. Media can also sell things, it can sell ideas. We have not taken a single penny in public subsidy because television advertising works. I think there's something magical about that."

Maggie Cunningham (MC): "It should make us laugh, make us cry sometimes, make us think, make us aspirational and be inspiring - and never make us couch potatoes."

HOW VIABLE IS A NEW PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING CHANNEL FOR SCOTLAND, AS PROPOSED BY THE

BROADCASTING COMMISSION? (asked by John Rushton, former head of library services, STV)

MC: "We're very encouraged by BBC Alba, although it's early days. I absolutely agree we should have more content for Scotland. The big question is how do we deliver and fund it?"

BH: "There's no doubt there's an appetite for such a channel and I suppose its viability is assured if the government is going to spend £75 million underpinning it - therefore its viability is not dependent on market conditions and advertising. In that sense, is it viable? Yes. The wider question is how desirable is it in that form, and is that the best way to solve the conundrum of public service broadcasting, and perhaps a shortfall in provision? I'm not sure that it is. We love the idea of the new channel, but it needs to be funded in order to get traction. The reason Alba's done so well is promotion. Without that, a channel's out there on the wind."

JA: "A new channel is a fantastic idea. One of the challenges it faces with the digital switchover is that the audience searches out programmes it wants to see - it doesn't sit down like it used to and watch BBC or ITV. That's a problem. I love the idea, and I'd love to think the money's there to make it happen."

MM: "I want a Scottish channel. I think it would be good for the soul and good for broadcasting. Unfortunately, I think it's tied up with politics and the constitutional question. As Ted Brocklebank sensibly suggests, part public and part-private funding is the only way to get the channel right away. I think though, being realistic, let's hold on to what we've got. That's not negative thinking, it's realistic."

OF COM HAS TALKED ABOUT HOW THE MINIMUM VOLUME OF NON-NEWS PROGRAMMES ON STV COULD BE CUT TO 90 MINUTES A WEEK. CAN THIS BE A GOOD THING FOR THE SCOTTISH PUBLIC?

BH: "We are shoehorning Gaelic programmes and non-news programmes into the same channel as *Coronation Street*. The system is creaking and something has to give. Ofcom has recognised a shortfall in provision, and we think that's a more immediate pressing need to address than a new channel."

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PROGRAMME ON TV AT THE MOMENT?

MM: "West Wing."
Stephen McInty: "That's finished!"
MM: "I watch *Hill Street Blues* as well!"

JA: "ITV have done some very good drama recently, but the thing I'm watching is *Merlin*. The magic in it is perfect."
BH: "I'm delighted big-time Saturday night entertainment has made a comeback. *The X Factor* edges it."
MC: "What I thought was lovely television was a three-part series called *Sunshine with Steve Coogan*. It had great innocence."

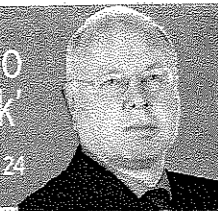
WHAT IS THE PANEL'S VIEW ON THE CONTROVERSY INVOLVING RUSSELL BRAND AND JONATHAN ROSS?

JA: "I'd be ashamed if I produced that programme, and if I employed those two on the money they are paid, I'd probably think they're not worth it. Jonathan Ross has had his time."
MC: "Tim Davie, the BBC director of audio and music, has said it was inappropriate, and I agree with that, but it would be wrong to comment because the BBC has launched an investigation into what happened."

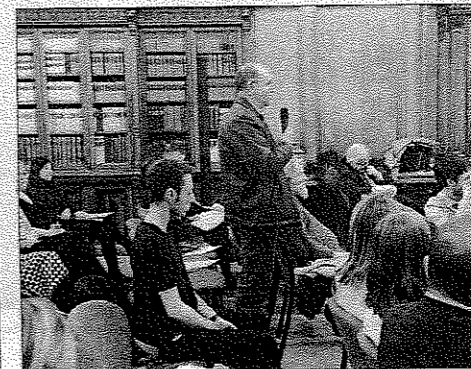
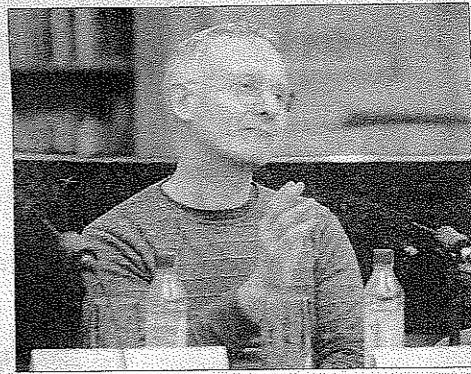
BH: "It's an interesting test of regulation and how the BBC reacts. There's no doubt in my mind that had it been on a commercial radio station, there'd have been pressure for heads to roll and sanctions imposed."
JA: "Andrew Sachs gave us far more

'Pumping more public cash into construction programmes will not work'

George Kerevan, Page 24



Business	P29-37 >>
Life&Arts	P41-46 >>
TV&Radio	P48-49 >>
Sport	P58-72 >>



good, the bad and the ugly

entertainment in 12 episodes of *Fawlty Towers* than the two of them."

DOES THE BBC FAIL TO CORRECTLY IDENTIFY THE UK PARLIAMENT OR THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTS IN ITS NEWS BULLETINS? (William Douglas)

MC: "Our guidelines say it's the UK Parliament or the Scottish Parliament. We do have very clear guidelines."
MM: "I'm like anyone else of this generation, I want to shorten everything down. So as far as I'm concerned, we're the MSPs, and the Westminster people are WIMPs."

JA: "Listening over the past year, I think the BBC is a lot more sensitive about delineating what's happening in Scotland and Wales. On Radio 4, they're very careful to point out where legislation only applies to England and Wales. I think the BBC's learnt it's annoyed many people."

HOW CAN THE MEDIA PROVIDE A MORE REPRESENTATIVE

VIEWPOINT OF FAITH? (Liz Leydon, editor, Scottish Catholic Observer)
BH: "It's an interesting question, and I don't think the media has an immediate or useful response. I know the lengths to which we have gone not only in this area, but also engaging

with ethnic minorities. You do a lot better with some than you do with others. But I'm pleased to see Ofcom trying to address it."
MC: "We still have a religious advisory committee at BBC Scotland and very recently held a seminar to look not just at the so-called God slots, but how we deal with these issues elsewhere and how we move them into other parts of the schedule that are more accessible."
MM: "I've got sympathy with broadcasters who have to make money, but I don't completely agree that when the public say they want serious programmes, they watch them."

WHY ARE THERE SO FEW COSTUME DRAMAS BASED ON SCOTTISH LITERATURE OR HISTORY? (Mary McCabe)

JA: "I've tried to encourage the BBC to produce Scottish books. There's a definite view it would be unviable. Excellent though they are, they keep going back to the same books."
MC: "I don't think there's any reason why we haven't had a Scottish costume drama, or more dramas based on Scottish literature. There are some fantastic Scottish books."
MM: "Scottish accents seem to go in waves in terms of acceptability outside of Scotland. The likes of Lewis Grassie

Gibbon needs the patois of the North-east, and that might be a barrier."
BH: "Less than 3 per cent of all programmes commissioned in the UK come from Scotland, so you're going to get very little from each genre. It's a Middle England favourite, and it's beyond our resources."

WHAT IS THE PANEL'S FAVOURITE SCOTTISH DRAMA?

BH: "Taggart is unashamedly populist, shown in 70 countries at any one time and going for 25 years."
MC: "Sunset Song."
JA: "As a series, *Tutti Frutti*. It was very Scottish; it was original, fun and launched new stars. I don't think BBC Scotland should be confined to Scotland, it should address the world from this country."
MM: "I like *Rebus*!"

DOES PANEL AGREE SCOTTISH PRINT JOURNALISM IS UNDER HUGE PRESSURE AT THE MOMENT? (Rory McLeod, former president, National Union of Journalists)

SM: "We are in a very difficult period, but the glimmer of hope is people still love newspapers. There's still a firm place for the medium, allowing people to read a mixture of analysis and news narrative at their own leisure."

Newspapers have to adapt, which is what *The Scotsman* is doing with these debates and its strong web presence, for example."
MM: "I'm scared stiff, especially with the current global difficulties. Advertising was already under pressure, and we don't have the economy of scale English editions have. There's no loyalty to any paper now."

JA: "I love newspapers, but something has to give. The US example of the *Huffington Post* is probably what will happen to newspapers. When the online readership is larger than the printed medium, there'll be a shift."
BH: "Everybody loves newspapers, but fewer people buy them. The problems are structural issues. If you went back 20 years, and you wanted to buy a car or a house, or find a job, you'd need to buy a paper. Now you look on the web. The commercial world is changing. I agree the world for newspapers will be online, but the big issue is business potential. Somebody needs to make it work by keeping the content going, with editorial quality but make it pay."
SM: "I think newspapers were a little bit late in exploiting online and they're playing catch-up, which is a shame. We need plurality across all media in Scotland. That makes us a strong democracy and allows debate."

WHAT NEXT?

THE Scotsman Debates have been organised with social and economic research consultancy Blake Stevenson to promote discussion of the big issues facing Scotland in 2008. The final debate - Progress Beyond Politics - will be held at The Albert Hall, Stirling, on Wednesday 12 November, 7-8:30pm. The event is free and open to the public and will be chaired by Glenys Watt, director of Blake Stevenson.

The debate asks "What Social Change do we need?" and the panel includes: Mel Young, founder of the Big Issue Scotland and Homeless World Cup; Susan Deacon, ex-MSP and minister and now professor of social change at Queen Margaret University; Alastair McIntosh, social activist and author of *Soil and Soul* and forthcoming *Hill and High Water*. For tickets, email scotsmandebates@scotsmann.com

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