

Gaelic in the Media

Mike Cormack

In January 1993 the first television programmes funded by the Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig (CTG) were broadcast in Scotland. In the ten years since, much has changed – in Scotland, in the Gaelic world, and in the continuing transformation of the media by digital technology and globalisation, with these different aspects meeting in the current controversy over the government's reluctance to fully fund a Gaelic digital television channel. It is a suitable moment to step back and consider what presence Gaelic has in the Scottish media, what has been achieved over the last ten years, and what difference this is likely to make to the survival of the language itself.

The political context has changed significantly since 1989 when Mrs Thatcher's government rather surprisingly agreed to fund an expansion of Gaelic television (for more on the creation of the CTG and its early years, see Cormack 1993 and 1994). Labour's election victory of May 1997, followed by the devolution referendum and the opening of the Scottish Parliament in May 1999, has transformed the Scottish political scene, even if, in the views of many, the early hopes of a new politics have not been fulfilled. These changes have had their impact on Gaelic issues. The Labour government finally signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on 2 March 2000 (the Charter had been available for signing since November 1992). On the following day the Scottish Parliament conducted its first debate in Gaelic. In September 2000 it had appointed a Gaelic Officer (Gaelic journalist Alex O'Henley), although he resigned in May 2002 giving as his reason anti-Gaelic prejudice in the Scottish civil service. Most significantly,

When this article was written Dr Mike Cormack was a member of the Stirling Media Research Institute and a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies, Stirling University. He is now Course Director for the BA in Gaelic and Media Studies at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Isle of Skye.

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the Scottish Executive appointed a Minister for Gaelic, although this later became simply one part of a broader portfolio of responsibilities.

Alongside these political changes there have been important changes affecting Gaelic education. During the 1990s the idea of a University of the Highlands and Islands steadily made progress. From Sir Graham Hills's report in 1992 which established the feasibility of the idea of a multi-campus, electronically networked institution, through the awarding of a £33.4 million Millennium Commission grant in 1996, to the achieving of higher education status in 1999, UHI (or, as its current official designation has it, UHI Millennium Institute) has, amongst other things, established an academic framework for higher education through the medium of Gaelic, with degree level studies being delivered at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye and Lews Castle College in Stornoway. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig had been developing its own Postgraduate Diploma in Gaelic Broadcasting (now in Broadcasting and Multimedia) during the 1990s, with its first graduates in 1995. During this period, however, Gaelic medium education at school level has been experiencing continuing difficulties due to a shortage of teachers, blamed by some on the more attractive prospects of Gaelic careers in broadcasting.

The media, of course, have also experienced great change during the last ten years. In 1993 the internet was still relatively little known. Ten years later it has become difficult to imagine the world without it and the future of broadcasting itself is clearly bound up with it. Meanwhile, digital broadcasting technologies are in the process of revolutionising radio and television. The 1996 Broadcasting Act began the process by setting up the legal structure for digital broadcasting. By Spring 2002 the collapse of ITVdigital had shown the weakness of the government's plans, particularly its desire to switch off the traditional analogue signal by 2010 (a move likely to affect viewers in the Gaidhealtachd disproportionately since the take-up of digital television in the Highlands and Islands has been lower than that for the UK as a whole). At the end of October 2002, the BBC (with participation from Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB) relaunched terrestrial digital television, with an offer of 25 free digital channels (along with 12 radio stations), but it remains to be seen whether this can rescue terrestrial digital television and the government's timetable for change. Then, in July 2003, the Communications Act received the Royal Assent, thus initiating another period of intensive change in the British media, not least due to the loosening of ownership regulations. This Act also created the Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig (Gaelic Media Services), a new body taking over from the Comataidh

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Craolaidh Gàidhlig (which itself had replaced Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig – see below), with an expanded remit. In October Neil Fraser was announced as its first Chairman.

This period also saw the continued decline in the number of Gaelic speakers, with the 2001 census finding only 58,652 able to speak the language, just 1.2% of the population of Scotland. The urgency which underpinned the campaign for the expansion of Gaelic television in the late 1980s became, if anything, even more intense in the late 1990s in the campaign for a Gaelic digital channel. This situation has given rise to somewhat heated debates concerning how the language would be best supported. **The Report of the Task Force on the Public Funding of Gaelic** (better known as the Macpherson Report) of December 2000, with its recommendations for a more unified and coherent approach to Gaelic support, is one aspect of this. The campaign for ‘secure status’ with its aim of a Gaelic Language Act (most cogently argued for in Comunn na Gàidhlig’s 1997 document **Inbhe Thearainte dhan Ghàidhlig**) is another. Following from these was the May 2002 report (**A Fresh Start in Gaelic**) from the Ministerial Advisory Group on Gaelic, led by Professor Donald Meek, which also recommended a Gaelic Language Act, as well as the immediate creation of a Gaelic Development Agency. Initially the Scottish Executive refused a Gaelic Language Act but went ahead with the development agency, now called Bòrd Gàidhlig na h-Alba, and by October 2002 had appointed its chairman (Duncan Ferguson, Rector of Plockton High School and a member of the Comataidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig). Then, in October 2003, the Executive published a draft Gaelic Language Bill, with the final Bill to be published in the Summer of 2004. In its first version at least, the draft Bill was remarkable for its lack of substance, containing little more than the confirmation of the role of the Bòrd and the requirement that public bodies draw up plans for Gaelic. In this context of hesitant progress, the assessment of Gaelic in the media becomes more than just an academic exercise, and it puts broadcasting, in particular, at centre stage.

Gaelic Television

The new Gaelic television programmes funded by the Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig in the early nineties began strongly with a clear pattern. The main strands were the daily news service (‘Telefios’), a weekly half-hour drama series broadcast in prime time (‘Machair’), a weekly BBC current affairs

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series ('Eòrpa') and a learners' series ('Speaking Our Language'). This gave a relatively strong structure to Gaelic television (strong, at least, in comparison with what had been seen previously), even though the programmes were scattered across different channels at different times. In the following years, however, this gradually unravelled, not helped by the fact that in 1996 the CTG was changed to the Comataidh Craolaidh Gàidhlig (CCG) and had its remit expanded to include radio but without being given increased finance. There were several reasons for the failure to keep, and indeed to develop, a coherent scheduling structure.

Firstly, the CTG/CCG was never given the funding which it would have needed to match the expectations made of it, and indeed the funding reduced in real terms over the years. Unlike S4C in Wales, Gaelic television funding has not been linked to any other measure, such as ITV advertising revenue, but has simply been a government decision. This has left it extremely vulnerable. On two occasions in particular, it was reduced when the CTG/CCG was expecting it would at least keep pace with inflation. The first was announced as early as December 1993, when, as part of a round of spending cuts, the Scottish Secretary Ian Lang announced that the fund for the year beginning March 1994 would be reduced by almost £800,000 to £8,730,000 (an 8.4% reduction). If the CCG had expected to do better under a Labour government, particularly a government which included Gaelic-sympathiser Brian Wilson, this was also shown to be wrong when in December 1997 Wilson himself announced that the Gaelic Broadcasting Fund for 1998-99 would be reduced by £500,000 with that money going to support other non-broadcasting Gaelic initiatives, such as the organisations Comunn na Gàidhlig, An Comunn Gaidhealach and Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich (and of course this was also at a time when the original remit of the CTG had been extended to include radio). Wilson attempted to deflect criticism by noting that 'this Government has a commitment to Gaelic and, in particular, to Gaelic-medium education', thus trying to spin the news from being about a cut in the Gaelic Broadcasting Fund to being about an increase in Gaelic education support. However Matthew MacIver, chairman of the CCG, described the changes as 'a retrograde step for Gaelic broadcasting, the Gaelic language and Gaelic culture' (both as reported in the **West Highland Free Press**, 26 December 1997). This funding situation has not only resulted in a decreasing average cost for Gaelic programmes and the inability of the CCG to keep to its original target of 200 extra hours of Gaelic television each year (the CCG's Annual Report for 2002-03 noted that because of the funding

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cut, they had only been able to support 146 hours of funded programmes in that year), but it has also made long-term planning impossible.

A second problem has related to scheduling and in particular the actions of Scottish Television. Scottish Television began making Gaelic programmes in the years immediately before the CTG came into being, even broadcasting some in primetime during 1991. Before that Gaelic television was associated mainly with BBC Scotland, and to a lesser degree with Grampian Television. This, of course, was at the time of the ITV franchise auctions and there seems little doubt that Scottish Television saw Gaelic as a way of bolstering their regional credentials and thus fighting off the threat of rival bids for the Central Scotland franchise. In the first years of the CTG, Scottish Television was receiving significant amounts of CTG funds, particularly for 'Speaking Our Language' and 'Machair'. However under pressure from advertisers and some anti-Gaelic audience reaction, the programmes began to slip from primetime slots. The CTG, when it entered into agreements with programme-makers and broadcasters, did try to establish schedule slots as part of the agreement but this proved to be impracticable since events beyond the control of the broadcasters might result in schedule changes, and so only broad time-bands were agreed. 'Machair' (which, with English subtitles, had reached audiences of well over 300,000) was scheduled against 'EastEnders' (at this slot its audience reduced to 180,000) and then moved to Sunday evenings where its ratings improved again. However this Sunday slot was only achieved after Scottish had suggested 11.30pm on Tuesdays and the ITC (the franchise watchdog) had insisted that an earlier time was allotted (information from a personal communication from John Angus MacKay).

By 2002 Scottish Television's weekday Gaelic programmes were regularly being scheduled after 11.30pm. The CCG's Annual Report in 1999 noted that its research had shown that amongst viewers 'there is considerable discontent over the showing of programmes in post-midnight slots and the removal of programmes from customary schedules' (CCG 1999, p.19). The overall situation had been made worse in 1997 when Scottish Media Group (SMG), the owners of Scottish Television, took over Grampian Television, so that they had control over scheduling policies in the North of Scotland area as well. More generally there was a perceived lack of support for Gaelic television coming from SMG. In June 1998 the manager of Grampian's studio in Stornoway resigned, with undue interference by SMG being cited as the cause (**West Highland Free Press**, 10 July 1998). The view of many in the Gaelic community is of commercial television in Scotland failing to

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support Gaelic. SMG's approach has not been ignored by the CCG. In August 1998 the CCG announced that the contract for 'Machair' would not be renewed, and the last episode was broadcast in April of the following year. Then in October 2000, following criticisms of the quality of the news service and, once again, unfavourable scheduling changes, the CCG announced that Grampian's contract for the television news would not be renewed and the service was ended in December 2000.

A related problem to scheduling has been the lack of coherence in Gaelic programming as a whole. Despite the CTG/CCG's attempt to oversee the service (starting with its list of desired programme-types which it drew up as one of its first acts), the realities of scheduling across the BBC and two commercial regional broadcasters (with even Channel Four very occasionally broadcasting Gaelic programmes), with programmes made by a number of independent production companies, as well as Scottish, Grampian and the BBC, has meant that the impression has been of fragmentation. And given that both SMG and BBC Scotland make Gaelic programmes not funded by the CCG, the inherent weakness in the CCG's position in relation to Gaelic broadcasting as a whole will be clear. After the first few years of CTG-funded programmes, there seemed to be less sense of overall structure. As compared with the strands of news and current affairs, drama and learners programmes of the early years, currently drama is only intermittent, with no long-term series (and the most talked about recent example – the six episodes of BBC Scotland's 'Gruth is Uachdar' in Spring 2002 – was funded by the BBC only, not by the CCG), there is no regular news programme, only a weekly current affairs discussion programme ('Ceann-Là'), which started in October 2001, broadcast at 11.30pm on Scottish and Grampian (and not even being broadcast throughout the year), and nothing aimed specifically at learners. Of the early programmes only BBC Scotland's 'Eòrpa' survives (and still wins awards and high audience appreciation ratings, even if the size of that audience is very small).

One potential problem has been created by devolution. Although matters to do with supporting Gaelic fall under the remit of the Scottish Parliament, broadcasting remains a reserved power for Westminster. Just as the Annual Report and Accounts of the CCG was presented to the ITC, so the Annual Report and Accounts of Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig is presented to the new media regulator Ofcom in London, and it is governed by the Communications Act of 2003. There is a good side to this partial devolution of responsibility, in that the Scottish Executive gave an additional one-off

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grant of £450,000 in 2002. However, as in Wales, such a division of responsibilities makes little sense and is likely to cause problems in the future. The consequences of this were apparent in the evidence (both written and oral) collected by the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee which in 2001 examined the record of the CCG. At one point in the proceedings Mike Russell made the following comments (in response to Finlay MacLeod's questioning of the committee's role).

The purpose of our inquiry is to support and encourage the further development of Gaelic broadcasting and to do so by engaging the Scottish Parliament on the issue. It is not just a broadcasting issue. Broadcasting is a reserved matter and is therefore not something on which we can make decisions. However we must engage with broadcasting as a matter of considerable interest both in Gaelic and within the cultural life of Scotland.

(Scottish Parliament. Education, Culture and Sport Committee. Meeting 18, 2001, col. 2410)

Needless to say, the committee's inability to take decisions on broadcasting, and their limitation to 'engaging' with the issues, did not stop them from producing a long list of recommendations about how the CCG should conduct its affairs and how Gaelic broadcasting should develop in the future. The fact that some of their conclusions were out of line with those of the representatives of the Gaelic community (and more in line with the commercial interests of the broadcasting industry) merely serves to emphasise the confusions to which this situation can give rise.

TELEVISION DRAMA

In an important recent essay looking at new ideas in the field of Celtic Studies, Colin H. Williams has commented on the role of the media, arguing that we need to

pay attention to the growing media industry in Ireland and Wales as both an economic asset and as a means of 'controlling' or balancing the hegemonic interpretation of social life in these lands. In other words, we need to analyse both media and popular representation as a means of contributing to the modernized self-image of citizens.

(Williams 2000, p. 212)

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Part of what this involves is looking at how the Gaelic community has been represented in film and television and this points to the importance of the creation over the last ten years of a body of Gaelic audiovisual drama. Clearly 'Machair' is (at least by quantity) a major part of this. The twelve series (totalling 151 episodes), which were broadcast from January 1993 to April 1999, resulted in more than 75 hours of television (and were successful enough to be sold to the Irish language channel TG4). According to the CCG's Annual Report for 1997-98, 'focus groups and research carried out by the Committee show that Machair is well received, but that the audience would like a wider variety of drama' (CCG 1998, p.12). Given its expense, television drama in Gaelic has otherwise been relatively scarce (certainly if compared with the amount of drama on English-language television). At the beginning of the CTG's life the bilingual film 'As an Eilean / From the Island' (directed by Mike Alexander) was a bold and significant step, despite the very limited theatrical distribution which it received (it was not even reviewed in **Sight and Sound**, the British Film Institute's monthly journal which claims to review all new films as they are released). Since then amongst the notable additions to this body of work have been the various short (25 minute) films which made up the 'Geur Gheàrr' series, jointly funded by the CTG/CCG, BBC Scotland and the Scottish Film Production Fund (later Scottish Screen). Made by various independent production companies between 1996 and 1998, these were broadcast on BBC Scotland and screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival. In 2000 SMG returned to drama with a five-part series 'Falach Fead'. In the same year appeared the film 'An Ceasnachadh' (directed again by Mike Alexander), based on the removal of the Stone of Destiny in 1950, and made by Pelicula Films for BBC Scotland (and, very unusually for Gaelic television drama, released on video). More recently (March-April 2002) the BBC has broadcast 'Gruth is Uachdar', a Gaelic version of **Crowdie and Cream**, Finlay J. MacDonald's well-known autobiographical novel of childhood in Harris.

This collection of work (and the listing above is far from exhaustive) is one of the significant achievements of Gaelic broadcasting. Not all of these programmes were funded by the CTG/CCG but they have all been part of the resurgence of Gaelic arts in which the CCG has played an important role, and they mark the first time that the Gaelic community has had some sort of control over its fictional media representation. Older films claiming to be set on the West Coast and the islands (such as 'I Know Where I'm Going!', 1945; 'Whisky Galore!', 1949; 'The Maggie', 1954; 'Ring of Bright Water', 1969; 'The Wicker Man', 1973) were very limited, not just in the fact that

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there were very few of them, but also in the image of life in the highlands and islands which was shown. Each of these films is, in its own way, of interest, but in terms of showing West Coast and island communities, none of them moves much beyond familiar stereotypes. Duncan Petrie has noted how such films construct Scotland 'as a liminal space within which fantasies can be played out, desires fulfilled, anxieties expressed' (Petrie 2000, p. 42). In other words, a representation of Scotland is constructed as a space for those outside the community to use as a vehicle for their own concerns rather than engaging with, or representing, the community in any meaningful way. Although Petrie refers to Scotland generally, it is actually the Highlands and Islands which plays this role, with Gaelic appearing as the most extreme signifier of difference, the indicator of the furthest distance that the central character has travelled. Petrie goes on to note how a series of films during the 1980s (such as 'Another Time, Another Place', set on the Black Isle, and 'Venus Peter', set in Orkney) 'marked a new phase in the representation of peripheral and rural experience, founded on indigenous, internal cultural expressions rather than externally imposed metropolitan fantasies' (Petrie 2000, p. 165). However these films are not of the Gaelic community and representations of it remained as externally produced until the 1990s expansion of Gaelic television.

It has only been through this source that Gaels have had any real influence over their depiction in media drama. Whatever criticisms may be made of 'Machair' (see in particular Angus Peter Campbell's comment that he would prefer one Gaelic equivalent of the Wim Wenders film 'Paris, Texas' to one thousand episodes of 'Machair', as quoted in Cormack 1995a, p.47), it has clearly been a view of the Gaelic community made largely by members of that community. The appearance on television of daily life on Lewis (however melodramatic it may have been at times, as plotlines used classic soap opera narrative devices) was something completely new in Scotland. As already noted, the other main example of fiction from the earlier years of the CTG was the full-length film 'As an Eilean / From the Island'. Although the director does not come from a Gaelic background, the film was scripted from stories by Gaelic writer Iain Crichton Smith. It dealt with issues of remoteness and isolation, contrasting the expectations of the younger generation (usually linked to leaving the area) with the memories and disillusionment of the older inhabitants. The speaking of Gaelic itself becomes a theme of the film. Even though many of the actors are clearly inexperienced, and the camera regularly lingers on the scenery in a way that must have delighted the Scottish Tourist Board (shots of idyllic west coast

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views are frequently used as punctuation devices between scenes), the film remains one of the significant achievements of the Gaelic fund (although it should be noted that the CTG was only one of several funders, including Channel 4 and Grampian Television – funding of a full-length feature film has always been outwith the capabilities of the CTG/CCG alone).

These programmes add up to an interesting contrast to recent English-language drama series which have been set in the Highlands and Islands, such as ‘Hamish Macbeth’, ‘Monarch of the Glen’ and ‘Two Thousand Acres of Sky’, all broadcast by the BBC and all essentially variations (although of very different kinds) of the outsider’s view of the Highlands and Islands as a place where lowlanders can indulge in their fantasies of rural life, and find their ‘true selves’ against a background of beautiful scenery and eccentric (and frequently rather simple-minded) locals. Even the ‘reality’ series ‘Castaway’ (broadcast by the BBC in 2000), in which Taransay, off the west coast of Harris, functioned effectively as a kind of desert island for the participants, was very close to this category. They also make a contrast to more serious Scottish-set films, most of which are still dominated by images of the urban landscape of central Scotland (‘Trainspotting’, 1995; ‘My Name is Joe’, 1998; ‘Orphans’, 1999; ‘Ratcatcher’, 1999; ‘Sweet Sixteen’, 2002). Gaelic television drama has the potential to provide a genuinely new outlook on Scotland. This is not to say that it has all been of a uniformly high quality or that it has all been accepted by the Gaelic audience as an accurate view of their community. Even ‘Gruth is Uachdar’, while getting good reviews from many people, was criticised by Angus Peter Campbell in *An Gàidheal Ur* for its sentimental and overly picturesque view of island life (*An Gàidheal Ur*, An Gearran 2002). But this merely underlines the importance of drama. It is not surprising that in her research in the mid 1990s into the preferences of young Gaelic speakers (of both primary and secondary age, and located both within the Gaidhealtachd and in Gaelic medium units elsewhere), Catherine Ann MacNeil found that ‘virtually all groups indicated that more Gaelic drama would be appreciated’ (C.A. MacNeil 1995, p. 15). This is not just an appeal for popular television formats, but also for the self-recognition and community identity which drama can prompt.

RADIO

During this period Gaelic radio was less controversial than Gaelic television (for a brief outline of the earlier history of Gaelic radio, see Cormack 1993,

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pp. 107-108). The BBC's Gaelic radio service, Radio nan Gaidheal, was expanded in March 1996. However it is not yet a full, 24 hour service. Currently (following a three-hour-a-day expansion into the afternoon in June 2002) it broadcasts for over eleven hours out of every twenty-four during weekdays, with much less on weekends (usually four hours on Saturday and just 90 minutes on Sunday). Its target audience is 80,000 but it still cannot reach all the Gaelic-speakers of Scotland, despite its declared aim as being to provide 'a national service for Gaelic speakers' (BBC 1996, p. 36). Not surprisingly for a radio station, most of the output is music, news and chat (often based on phone-ins) but there have been regular moves beyond this, including, for example, the radio drama series 'Airdanaiseig' (whose 15 minute episodes were broadcast from October 1994 to May 1995 and from October 1995 to April 1996). I have argued elsewhere that if the representations of the Gaelic community shown in the different media are compared, it is radio which gives the best impression of life in the Gaidhealtachd (Cormack 1995b, p. 278). As Joni Buchanan has commented, 'It is radio, far more than television, which consistently succeeds in reflecting the richness and diversity of our small Gaelic world and the great variety of individuals who inhabit it' (**West Highland Free Press**, 12 December 1997).

As noted above, following the transition from the CTG to the CCG, radio became part of that organisation's remit, but it had very specific aims in supporting radio:

The Committee's strategic thrust is to fund programmes that cannot be adequately financed from Radio nan Gaidheal's own limited resources, and particularly ones that involve topics, personalities and communities that are distant from broadcasting facilities or cannot be satisfactorily reflected and represented in studio-based productions.
(CCG 2000, p. 18)

These have most notably included a series ('Sruth an Eòlais') of fifty half-hour programmes based on archive material in the School of Scottish Studies, and an hour-long radio play ('A' Ruith Caol') written by Angus Peter Campbell. In the year 2001-02, the CCG funded a total of 20 hours of radio (CCG 2002, p. 18). The CCG is also trying to support Gaelic on local stations, although the 2002 Annual Report notes that 'progress with Gaelic programming on Community Radio has not been as rapid as the Committee had envisaged when it began to provide development funding for programming in that sector' (CCG 2002, p. 19). It has now funded a Highland Council appointment to develop Gaelic on community radio

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stations. Gaelic programming is already part of the output of several local stations in the Highlands, such as Loch Broom FM in Ullapool, Nevis Radio in Fort William and even Heartland FM in Pitlochry, but they tend to broadcast only one or two hours of Gaelic each week. Isles FM in Stornoway does better, but is still a predominantly English language station. Most recently Cuillin FM has been awarded the licence for the Skye and Lochalsh area and promises an approach to Gaelic that seems to be close to that of Isles FM. All this merely emphasises that the BBC remains the central provider of Gaelic radio.

DIGITAL BROADCASTING

With the Broadcasting Act of 1996, digital broadcasting appeared as a possible saviour for Gaelic. In January 1998 Brian Wilson announced that the government was setting up an investigation into the possibilities of Gaelic on digital television, appointing Neil Fraser to head it (he had been the Vice Chairman of the CTG in the mid 1990s and Head of Radio at BBC Scotland before that, as well as having an impressive track record as a producer in both radio and television). Fraser's remit was

to assess the opportunities for Gaelic Broadcasting with the advent of digital technology, with particular reference to the possibility of a co-ordinated Gaelic television service on a single dedicated channel; to consider, against this background of new opportunities, the contribution to Gaelic Broadcasting of current service providers and future providers and the structure within which this might be implemented.
(Fraser 1998)

The report was submitted a few months later. Fraser was particularly critical of the lack of coherence in Gaelic television, noting that 'the concept of a Gaelic service remains elusive; the extended provision has become just a larger collection of programmes randomly scheduled across several channels with no overall control of the range and quality of programmes on offer' (Fraser 1998, p. 4). His report recommended there should be a Gaelic digital channel, organised by a Gaelic Broadcasting Authority, and funded on the same basis as S4C in Wales, that is, by a direct grant based on a percentage of overall ITV advertising revenue. In the various discussions since then, Fraser's report has remained the benchmark.

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It was followed by the setting up of the Task Force on Gaelic Broadcasting, headed by former BBC Director-General Alasdair Milne. The Task Force's report was submitted to the government in September 2000. By this time some Gaelic digital television was already being transmitted. Under the terms of the Broadcasting Act 1996, one hour a day has been going out on Channel 18 on SDN's multiplex (jointly owned by S4C, NTL and United News and Media). The service was called 'TeleG' and consisted of material already broadcast terrestrially (including a re-run of the learners' series 'Speaking Our Language'). It has also shown Irish language programmes with Scottish Gaelic subtitles. Few Gaels, however, have been in a position to see it. As noted earlier, take-up of digital television has been slower amongst Gaels than amongst the population in general, with many seemingly waiting to see if a full Gaelic channel will become available before they make the financial commitment (NicNèill 2001, p. 102; see also CCG 2002, p. 21). Like the Fraser report, the Milne Report recommended a Gaelic digital channel, and a Gaelic Broadcasting Authority to oversee it, and also gave a set of aims for Gaelic broadcasting. The reaction of CCG chairman Matthew MacIver was quoted in the **West Highland Free Press**.

They have clearly seen the threat to Gaelic broadcasting inherent in continuing current arrangements and have shown a positive way forward in the new digital environment. It is only through empowering the Gaelic community to fight its own battles in the face of global, national and local economic and cultural forces that public service objectives in relation to Gaelic broadcasting can be met.

(**West Highland Free Press**, 29 September 2000)

Earlier in the year Brian Wilson had said that there could be an all-Gaelic channel within five years, costing around £30m per annum (a year later the annual cost was being cited as £44m) and saying that the funding would have to be on a UK basis like S4C. However by the time the Communications Bill was made public in May 2002, the government had retreated from the idea of providing full funding for a Gaelic digital channel. Later in the year (and following intensive lobbying) it was announced that the CCG would be transformed into a broader organisation with more powers and that its remit would include 'working towards the creation of a specific Gaelic channel' (**West Highland Free Press**, 8 November 2002), although there was no mention of increased funding or when such a channel might be up and running. In the final version in the Communications Act itself, there was no mention of a digital channel being an aim and no mention of funding, merely the transformation of the CCG into *Seirbheis nam Meadhanan Gàidhlig*.

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Radio, meanwhile, had been served slightly better by digital technology, with Radio nan Gaidheal being made available as one of the stations provided by Score Digital (owned by Scottish Radio Holdings, the owners of Radio Clyde and Radio Forth), the digital licensee for both Edinburgh and Glasgow. During 2002 Score Digital began services in Ayr and in the Dundee/Perth area, both including Radio nan Gaidheal as part of their provision. Score's Inverness service began in August 2003. The current cost of digital radio receivers, of course, has rather hidden the presence of digital radio. It is worth noting, however, that a Gaelic digital television channel would probably use Radio nan Gaidheal as a sustaining service, that is, it would be available on the channel during some of the time when television programmes were not being broadcast. This would serve to further integrate the different elements of Gaelic broadcasting and, indeed, to integrate their audiences.

NON-BROADCAST MEDIA

In an account of Gaelic in newspapers in the mid-nineties, I noted how little Gaelic was found, even in local newspapers in the Highlands and Islands such as the **Stornoway Gazette**, the **Oban Times** and the **West Highland Free Press** (WHFP), and that these newspapers, like others such as **The Scotsman**, tended to use Gaelic more as a display of identity, rather than as a vehicle for news (Cormack 1995b). In the years since then there has been some limited development. Both the **Gazette** and the **WHFP** now use Gaelic a bit more, especially on news stories about the language. Similarly **The Scotsman** has expanded its Gaelic content so that since the beginning of 1998 it has published two weekly Gaelic columns, rather than one, and the subject matter of these has expanded to include current affairs. The financial daily newspaper **Business am** began in September 2000 with a Gaelic column (in another gesture of identity display) but this had died even before the newspaper itself ceased in December 2002. The most significant development, however, has been **An Gàidheal Ur**. This began as a publication of An Comunn Gaidhealach and from May 1998 until March 2002 it was distributed as a monthly supplement in the **WHFP**. It has since ended its link with the **WHFP** and is now distributed independently from its base in Stornoway. At the time of its **WHFP** launch the President of An Comunn, Ann Draper, made the following comment.

We are realising a long-term ambition here – the publication of a monthly newspaper in Gaelic. We hope that **An Gàidheal Ur** will interest a wide

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readership. It will not be confined to Gaelic-related issues.
(**West Highland Free Press**, 8 May 1998)

Despite this intention, most of the content of **An Gàidheal Ur** (perhaps inevitably given its monthly frequency) has been news specifically to do with Gaelic and Gaelic culture, rather than more general political, economic or social news, although it does contain some economic and political items that are relevant to the Highlands and Islands. To call itself a Gaelic newspaper, however (it describes itself as ‘paipear-naidheachd neo-eisimeileach nan Gàidheal’, independent newspaper of the Gaels), gives a rather inaccurate impression. Despite this, it is clearly an important addition to the Gaelic media, although how well it is distributed will be crucial to both its role in Gaelic culture and its long-term survival. The existence of a more regular Gaelic newspaper, comparable to the Irish language weeklies **Là** (Belfast) and **Foinse** (Galway), remains a distant possibility (for arguments in favour of a Gaelic weekly newspaper, see Cormack 2003).

Another change in Gaelic publishing was the transformation of **Gairm** into **Gath**. **Gairm** (meaning a call) was a quarterly cultural magazine which had a major role in Gaelic publishing since its foundation in 1951, but it ended with its two hundredth issue in October 2002. As its own advertising put it, **Gairm** ‘has commented on current affairs and public issues, given the flavour of life in the Gaelic area, published over 500 short stories, all sorts of poems, and many articles on general topics, together with reviews, songs, pictures and cartoons’ (**Gairm**, no.199, Summer 2002, p. 288). Although at first this seemed to be a major loss, by July 2003 its successor, **Gath** (meaning both a ray of light and a sting) had appeared in a very similar format, although the rather old-fashioned appearance of **Gairm** had been updated. It remains to be seen as to how **Gath** will develop and whether it will significantly alter the remit of **Gairm**.

As the internet developed during the 1990s, it seemed to many involved with minority languages as the ideal medium. It was cheap, it could link dispersed communities, and it seemed to support all forms of content. The experience of Gaelic on the internet, however, has not been an unbridled success. Although the main gateways to Gaelic sites (that provided by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and more recently a Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board site called ‘Gaelic Scotland’) give access to a wide range, most of these sites are concerned with more traditional elements of the culture and usually are aimed explicitly at newcomers to Gaelic. Sites for fluent speakers have not fared so well. One of

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the more notable was that of Reidio.com which claimed to be 'serving the Gaelic community with regular news updates, information and entertainment'. It was based in Ness, on Lewis, and from February 1999 to December 2000 it was linked to a weekly newspaper (**Fios**) but that proved uneconomic and it has not survived. BBC Scotland has a Gaelic site (a redesigned version was launched in June 2002), which is partly an introduction to and support for Radio nan Gaidheal (which is itself available on the internet), although it also has a significant amount of material for educational purposes, including a Gaelic beginners' course. Also of note is the 'Sgleog' site (established in February 2002) aimed at young people and funded by the CCG. The CCG's Annual Report for 2002 notes that this site recorded 'a high rate of usage by the target group in its first week and regular interaction on a daily basis since' (CCG 2002, p. 7). Despite this success, however, the internet is still an under-utilised resource as far as Gaelic is concerned.

It is, of course, open to doubt as to just how much the internet is likely to help the language. Wilson McLeod has noted that sites linked to 'cultural tourism' (as the Gaelic Scotland site explicitly is) are aimed at non-speakers and are not likely to be of much help when the survival of the language is at stake:

While it is certainly true that such activities [selling Gaelic books over the internet and setting up websites] should marginally increase the revenues of Gaelic publishers and web-page designers, and with it boost their ability to employ staff, it is difficult to accept that such small steps can make a significant contribution to altering powerful and long-established language-use patterns.
(McLeod 2002, p. 59)

Even Gaelic sites which are aimed more specifically at fluent speakers could be regarded quite legitimately with the same degree of scepticism when it comes to claims about their efficaciousness for language defence. Joshua Fishman, the leading international figure on minority language maintenance, has warned against placing too much faith on the internet for reversing language shift (RLS):

Indeed, although cyber-space can be put to use for RLS purposes, neither computer programmes, e-mail, search engines, the web as a whole, chat boxes nor anything directly related to any or all of them can substitute for face-to-face interaction with *real family imbedded in real community*.
(Fishman 2001, p. 458, his emphasis)

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Supporting this scepticism is the comment in a recent conference paper by Julie Adair, Head of BBC Scotland Interactive, noting the seeming reluctance of Gaels to use Gaelic in chatrooms associated with the BBC Gaelic website (Adair 2003). This only goes to emphasise that a virtual linguistic community is not the same as a real linguistic community. The internet may come to be a help for Gaelic survival, but (like the media more generally) it cannot do much unless the language is regularly being used in communities and is being passed on as a mother tongue by parents to children.

ASSESSING THE GAELIC MEDIA

It is difficult to see any real structure or coherence in the Gaelic media and this in itself militates against its effectiveness. Radio nan Gaidheal is, not surprisingly, the most coherent part of it, with daily news and a close interaction with the Gaelic community. **An Gàidheal Ur** provides cultural and social commentary. At the time of writing television does not provide, with any degree of regularity, anything beyond children's programmes and the current affairs of 'Eòrpa' and 'Ceann-Là' (which is not to downplay the importance of non-regular programmes, such as occasional drama).

The question of what the Gaelic audience (and that includes learners and sympathisers, as well as fluent speakers) wants from its media is not however one with a clear answer. The main evidence has come from the research carried out over the last ten years by Leirsinn, the research centre at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Reporting on research carried out in 2000, Morag MacNeil has noted that Gaelic television audiences want religious programmes and news and current affairs more than any other type (NicNèill 2001, pp. 103-4). Similarly, in research into what Gaels would want from a digital television channel, John Angus MacKay found that for the Scottish-based Gaelic audience, local and regional news came first, followed by programmes on Gaelic and Celtic history, with national and international news third, and current affairs and documentaries fourth (MacKay 2002, p. 38).

However, the question of what the audience might want, whether from current media provision or from a future digital channel, should not be confused with the question of what is required for language survival. There is no necessary link between the two. Gaelic programming which merely reproduces bland formats with little cultural specificity may be popular without helping the state of the language since the pleasures such programmes offer have no link to the language itself. What is required is for programming which encourages

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the sense of a distinct community, culture and identity so that speaking Gaelic is seen as part of individuals' sense of themselves and their social context. Without such a sense of identity it is difficult to see Gaelic surviving as a spoken language into the second half of the twenty-first century. The Ministerial Advisory Group on Gaelic report recognised this and recommended a number of actions to be taken to support Gaelic, including 'an immediate programme of promotion of, and support for, Gaelic-medium education with a view to fostering community confidence, and this should be reinforced through radio and television output' (Ministerial Advisory Group on Gaelic 2002, p. 23). The relationship between community confidence and broadcasting is an important one and is directly related to issues of collective identity, of how a community sees itself.

When considering the success or otherwise of Gaelic broadcasting in relation to language survival it is worth heeding Robert Stradling's words (in the context of a discussion of the economic effects of Gaelic broadcasting).

With regards to the contribution to language revitalization, at present it is almost impossible to establish a direct causal link between the provision of minority-language broadcasting and the vitality and sustainability of the language. It is simply not possible to separate out the effects of broadcasting from the effects of other dynamic factors such as education, cultural revival, political and pressure group activity, and so forth. (Stradling 2001, p. 54)

However on the same page he goes on to note that without Gaelic broadcasting, 'the language would be further marginalized'. This is the central conundrum of the Gaelic media – without a media presence the language will fade away, but it is not at all clear how important the media are in comparison with other ways of supporting the language. The £44 million that is cited as the cost of a digital channel is small in comparison with some other broadcasting sums (according to its Annual Report, during 2001-02 the BBC spent £1,372 million on television, £302 million on radio and £278 million on digital services). However it is still a large amount of money, particularly when compared with the sums used to support Gaelic in other ways. A crucial element of this situation is how the Gaelic-speaking community (whether living in Lewis, Glasgow or anywhere-else) sees itself and is seen, particularly in relation to Scotland. Michael Newton has called, somewhat idealistically, for Gaelic to be repositioned at the centre of Scottish culture.

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It could renew the vigour of Scottish culture from within and reinforce the sense of place and identity which has only recently been disrupted from its ancient roots. It could change Scotland from being a mediocre periphery of the Anglo-American world to being at the centre of a Gaelic/Scottish world. All of this together could help give Scotland the self-confidence necessary to seize control of its own future and reclaim its status as a proud European nation among peers.
(Newton 2000, p. 290)

Such a call is unlikely to be answered however, not least since for many Scots, even those with relatively recent Gaelic-speaking ancestry, the language is simply seen as irrelevant or, at best, as something with historical value only. When the Scottish Executive published its cultural policy in 2000, Gaelic (along with Scots) was relegated to the category of heritage – a death sentence if there ever was one. Even though the document states that ‘The Scottish Executive values Gaelic as an important part of Scotland’s living cultural heritage’ (Scottish Executive 2000, p. 25), its view of the language is made clear by putting it in the section which includes museums, historical sites, and preservation more generally, and not mentioning it in the sections on the creative arts, tourism, education and social inclusiveness. Indeed it is arguable that part of the problem of convincing the Westminster government of the importance of a Gaelic digital channel is down to the perception of Gaelic as a language (and culture) of the past. It is not clear how easily Gaelic television can change this despite the attempt to create a modernised view of the language and its culture which has been evident in many Gaelic programmes during the last ten years.

At this juncture, more than ten years after the start of the CTG and while (at least at time of writing) the issue of how a digital channel is to be funded is not yet fully resolved, events are at a key stage. For the language itself, of course, the situation is much more stark, making the Gaelic media an urgent concern. In considering this, however, the media’s main role in language maintenance should be seen not primarily as being to increase the numbers of speakers in any direct way, or even as giving fluent speakers the media services which the principles of public service broadcasting would seem to indicate is owed to them, but rather in maintaining the sense of a Gaelic identity, both linguistic and cultural. It is this which makes a digital channel important and which makes a more coherent media system (including the internet) a necessity.

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