

# Reporting the Independence Referendum Festival of Politics

27 August 2011

Note of the Discussion

These notes are intended as an aide memoire to capture individual points raised in the seminar. They should not be read as reflecting the views of the panel as a whole or any consensus among the panellists.

## Panellists

Blair Jenkins – Carnegie UK Trust (Chair)  
 Alan Roden – Scottish Daily Mail  
 Joan McAlpine MSP  
 John Boothman – BBC Scotland  
 Professor Sarah Oates – University of Glasgow  
 Stewart Kirkpatrick – Caledonian Mercury

## Background

Carnegie Fellow Blair Jenkins is currently leading a programme of work for the Carnegie UK Trust on the future of news across the UK and Ireland. This work builds on the Trust's previous Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society, and involves work on new models of news provision, ethics in journalism, and issues related to training and regulation in the media.

The Carnegie UK Trust's Festival of Politics debate examined the role that the media will play in the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence. This debate provided a highly thought-provoking and challenging seminar, and a number of the issues that it raised are now being fed into the Trust's wider work in this important policy area.

## The Debate

The five panellists were each asked to make some opening remarks, giving their perspective on the key issues for the media in covering Scotland's independence referendum. They then responded to comments and questions from the floor, which raised the following issues:

- To what extent the economic difficulties being experienced by much of the press will impact

upon its' ability to cover the referendum campaign in a comprehensive and detailed manner

- What role the media will play in explaining what independence might mean for different groups of people in Scotland, including for example, disabled people and Gaelic speakers
- Whether the referendum should be more accurately labelled a 'constitutional referendum', rather than an 'independence referendum'
- The impact of free newspapers upon the traditional press in Scotland and its ability to cover the referendum
- What role the media can and should play in helping to frame the referendum question(s)
- Whether the coverage of the referendum campaign by the media will be mainly emotional or factual
- What challenges UK-wide news providers might face in covering a debate which could result in the break-up of the UK
- To what extent the media will focus on the issues involved in the independence debate, rather than the personalities

The key points made by each of the panellists, either in their opening remarks or in response to the comments and questions from the floor, are summarised below:

### *Alan Roden, Scottish Daily Mail*

Alan's view is that the referendum campaign effectively began on May 6<sup>th</sup>, following the SNP's election victory. For example, he argued that the SNP is seeking to use many news stories as an opportunity to highlight the need for greater

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powers for Scotland. He commented that he believes those who are not in favour of independence are already behind in the campaign, particularly as it is not yet clear who will lead the campaign against independence. He believes personality will play a role in the campaign, but the issues will be more important.

Alan pointed out that newspapers are not required to be impartial in the debate, and suggested that their approach to the referendum would be broadly similar to their approach to a general election campaign. He noted that there is unlikely to be a single, mainstream newspaper in Scotland which supports independence. His view is that one of the reasons for this is that the press prefers to support the outcome which it thinks is the most likely to prevail.

He argued that the power of the press – even although circulations are declining – should not be underestimated. He noted that more than 1 million newspapers are still sold every day in Scotland, and that two or three times this many people read these papers. He suggested that The Sun played a crucial role in helping the SNP achieve a majority in the Scottish Parliament election, as it sells 300,000 copies a day in Scotland. He believes the power and reach of the Internet is exaggerated – as only 61% of people in Scotland have broadband.

## *Joan McAlpine MSP*

Joan stated that the referendum will be towards the end of the current parliamentary session. The first priority is to strengthen the Scotland Bill. She argued that since the Scottish Parliament election in May, too much media coverage has focused on the independence referendum and not enough coverage has been focused on the debates about the Scotland Bill.

She believes that there are still errors in the way in which devolution is being reported – for example, the coverage of a recent speech on the 'UK education system' failed to point out that there is actually no such thing. She commented that the

media needs to have the capacity and the commitment to telling the story properly.

Joan highlighted that the campaign coverage needs to reflect the range of issues relevant to people across Scotland, and what the impact of constitutional change may be on each of these issues. She stated that people need to know all the facts to make up their mind about independence – and suggested that if the print and broadcast media don't provide this information then new spaces, such as digital, will have an increasingly critical role to play. She feels that as a UK-wide provider the BBC will face particular challenges in covering an independence referendum.

## *John Boothman, BBC Scotland*

John highlighted that the independence debate touches every aspect of the life of every person in Scotland – and therefore it is extremely challenging and incredibly important.

He argued that the date of the referendum is very important. Firstly, because once the campaign is deemed to have officially started there will be an additional set of rules and regulations that the BBC will be required to adhere to. Secondly, because there are emotive issues attached to certain dates.

John noted that the decline of the printed press means that the BBC, almost by default, is the most prominent media player in Scotland. The coverage of the Scottish election, and the result, on the BBC website received millions of hits, including many from people in other parts of the world. There is a lot of interest in the constitutional future of Scotland.

He outlined that the BBC's role will be to explain the referendum question(s) to the public, and then ensure all sides of the debate are reflected in a fair, balanced and impartial way. He noted that this includes providing information and analysis on the whole range of different issues that will be affected by the result.

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He pointed out that the BBC has good organisational experience of covering referenda – more than 10 in the past 40 years – and this experience will help inform how it approaches this referendum. However, he reflected that the issues involved in the independence referendum are far more substantial and complex than those raised by many previous referenda, and therefore there will be additional challenges in covering this campaign.

## *Professor Sarah Oates, University of Glasgow*

Sarah agreed that there are significant challenges in the Scottish media market – for example the relative dominance of London-based newspapers, whose coverage of Scottish political issues is naturally less extensive than Scottish based titles, and the economic difficulties and declining circulation being experienced by many newspapers.

However, she pointed out that we should recognise the positive features of the landscape – for example journalism is protected and supported in Scotland in a way in which it is not in many other countries around the world, and the media in Scotland provide the Scottish public with a lot of valuable information and data on key political issues – including the independence debate.

Sarah also reminded the audience that Scotland is not the first nation to have had a referendum on independence – and suggested that there are lessons that can be learned from how the media reported events in other places where a similar vote has taken place. She recognised however, that it is difficult to predict how journalists will react to, and report on, unusual or unique events such as a referendum.

Sarah argued that the TV coverage of the referendum campaign is possibly more important than the press coverage, as TV is the main source of news for most people. However, she believes newspapers also have an important role to play. She queried whether the role of the press was to reflect the views of its readers or to put forward a particular point of view favoured by the editor or the

proprietor – while she acknowledged that this the tradition in the British press, she speculated as to how useful this is when readers really should get full, unbiased information to make their own informed choices.

She suggested that the referendum campaign and how it is conducted will be critical in defining Scotland as a nation – and therefore the process is arguably more important than the result. She believes the debate to date has been too narrowly focused on economic and emotive issues, and there has not been enough coverage of what independence might mean for a number of other important aspects of people's lives.

## *Stewart Kirkpatrick, Caledonian Mercury*

Stewart emphasised that there are fantastic journalists in Scotland – but the economic model for news provision is extremely challenging. He highlighted that there is a lot of pressure on journalists to produce more and more content every day.

He believes these economic difficulties are highly problematic, as the independence referendum is very complex and it requires thorough and detailed investigation by journalists. Stewart is concerned that the financial pressures that media outlets and journalists are experiencing means that most will find it difficult to cover the referendum with the depth and scrutiny that is required.

Stewart commented that new media has proved a very effective campaigning tool – as evidenced by the SNP's social media campaign in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. However, he noted that much of the current online 'news' content represents opinion rather than investigative journalism, and there are often disputes about its neutrality and accuracy. He argued that comment is cheap but facts are expensive.

Nevertheless, Stewart highlighted examples of digital media outlets which have achieved a significant readership in Scotland – and he believes

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this channel can play an important part in filling some of the gaps being left by 'old' media. He stated that he thinks one or more new media entities will be established in Scotland before we get to the referendum.

Douglas White  
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