SPECIAL REPORT

Study asks if Scotland should have greater control over broadcasting

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What is the future of broadcasting in the UK? Will it ever be devolved? *(Image: Archive)*



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A TEAM of researchers have launched a study into the future of broadcasting in the UK, exploring how Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland are approaching the question of devolved media powers.

Professors from across Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland have come together for a series of workshops to investigate the pros and cons of transferring broadcasting powers from **Westminster**.

The project is called "Broadcasting Policy in a Devolved UK".

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Dr Jamie Medhurst from Aberystwyth University leads the research, along with Dr Inge Sorensen from the University of Glasgow, Dr Phil Ramsey from Ulster University and Dr Tom Chivers from Goldsmiths, University of London.

After consulting in Cardiff, Glasgow, and Belfast, they will take their data to London in April. Here, the final report and evidence will be presented to serve as a base for government decisions.



The group held a workshop in Glasgow. *(Image: Supplied)*

This work comes at a crucial time, as the BBC makes widespread cuts, attempting to restructure its funding model.

The reductions include the possible suspension of **BBC Scotland** as a **TV** channel, and certain job losses across the country.

Speaking to The National, Medhurst said: "A few years ago, we got talking and said, 'Wouldn't it be good to explore broadcasting policy in an increasingly devolved UK?

"We've got funding (£79,600) for a two-year project to hold a workshop in each of the nations and a final conference in London. It explores broadcasting policy, how it operates and how it might operate in an increasingly devolved UK."

What does the Welsh broadcasting landscape look like right now?

Unlike Scotland, Wales has long had a media landscape dominated by BBC Cymru. **One Senedd member said in 2020** that the country had an "unacceptable and unsustainable democratic deficit".

And a previous study by Cardiff University and YouGov found that 40% of people in Wales incorrectly thought that Plaid Cymru were in power between 2011 and 2016.

This year, the country's culture committee report also criticised "inadequate" broadcasting, suggesting the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 needed to improve coverage of devolved matters.

But the government have aimed to address this and in summer, plans for the **Shadow Broadcasting and Communications Authority for Wales** were announced.

The idea is to protect and strengthen local and national public service media platforms in Wales.

Following a meeting in Cardiff, the research group's report suggested that any broadcasting model should be "accountable to the people of Wales through the Senedd".



Jamie Medhurst is leading the research. *(Image: Aberystwyth University)*

They highlighted the importance of maintaining Welsh language services but were concerned about financing.

Crucially, the report suggested that devolving broadcasting powers would have to happen across the other nations for it to work properly in Wales.

"The question is whether you can do anything in Wales without the other nations, or whether you need all four nations? Or certainly Scotland and Northern Ireland, otherwise you're imbalanced."

Has Scotland let a reserved broadcasting dream fall by the wayside?

While the media situation **in Scotland** is arguably healthier, Medhurst says probes into Scottish-led broadcasting seem to have fallen off the agenda.

"I noticed in 2013, before the referendum, the **SNP**'s document on culture comes through and [suggests] that in an independent Scotland there would be broadcasting devolution.

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"Even in the 2024 general election, I think the SNP manifesto made it quite clear they were aiming at devolved broadcasting.

"But in the 2026 Scottish Parliamentary elections, it wasn't there at all," Medhurst added.

BBC Scotland is eliminating approximately 60 jobs, and there is speculation that it will soon transition its dedicated television channel to an online-only format as part of a broader £500 million BBC-wide savings plan.

Therefore, it is a crucial time for researchers to assess the media landscape. A meeting, similar to that of Cardiff for the Broadcasting Policy in a Devolved UK, was held in Glasgow last month, and the results will be published shortly.

Where are we on devolved broadcasting in Northern Ireland?

In Belfast, discussions around broadcasting seem to be in a very early stage. But they are in a different position, in terms of the leadership's hope for reunification and the public's media choices.

Academic research suggests those in NI look both ways, also consuming news from Irish national broadcaster RTÉ, which has a Belfast news bureau.

And in January this year, a report by Ulster University argued that in a reunified Ireland, the country should have "a new public broadcaster, provisionally called Public Media

Ireland".

The authors say "it takes inspiration from the run-up to the Scottish Independence referendum when a new Scottish Broadcasting Service was imagined".



Glasgow *(Image: Supplied)*

In December, the researchers will attempt to consult with local media bodies and interested parties.

Medhurst added: "It'll be interesting to see what does come up in Belfast, because it's not on the agenda at the moment."

And what about England?

While Westminster ultimately controls broadcasting centrally, there has been concern over its representation to the English public.

Bafta chair Anne Morrison and media consultant Chris Banatval say the organisation still has work to do in "engaging working-class audiences" and **pushing power out of London**

and into regions.

In an article in The Conversation, Medhurst wrote: "The new **UK Government** under Andy Burnham's leadership has spoken positively about devolving power more generally.

"However, its initial response to the Welsh Government's announcement has given little indication that broadcasting is likely to be high on its list of constitutional reforms".



The workshop in Cardiff. *(Image: Supplied)*

He says a separate BBC charter for each nation of the UK, including England, could allow for a "greater accountability to audiences" albeit "ambitious and complicated."

Overall, the situation is complicated, and funding issues that the BBC experiences are ultimately a problem that devolved nations would have to grapple with.

Medhurst said:"I think what is emerging is how complex it is, t all hinges ultimately on DCMS (Department of Culture, Media and Sport) and the UK Government.

"I don't think under Andy Burnham's Labour, they're going to turn around and say they have broadcasting. But I think there's an awareness that the UK is changing slowly."

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