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Evaluating the Introduction of Scottish Gaelic Public Broadcaster BBC Alba

Abstract

The article evaluates the policy decision to introduce BBC Alba and provide a public service for Gaelic speakers, focusing on the differing aims and mandates of its two funders – the BBC and MG Alba. Using a logical framework, we examine the aims and strategy BBC Alba has deployed in the context of its two main audience groups: the core Gaelic community and the wider Scottish audience. We utilise data from annual reports, including audience size, number of online streamers, and audience satisfaction. Our analysis suggests that while the stated aims have largely been achieved, the original aims were skewed towards the wider community rather than contributing to language maintenance/ revitalisation. We offer suggestions on how the inputs and outputs could be tweaked to improve the policy's impact on Gaelic speakers. We conclude that the impact of BBC Alba has been more successful with the wider Scottish audience than the core Gaelic community.

Keywords

Public broadcasting, minority languages, Scottish Gaelic, policy evaluation

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1. Introduction

The Scottish Gaelic television channel, BBC Alba, was launched in 2008 through a partnership of two public bodies after a decades-long campaign by language activists to linguistically expand broadcasting policy in Scotland. Uniquely, this partnership involves two entities operating under different jurisdictions and with significantly different public mandates in terms of their policy interventions. On the one hand, the governance of the BBC[1] is regulated at the UK level under the Broadcasting Act 1996 and Communications Act 2003 and is chiefly concerned with providing a public media service and ensuring value for money to the license-fee payer. On the other hand, MG Alba is a body funded by the Scottish Government whose original remit was "to ensure that audiences in Scotland are provided with a wide range of high quality Gaelic programmes" (MG Alba 2009, 8) and which now "is to ensure that a wide and diverse range of high-quality programmes in Gaelic is broadcast or otherwise transmitted so as to be available to persons in Scotland and to others" (MG Alba 2024, 64). Thus, from the outset, BBC Alba was designed with a twin-pole strategy aiming to satisfy both the core Gaelic community and the wider Scottish audience with its output. The extent to which it has been able to do this is the subject of this article, which evaluates the policy intervention that established a full channel in Scottish Gaelic as a form of public service media. For this purpose, the authors apply a logical framework model which aims to unpack and trace the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of the policy, assessing whether it has successfully met its stated aims in terms of impact.

The twin-pole strategy is evidence of the dual role that minority language media play worldwide, serving as a tool for identity and linguistic and cultural survival as well as a channel for participation in the general national or pan-national public sphere. Since majority language media are seldom concerned with cultural survival or language maintenance, although they are often debated in terms of linguistic quality and correctness, most media evaluations and assessments only consider their relevance for the development of public opinion and political debate in the most general and overarching way. Thus, a more profound evaluation of BBC Alba's dual strategy serves as a point of reference for debating the best way to evaluate the work of minority language media.

Firstly, however, an overview of relevant literature is provided, demonstrating how the case relates to the broader field of minority language

media and public service broadcasting. A methodological section then details the rationale for using a logical framework and theory of change model, before moving on to the case. The history of BBC Alba is first examined from the initial discussions and public value test it underwent in 2007 through to the launch and developments up to 2023. This allows the subsequent evaluation to be embedded in the specific context of BBC Alba and its unique position in the British broadcasting sphere.

2. Literature

2.1 Minority Language Media

Academic research on minority language media (MLM) first emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s, primarily as a result of the increased provision across Europe and theoretical debates on language revitalisation or reversi0ng language shift, embodied by the work of Fishman (1991). A detailed overview of these early developments in Europe was provided by Cormack (2007) and complemented with studies from other parts of the world by Browne & Uribe-Jongbloed (2013), as well as research on indigenous minority media development in the Americas and Africa (Salawu et al. 2022; 2023). Regarding MLM studies focusing on television, Jones (2007, 190) outlined five "primary functions": communicative, cultural, economic, status, and linguistic. Moring (2007) explored what would be required for a minority language sphere to achieve functional completeness – a concept of having media output that is able to meet the basic range of media needs of a population – distinguishing between institutions and genres. Genre completeness includes news and current affairs as well as entertainment offerings, considered essential for ensuring that minority language speakers do not migrate to majority language media for their consumption. More broadly, the need for a supportive audience for the long-term survival of a MLM outlet was mentioned by Browne (1996), who stated that it would be ideal if the majority also became part of the audience. Moring (2013) later suggested that the digital age had produced new and developing challenges to maintaining genre completeness, but that achieving this was essential to prevent audiences from migrating to majority or global outlets.

The case for developing MLM outlets hinges on the relevant role media play in cultural representation and public debate and because they are key to the standardisation and spread of language use (Cormack 2004). Although it has always been difficult to assert the impact

of media exposure on language promotion, the presence of a language in the media undeniably affects the social recognition and valuation of a language as contemporary and relevant (Cormack 2007; Pietikäinen et al. 2019). A lack of media provision in a language widely spoken, whether by a small or large part of the population, can be interpreted as a lack of national interest in the language and its surrounding culture. Conversely, the absence of a language from the media is immediately viewed by the general population as a sign of backwardness or irrelevance. However, as language shift towards the majority language tends to lead people to discard the use of the language faster than the amalgamation of cultural traits, language and culture are decoupled and cultural identity might be maintained even though linguistic identity and ability have already eroded (Uribe-Jongbloed 2016). Despite this evident disconnection, language remains consistently linked to a cultural identity that may overlap with other simultaneous identities. As presented by Grimson (2011), people live in a variety of cultural configurations at once, some of which might be contradictory or opposed to other identity allegiances. Yet, by remaining part of a larger collective cultural configuration, the terminology and actions used between these configurations create spaces for discussions and debates that redefine and even shift the boundaries of cultural configurations over time. In the case of BBC Alba, there is a wider UK cultural configuration that underpins the thinking and structure of an institution like the BBC and its governing board. There is also the cultural configuration of the constituent nation of Scotland, which defines geographic and internal identity debates. Finally, there is the cultural configuration of the Gaels or Highlanders, which intersects but does not perfectly overlap with the Scottish Gaelic linguistic minority. This latter notion has created tensions between the traditional speaking areas and those in the central belt, with the speaker group in the vernacular community described as being in crisis linguistically (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020). Prior to the UK leaving the European Union, but still present for many of its inhabitants, the overarching cultural configuration of being part of Europe continues to influence how the debates are framed (Mac Giolla Chríost & Bonotti 2018). It is within these cultural configurations that unexpected and sometimes unlikely alliances emerge that underscore social movements, including those of MLM campaigners (Hourigan 2004).

It is useful to consider cultural configurations as they offer the framework within which MLM exist. As described by Browne and Uribe-Jongbloed (2013), media in minority languages have existed for over 200 years, practically coterminous with modern-day nation-states. That

is to say, minority languages did not exist outright but were created in the development of nation-states. Certain languages were given official or de-facto prominence over other languages and, through the standardisation and institutional practices of the nation-state, were privileged over others, despite multilingual diversity being always present in their territories (Uribe-Jongbloed & Salawu 2017). These actions by those in power in nation-states provide the background to why some activists and academics prefer to use the term minoritised instead of minority to refer to those languages that were not embraced by the process of nation-building that prioritised one or at most a few languages as equivalent to the cultural configuration of the nation-state. Thus, media outlets in minority languages have often coexisted with majority language outlets, although they have seldom managed to remain active. Some MLM outlets have survived through support from other territories where the language is a majority language, such as diaspora or border-crossing media (Bober & Willis 2023). Others have survived because of their relatively large population sizes that guarantee a commercially viable audience. Such is the case for minority language newspapers in Yoruba in Nigeria (Fasan 2018) or Spanish-language television in the US (Piñón & Rojas 2011). Censorship, linguistic standardisation, or discrimination, however, might lead to those media outlets finding it difficult to continue their development.

Even when commercial viability is less clear, governments bear a responsibility to enable the development of media in other languages that are used within their territories. To that regard, Moring (2013, 44) mentioned that "in an asymmetric situation, media services in minority languages can, in their totality, be seen as a public good that is not ... sufficiently served by the market". Although matters of population size, access to services in the majority language, and the responsibility of language provisions have been openly debated, the example of many Latin American countries recognising their linguistic diversity and developing language legislation in the past 30 years brings to the fore the fact that the multilingual reality of the nation-state requires media policies that enable or promote the development of MLM. Although the European Union often champions multiculturalism and diversity, its discussions focus on the different (majority) languages of their respective nation-states, rather than those of their constituent peoples. Nevertheless, the overarching multiculturalism in the cultural configuration of Europe implies an acceptance of the same multicultural and multilingual diversity within the constituent cultural configurations. As pointed out by Hourigan (2004), social movement campaigns for media

in non-state minority languages of Europe were underpinned by both the general interpretation of the public service provision and the likelihood of connecting to different levels of interaction (local, national, international) to promote media in their respective languages.

2.2 Public Service Media

Despite recent shifts in MLM research in Europe towards the study of digital social media and messaging services (several chapters in Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed (2013), and the entirety of Arendt and Reershemius (2024)), Public Service Media (PSM) in minority languages remains a relevant area of study due to their role in fostering public debate and consciousness. PSM have been central in Europe, where broadcast media are strongly structured around public ownership and financed through license fees or directly through taxes. Guyot (2007) focused specifically on MLM and the public sphere, detailing the broader historical perspective of PSM in Europe. McElroy and Noonan (2016; 2018) pointed out that the majority of nation-states in the world are small nations in terms of population and size, making PSM fundamental for sustaining diverse and pluralistic television systems. They (2018, 161) further mention that "minority-language PSBs are expected to sustain linguistic vitality and cultural diversity while also needing to retain political support for public funding, to maintain viewing figures, support indigenous production, and compete in international markets". Zabaleta et al. (2014, 290) noted that, despite the relatively small size of the media systems for all minority languages except Catalan, the media outlets for the three Celtic languages (Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic) "were probably enough to establish a basic and inclusive public sphere reaching the whole community". This suggests that, regardless of the small numbers of users of the language relative to the nation they covered, PSM provisions were sufficient to ensure representation. However, as noted in other cases of cultural diversity, PSM focus on representation rather than engagement or promoting capabilities (Naerland & Dahl 2022), which underpins why evaluations focus on the amount of participation in programmes, screen time, or the number of shows rather than on an analysis of the impact of media production and what it enables in the community. Obviously, this is also based on the ease of obtaining figures for outputs (e.g. production hours, budget expenditure, screen time) in contrast to determining impact (e.g. changes in views, increased recognition or social appreciation of the language, further interest or activities based on programming). On the European

level, Gazzola et al. (2016) included PSM in their analysis of EU-related funding for minority languages, pointing out that there was some funding in place for multilingual radio and television services, but that was cut already by 1998. Subsequent efforts to engage the EU with regard to media and language have largely been unsuccessful, despite campaigning efforts by language activists concerned about threats posed by Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.

PSM are under pressure that has been mounting since the introduction of commercial outlets and the transition to digital platforms, including the internet (Iosifidis 2010), which has required a modification in practices to accommodate the changing environment. Comparing various European PSM in their transformation to suit the contemporary digital media landscape, Donders (2019, 1025) found out that "there is insufficient alignment of strategies between the different brands and departments within public broadcasting companies". However, there has been evidence of minority-language PSM adapting to social media trends to promote their content, for example, through Facebook (Costecalde 2019), yet the challenge persists with the latest media trends, such as the rapid growth of TikTok presenting novel obstacles (Willis 2024a). Moreover, budget cuts to PSM – particularly in the aftermath of the Euro crisis – have left many PSM severely underfunded and struggling to meet the demands of providing a variety of genres and platforms (Campos-Freire et al. 2020). This is all the more acute in the minority language context (Guimerà Orts & Bonet 2020).

In the case of BBC Alba, as part of the BBC's nations and regions, there might be a mismatch between the interests of the larger institution and the specificities of the minority language broadcaster. This mismatch is what we expect to disentangle through a policy evaluation of BBC Alba. In addition, the performance of the channel might have been affected by tough budgetary conditions in the post-2008 UK.

3. Methodology

Among the methodological approaches commonly used in policy evaluation, not all are feasible in the case of BBC Alba. Given its relatively recent launch, it is an intervention for which a reasonable amount of information is available in the public domain – compared to other minority language broadcasters, for example. This makes it feasible to evaluate BBC Alba's success against its stated aims from the outset. As such, a theory-based evaluation was chosen as the method for this article, utilising a logical framework as well as a theory of change model.

Other popular methods of policy evaluation, such as quantitative evaluation, are less feasible in the case of BBC Alba for several reasons. Counterfactual Impact Evaluation is difficult as there is no obvious control group; the audience in Scotland was both the target group and the treatment group as a whole. Whilst some policy evaluators have successfully used the Synthetic Control Method (Abadie et al. 2015) to create a counterfactual synthetic version of the treatment group through a pool of control groups, this is difficult in the context of minority language broadcasters as data is limited and inconsistent in terms of variables.

The information used to determine the level of success is obtained from published reports of the involved organisations (MG Alba, BBC) which are publicly accessible and available. This includes their annual reports at the end of each financial year (thus, the first was 2007–2008), which feature key quantitative performance indicators as well as more descriptive sections on the main activities and achievements of the year. In addition to this, we also consider existing academic publications focused on BBC Alba, often just relating to one genre or programme but overall adding to the knowledge base of the channel's outcomes and impact.

4. BBC Alba

4.1 Background

BBC Alba was launched in 2008 and is thus relatively new compared to other minority language television channels. Similar cases, such as S4C in Welsh or ETB in Basque, TV3 in Catalan and TVG in Galician, were all launched in the 1980s. TG4 in Irish followed in the mid-1990s. Thus, the key actors involved in launching BBC Alba were well aware of these earlier cases and the processes they had gone through. From an activist perspective, the campaign for a full channel in Scottish Gaelic was heavily influenced by S4C and TG4 (Hourigan 2007), which is logical given their geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity. Moreover, from a recognition and policy perspective, institutions and delivery of services to linguistic minorities is an important step following official recognition (Cardinal & Williams 2020), with public service media being one of the key pillars (Cormack 2007). In the case of BBC Alba, the channel followed the introduction of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which increased both the capacity and funding available for the language (Dunbar 2012; Manias-Muñoz & Martori Muntsant 2017; McLeod 2022). It is also worth noting that television content in Scottish Gaelic did exist

prior to BBC Alba and was broadcast on multiple channels but often not during prime slots – thus, a full channel was seen as necessary to bring about a substantial advance in weekly broadcasting hours as well as scheduling freedom (Cormack 2008; Chalmers et al. 2013).

Regarding the two bodies behind the legal partnership that constitutes BBC Alba, it is important to examine the remits which form their desires for the channel. MG Alba was already responsible for producing Scottish Gaelic content that was partially broadcast on other channels. Created following the Communications Act (2003) at the UK level yet funded by the devolved Scottish Government, MG Alba operates at the intersection of two levels of governance. Its remit is to "ensure high quality television programmes in Gaelic are made available to persons in Scotland" (MG Alba n.d.). It goes on to state that "MG ALBA also works with producers to promote development, training and the use of Gaelic as the working language of the Gaelic production sector" (MG Alba n.d.). The organisation's focus on the Gaelic-speaking community thus also involves economic elements as well as providing a media service for which it quite clearly limits its geographical scope to Scotland rather than the entire UK. In contrast, the BBC is funded through a licence fee model to allow its "UK services to remain free of advertisements and independent of shareholder and political interest", with an aim to deliver "value for all audiences" (BBC n.d.). As part of these aims, the BBC requires any new channel to be subject to a Public Value Test to obtain a broadcasting licence. This process demonstrates the clear aims of the channel and how they relate to the two partners, MG Alba and the BBC.

Conducted in 2007, the Public Value Test initially resulted in the proposal being rejected by the BBC Trust which was not convinced the new channel would "create sufficient public value", specifying "we have seen very little evidence of a convincing plan for appealing to a wider audience in Scotland" (BBC Trust 2007, 11–12; Dunbar 2012). Moreover, it also expressed a concern that the proposal had not put enough emphasis on attracting new speakers to the channel, yet it was very much the public value issue which became the dominant narrative. The proposal was resubmitted in 2008 and eventually approved by the BBC Trust, with the addition of specified quantitative targets for audience reach – set at 5% of the population of Scotland, ca. 250,000 people (BBC Trust 2008). This is significantly higher than the previous reach of Scottish Gaelic programming, which was ca. 77,000 weekly (Dunbar 2012), as well as much higher than the total number of Scottish Gaelic speakers – which then numbered ca. 59,000 – or those able to understand the language – ca. 77,000 according to the 2001 census. These num-

bers have since risen to 69,000 and 130,000, respectively (Scottish Government n.d.). Consequently, it was clear from the beginning that the channel would need to attract a large number of non-speakers if it was to meet its audience targets.

4.2 Logical Framework – BBC Alba Strategy

As described in the methodology, we use a logical framework as the evaluation tool and, accordingly, the different steps are covered in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Logical Framework for BBC Alba

Objectives	• Reaching a wider Scottish audience (BBC Trust) • High-quality programming in Gaelic (MG Alba)
Inputs	• BBC Trust and MG Alba budget allocations • Staff • Co-production agreements • Education agreements • Infrastructure funding
Activities	• Commissioning process and local production • Creating educational material • Dubbing / subtitling • Engagement with stakeholders
Outputs	• # programming hours • # social media posts • # material for learners
Outcomes	• Size of audience • Community satisfaction • Jobs in Gaelic language
Impacts	• National awareness • Economic impact (Scotland-wide) • Interest in the language • Public sphere for Gaelic language? • Language sustainability

Notes: Authors' own representation.

4.2.1 Objectives

The balance between providing quality Scottish Gaelic language programming for the core Gaelic community and providing public value by attracting the wider Scottish audience has been described by BBC Alba as a "twin-pole approach" (Willis 2024b). This approach can be seen as the central objective of the channel, separable into two objectives

to satisfy the two founding partners. While the BBC Trust's objective is clearly meant as a long-term impact, the objective set by MG Alba relates to actions that they can undertake directly as part of their outputs. In other words, the focus on what they can deliver (programmes) rather than the impact of said actions (for instance, recognition or prestige) is not mentioned. MG Alba is concerned with language policy, whereas the BBC focuses on cultural policy – albeit with consideration also towards the normalisation of the language, for which it suggests "a linear channel would give enhanced status" (BBC Trust 2008, 17). The objectives within the twin-pole approach can be seen in the channel's programming priorities, which are explored below.

This gives BBC Alba a slightly different *raison d'etre* compared to other BBC channels, even those categorised as special interest channels.

4.2.2 Inputs

The main inputs into BBC Alba are obviously the finances provided annually by the BBC and MG Alba, which can then also be broken down into areas – as shown in the annual reports. In its first annual report for 2008/09, it reported receiving £12.1 million for the year ending 31 March 2008, and £12.4 million for the year ending 31 March 2009 (MG Alba 2009, 34). In its most recent report for 2023/24, the core grant had only risen to £13 million (MG Alba 2024, 84), which implies that, in real terms, bearing inflation in mind, the grant has been slowly decreasing. On the other hand, BBC investment in production for BBC Alba is presented at £10 million for 2023/24, the same as in 2022/23 (BBC 2024, 160).

Aside from the core funding through its budget, BBC Alba has also received input from other sources, often indirect. Part of this relates to additional one-off grants for certain activities, plus they also co-finance productions and thus benefit from the output produced. Another example of external funding is the use of European Regional and Development Funds from the EU, such as a £2.6 million project for the construction of a Creative Industries and Media Centre in Stornoway – creating office space for companies including MG Alba (Hebrides News Today 2012; Herault & Willis 2021, 15).

In terms of staff, many core team members had experience in broadcasting, either with the BBC or within the previous Gaelic content for television. This includes Head of Service Margaret Mary Murray, who had worked for the BBC's Gaelic department for 20 years before the launch of BBC Alba (BBC 2008), and Alan Esslemont, former Director

for Television at TG4 (the Irish language public broadcaster in Ireland), brought in as Head of Content for BBC Alba (Woods 2016). In terms of staff employed directly by BBC Alba or MG Alba, a previous impact report stated that MG Alba provides for 71 FTE positions – a figure which covers direct employees and other operational services, including freelancers, with over half of them located in the Western Isles and Skye (Olsberg – SPI, 2016, 4).

Finally, it is useful to mention that there is an agreement in place with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig regarding the development of learning materials which are funded by Bòrd na Gàidhlig (MG Alba 2024, 12), as well as co-commissioning with other minority language broadcasters (S4C and TG4) seen as successful in the case of children's show *Boban is Fuigheag* (MG Alba 2024, 20).

4.2.3 Activities

These are the aspects that are easier to highlight because they represent the day-to-day tasks of the broadcaster. As such, BBC Alba's main activities concern producing or commissioning television programmes. This predominantly involves interaction with Scottish companies – in its first annual report after launching, the channel stated that 95% of the original content it produced or commissioned was with Scotland-based companies (MG Alba 2009, 11). It supported 49 independent production companies through commissioning between 2013–2023 (EY 2023, 17), with only four of them receiving more than 60% of the commissioning budget in 2024 (MG Alba 2024, 120).

Furthermore, not only do they produce and commission products, but the channel also needs to fill programming spaces. To achieve this end, BBC Alba needs to cover the empty slots with either previous products they might hold the rights for, external finished product acquisitions (dubbing or subtitling them), or co-productions. They could acquire and dub renowned content (particularly for TV shows or animations) and incur high costs for licencing, or dub less known and less expensive quality products from less costly production origins. The former strategy, dubbing a hit animation such as *Bluey*, might bring recognition with the wider audience, but deplete resources. The latter, dubbing the animation *Port Pàipeir* from Chile, demands less funding but does not bring recognition.

BBC Alba's activities also include maintaining its own website, which is integrated into the broader BBC / BBC Scotland setup. It has its own social media accounts on some platforms, most prominently Twitter/X

and Facebook. In addition, the channel works with external partners to develop material for the SpeakGaelic and LearnGaelic campaigns, which are then conveyed through broadcasting but also have their own standalone websites / social media (MG Alba 2023).

No information was found describing dubbing/subtitling costs or practices, something that would be relevant as part of the activities undertaken by MG ALBA. This might be part of the subset of costs and agreements associated with children's television shows production, but it is not specifically described.

There is evidence of engagement with policy development in different consultations and debates, as well as the organisation of a career fair that highlights the possibilities of working in the audiovisual sector through Gaelic (MG Alba 2024, 38).

4.2.4 Outputs

In terms of the direct results BBC Alba produces as outputs, the main area is programming hours – the traditional bread and butter for a broadcaster. At the time of its launch, BBC Alba broadcast around 50 hours per week, mostly in the late afternoon / evening (MG Alba 2009, 11). It also claims to offer a sufficient variety of programmes (genre completeness) to reach different audiences and tastes, thus catering to diversity.

In 2023/24, the total production amounted to 387 hours of new programming (MG Alba 2024, 42), slightly over the 371 reported for the previous year but down from a high of 471 hours in 2015 (EY 2023, 15). However, the total number of hours broadcast for that year was 2,650 (BBC 2024, 161), meaning that MG Alba only commissioned 14% of the hours on screen. It is unclear whether the remaining 86% is of BBC own production,[2] content bought in from elsewhere (including subsequent dubbing / subtitling), or repetition of previous years' content. Furthermore, the categories used to describe different genres are not the same between the two organisations, except for children's and sports programming. Table 2 shows the terms used by BBC Alba and those used by MG Alba.

This discrepancy in the use of categories makes it very difficult to assess the percentage of content by genre produced by MG Alba itself, and it also makes it difficult to comment on whether the channel is offering a good level of genre completeness (see Moring 2007 for a definition of the latter).

Table 2: Hours broadcast by BBC and hours commissioned by MG Alba, 2023/2024.

Categories / Genres	BBC Alba (broadcast hours)	MG Alba (production hours)	Percentage of production by MG Alba
Children's (both)	549	51.9	9.45%
Sport & Leisure (both)	235	189.7	80.72%
Daily, weekly, news and current affairs (BBC)	215	-	N/A
Education, Factual and Religion (BBC)	1,048	-	N/A
Learning (MG)	-	8.7	N/A
Factual (MG)	-	86.2	N/A
Drama, comedy, music, entertainment and arts (BBC)	602	-	N/A
Drama & Comedy (MG)	-	3.4	N/A
Music and Entertainment (MG)	-	46.9	N/A

Notes: Authors' own representation, using data for the period 2023/2024, taken from BBC (2024, 161) and MG Alba (2024, 120).

These figures, however, do not provide any information on language use. A more detailed look into what the production hours might mean in terms of language usage, quality and standardisation achievements, percentage of English, or representation of the traditional Scottish Gaelic heartlands,[3] could also serve to shed light on how far the programming truly encompasses both identity and language (see O'Connell 2013).

Other small points include the audience engagement strategy / promotional activity, which is increasingly digital. Thus, the number of social media posts can also be seen as a notable output. In addition, BBC Alba also provides material for learners as part of its role in the maintenance / revitalisation of Scottish Gaelic.

4.2.5 Outcomes

Regarding measurable outcomes of BBC Alba's outputs, a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is listed in each annual report published by MG Alba. From the outset in 2008/09, these were limited to just a few core indicators but have expanded over time. Audience size has been reported since the beginning through the national weekly TV reach – intrinsically linked to the public value test the channel underwent before its licence was granted. Data from 2008/09 shows that the channel was reaching 5% of the Scottish audience on a weekly basis (MG Alba 2009),

a figure which grew and peaked in 2013/14 at 17.6% (MG Alba 2014, 18) but has since been falling. In 2023/24, it stood at 7% – still above the 5% target but moving in a negative trend (MG Alba 2024). Figures are also provided for the Gaelic weekly TV reach, which was highest in 2011/12 at 76%, remaining above 70% for the following 5 years before beginning to fall down to 50% in 2022/23 and 46% in 2023/24 (MG Alba 2024). As these figures only included linear television watching, annual reports now also include the annual number of iPlayer views and, most recently, short-form content views. iPlayer figures followed a similar trend to national weekly TV reach, starting at 776,000 in 2009/10, peaking at 7.4 million in 2014/15 before decreasing to just 3.7 million in 2022/23 and rising to 5.9 million in 2023/24. Short-form content views have only been reported since 2019/20, with a figure of 5.4 million increasing to 5.9 million by 2022/23 and then 12.3 million in 2023/24 (MG Alba 2009; 2024).

Another key outcome for BBC Alba is audience satisfaction / appreciation, reported since 2016/17 for both national and Gaelic audience appreciation. National audience appreciation that year was at 7.2/10 and remained above 7 in each year reported, with 2023/24 reaching 7.9. Gaelic audience appreciation, on the other hand, has always been above 8, beginning in 2016/17 at 8.2 and reaching 8.6 in 2023/24. In relation to its collaboration with LearnGaelic, the channel reports on unique users per month, with the figure of 44,000 rising to 51,000 between 2022/23 and 2023/24 (MG Alba 2024). Relatedly, the SpeakGaelic programme had 4,000 unique users per month and was said to have a 142% growth in video plays through its social media output between 2022/23 and 2023/24 (MG Alba 2024, 18).

4.2.6 Impacts

The main result that constitutes an impact is the awareness of BBC Alba. The fact that the population of Scotland recognises its existence as a broadcaster in Scottish Gaelic represents a tacit recognition of the language belonging to the whole of the country. Although the percentage drop from a high of 85% in 2019/20 to 75% in 2022/23 (MG Alba 2023) could be attributed to diminishing TV viewing figures overall because of wider audiovisual offerings, it remains a point of debate concerning the efficacy of BBC Alba for language awareness in the long run.

The economic impact of BBC Alba for the Scottish Gaelic users is another important measurement. The number of full time equivalent (FTE) jobs created and maintained by the service is important because

it has a positive overall economic impact on the Scottish Gaelic users (Chalmers et al. 2013). The potential economic outlook for the language has incidence on its maintenance and on whether the language is perceived as an asset or a hindrance for personal financial stability. Evaluating this impact requires considering the counterfactual, that is, how many of those employed by BBC Alba would be working in the audiovisual sector if the channel did not exist.

Also worth exploring is how much interest in learning or engaging with the language stems from available Scottish Gaelic content on BBC Alba. This extends beyond broadcasting to include their repository available via the iPlayer or other services. For instance, the BBC Alba channel on YouTube has over 7,000 subscribers and reaches 142,000 views in their most popular content, which is mainly music. Important lessons in this regard could be drawn from tourism research studying the appeal that derives from featuring in contemporary films or TV series, such as the recent impact of Outlander, a series that also included spoken Scottish Gaelic, on tourism in Scotland (Garrison & Wallace 2021).

It is widely accepted that media provisions in a language raise its status among the whole population (Ramallo 2017, 455; Ramos Rodríguez 2005, 165–166). In the case of Scotland, "the use of Gaelic in media helps fight against misconceptions of the language as being one that is unfit for contemporary Scottish life" (Chalmers et al. 2013, 218).

5. Analysis

The double set of requirements for MLM to fulfil PSM expectations and linguistic sustainability goals implies different evaluations. The twin-pole strategy disaggregates them by interested party rather than intertwining them as one single collective objective. However, managing to balance the two concurrently has proved difficult at times – in its 2013/14 Annual Report, the channel stated it needed to "grow BBC Alba satisfaction among the core audience whilst maintaining national reach" (MG Alba 2014, 8).

The emphasis on measurable outputs and some form of outcomes aligns with the simplicity of obtaining data that is readily available, instead of the more complicated analysis that is required to determine impact. But output measures say very little about the success of the channel in achieving its goals and are insufficient proxies to account for the value that is added by this public system. The fact that it exists, provides jobs for minority language speakers, and enables their input into the wider audiovisual debate should not be taken for granted. For

many people in the UK browsing the iPlayer app on their TVs or phones, this brings up a reality that might never be approached in any other way. Similar to signage, media existence highlights presence and serves for awareness raising. While reaching the non-speaking audience is relevant, it is not sufficient for MLM (Willis 2024b). Here, sport has been shown to be particularly effective for BBC Alba (Ramon & Haynes 2019; MacKenzie 2018).

One important measure of the impact of MLM is whether it motivates people to use the language more (Moring 2013). Although national awareness of its existence and its relation to national identity is important, it is not enough to determine successful impact. In that sense, audience figures alone are insufficient; they must be correlated with language courses intake or access to other types of language-demanding activities. This could be achieved as part of their existing audience research surveys. This is important because having an ample array of programmes might be justified not as much by individual viewing figures but by continual availability which ensures that interest is met with sufficient content.

The logical framework we use to evaluate BBC Alba focuses on the information and data the channel itself provides. However, it is also worth reflecting on the limitations of this data and what else the channel could consider. Language use is a large factor here, with BBC Alba reflecting very little on the effects it has had on the normalisation and standardisation of Scottish Gaelic. Rather, it seems to take Gaelic viewing figures and audience appreciation as a sufficient measurement of anything related to the language. Whilst the figures for Gaelic audience appreciation remain high, the viewing figures for Gaelic have been consistently falling from a high of 76% in 2011/12 to below 50% for the first time in 2023/24 – specifically, 46%. This demonstrates that something is not right with the core community. Furthermore, from the language perspective, BBC Alba does not provide any data on language use – i.e. the amount of English used in programming. Thus, while it may report that it broadcasts X number of hours per week or per genre, given the varying degree of use of English it cannot be said to be the same X number of hours broadcast in Scottish Gaelic. Whilst this may not be of prime concern to the BBC itself, it is clearly of relevance to MG Alba given its mandate. The channel should therefore consider broadening or refining its indicators to focus more on language (see O'Connell 2013), rather than simply replicating the same kinds of indicators that a majority-language broadcaster would use.

A clear positive for the channel is the growth of short form content views, with the most recent figures showing a rise to 12.3 million from 5.9 million the previous year. MG Alba (2024, 8) mentions this in its most recent annual report but it does not seem to reflect on why. Moreover, it does not offer any information on the viewers in terms of language use – it would be imperative to know how many of these are Gaelic speakers. Whilst it is not possible to directly extrapolate this for the entire 12.3 million, social media analytical tools will offer the ability to disaggregate data by different user demographics. We would encourage the channel to provide different key indicators related to this in the future because it is clearly growing in importance in stark contrast to the figures for weekly reach. Only then can a more accurate evaluation be made on how the channel serves its two primary audience groups: the core Gaelic community and the wider Scottish audience. Moreover, if underperforming in short content with regard to Gaelic speakers, subsequent steps could be taken to encourage Gaelic speakers in creating content, reaching out to independent content creators who post in Gaelic and offering them a path into the channel. Therefore, further research could focus on if/how BBC Alba could facilitate digital content creators to provide content in Gaelic also through platforms such as Instagram or TikTok.

To summarise, this evaluation points to a mixed picture for BBC Alba in terms of its performance. Its initial success in terms of headline indicators has certainly waned in recent years and thus the channel finds itself at a crossroads where it is no longer growing but rather shrinking in certain audience measures.

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Notes

[1] At the time of BBC Alba's launch, the BBC Trust was the relevant governing body. It has since been replaced by the BBC Board in 2017.

[2] However, unlike the clarification made for S4C in the same report (BBC 2024, 157), there is no clarity as to how many of those hours were produced by the BBC, and whether it includes the ones commissioned by MG ALBA.

[3] The focus on Scottish Gaelic heartlands has been debated as geographic priorities for policy intervention in recent publications (see Chalmers 2021).

Presoja uvedbe javne radiotelevizije BBC Alba v škotski gelščini

Povzetek

Članek proučuje politično odločitev glede uvedbe televizijskega programa BBC Alba in zagotavljanja javnega servisa za govorce gelščine, pri čemer se osredotoča na različne cilje in naloge dveh glavnih financerjev – BBC in MG Alba. S pomočjo logičnega okvira analiziramo cilje in strategije, ki jih je program BBC Alba razvil za svoji glavni ciljni skupini: skupnost govorcev gelščine in širše škotsko občinstvo. Pri tem izhajamo iz podatkov iz letnih poročil, vključno z velikostjo in zadovoljstvom občinstva in številom spletnih uporabnikov. Naša analiza kaže, da so bili zastavljeni cilji sicer večinoma doseženi, vendar so bili prvotni cilji bolj usmerjeni k širši skupnosti kot pa v podporo ohranjanju oz. revitalizaciji jezika. Podajamo predloge, kako prilagoditi vložke in rezultate, da bi politika bolj koristila govorcem gelščine. Ugotavljamo, da je bil vpliv BBC Alba na širše škotsko občinstvo večji kot na skupnost govorcev gelščine.

Ključne besede

Javna radiotelevizija, manjšinski jeziki, škotska gelščina, presoja politike