The Scottish independence referendum, political journalism and the news media landscape.

Marina Dekavalla, University of Sussex

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum was the most important moment of decision making in this small nation since the two referendums on devolution from the UK in 1997 and in 1979 (Mitchell et al., 1998). As such, it offered a major opportunity for its media to support an extremely rich and engaging public debate. In the two years before the vote, the Scottish media, whose position in the UK media ecology will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, were enhanced by becoming platforms for deliberation and opinion formation serving a significantly increased public appetite for political argument.

This chapter will argue that the referendum gave a boost to the significance of political journalism in Scotland not only during the campaign, but also in its aftermath, as it provided a clear indication that there was a demand for more extensive and diverse news provision within the nation. However, the economic challenges faced by the media industry both before and after the campaign meant that change was moderate and controlled by the big organisations that operate in the Scottish market. These challenges are so deep, that they could not be overcome by the temporary life injection given to the public sphere in the period of the referendum campaign.

In what follows I shall first briefly discuss Scotland’s media system and the media’s role in the political life of the nation. I will then explore the coverage of the 2014 campaign and the significance of this event for reinvigorating political news coverage in Scotland. Finally I will discuss the longer term impact of this event for the Scottish media and what it meant for changes in the industry after the referendum had taken place.

Scotland and the media

Scotland is a small nation of five million people, which forms part of the United Kingdom. Although it retained much of its institutional distinctness after the Union of 1707, manifested in its separate legal and education systems and its own Church, devolution further solidified this separateness with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament legislates on all policy matters affecting daily life in Scotland except for issues reserved to the UK Parliament, such as the economy and foreign policy. The Scottish government, led by the First Minister, is the devolved executive body accountable to the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish devolution was initially envisaged by the UK government as a safety valve for a long-developing desire for self-determination, and was therefore designed in such a way as to obstruct further moves towards independence (Devine, 2016: 208). Political and social processes in the following fifteen years however meant that this intention did not entirely succeed (Devine, 2016; Johns and Mitchell, 2016). An official independence referendum was held in 2014 and, although it was unsuccessful, public debate on Scottish independence and the possibility of a second referendum continues at the time of writing.
Like in other small nations, the media have played a significant role in maintaining Scottish cultural distinctiveness from the nation’s bigger neighbour (Schlesinger and Benchimol, 2015) both before and after devolution. Indigenous Scottish newspapers which are still published today (e.g. the Scotsman, the Herald, the Daily Record, the Press and Journal) were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although each of these titles has been traditionally rooted in the city where it is produced, and has comparatively fewer readers outside it, the Scotsman, the Herald and the Record have been marketing themselves as Scottish nationals for the last few decades. Scottish television broadcasting was established in the 1950s and 60s, when Scottish Television (STV) and Grampian took the Channel 3 licenses for central and northern Scotland respectively, and the BBC renamed its Scottish operation as BBC Scotland. Just the existence of these Scottish-named channels helped reinforce a sense of Scottish distinctiveness (Hassan, 2014). Since their inception, print and broadcast Scottish media have been central platforms supporting a distinctive political public sphere.

However by contrast to other small nations, Scotland’s media are in more closely interwoven relationships of coexistence and competition with English media within the Scottish market. Firstly, unlike in other stateless nations like Quebec or Catalonia, most Scottish media do not serve a separate linguistic community and therefore do not have a niche, linguistically defined market, using the media to maintain its language. English is the overwhelmingly dominant language in Scotland and is used by most of its media, with the exception of Gaelic platforms like BBC Alba, which serve relatively small, geographically restricted communities (Cormack, 2008).

Secondly, Scottish media are not often owned by autonomous Scottish companies. Major broadcasting and digital platforms like BBC Scotland produce some Scottish material but rely heavily on their London headquarters for the majority of their content. Until the launch of the BBC’s dedicated Scottish channel in 2019, there was no television channel with exclusively Scottish content in the English language. Scottish television news provision on both BBC and STV consists of a 30-minute daily bulletin, broadcast as an opt-out from the main programming and there has been a long public debate about its sufficiency. Besides, broadcasting is one of the issues reserved to the UK Parliament since devolution, and technically the Scottish Parliament does not have any powers in this domain. The main morning dailies that claim national newspaper status in Scotland are owned by UK-wide or international conglomerates: Reach Plc, formerly Trinity Mirror and publisher of the UK Mirror and Daily Express newspapers, owns the Daily Record; Newsquest Plc, owned by American company New Media Investment, owns the Herald and the National; JPI Media, established by Johnston Press’s creditors when the latter went into administration in 2018, owns the Scotsman. These are respectively the first, second and third biggest local newspaper publishers, controlling between them over 600 titles around the UK.

This means that Scotland does not enjoy an equally diverse and independent indigenous media ecology as other small nations. Initiatives such as the 2008 Scottish Broadcasting Commission or the 2011 Scottish Digital Network Panel, which sought ways to enhance broadcasting, were welcomed in the Scottish Parliament but did not instigate action. Ultimately, questions concerning Scotland’s media infrastructure, funding and ownership are
highly politicised and taking action around media provision is not a straightforward matter (Blain, 2017).

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, indigenous media are and have been for several decades in close competition for Scottish audiences with English media (Dekavalla, 2015). London-based UK national newspapers are also sold in Scotland and many of them have created very successful Scottish editions, such as the Scottish Sun which became the best-selling newspaper in Scotland in 2006. Similarly, major UK-wide news portals are the dominant destination for online news across the nations of the UK. Compared to their Scottish counterparts, London-based media tend to be much better resourced and in a better financial position to innovate in both offline and online content and marketing ideas.

Clearly, like everywhere in the world, the media in Scotland have been challenged during the last two decades by increasing competition introduced by online platforms, which have jeopardised traditional media’s business model (Dekavalla, 2015). Scottish media have been affected by a very rapid decline in audiences (especially for the print press), and a move of advertisers to digital platforms which don’t produce news, such as search engines and social media, where companies can promote their products in a more efficient and targeted way. In the years before the 2014 referendum, Scottish newspapers had been losing thousands of readers, considerably reducing their investment in content, and there was debate around whether commercial broadcasting had the resources to continue their news provision (McIvor, 2010). However Scotland’s traditionally liberal media system contributed to an industry culture where direct state subsidy is viewed as a potential risk to journalistic independence and has therefore been avoided as a solution to the crisis (Dekavalla, 2018b). Liberal attitudes are historically ingrained in the Scottish media industry and, as I argue elsewhere, they shape state and industry responses to the financial crisis of the press (Dekavalla, 2018b).

As indicated so far, the Scottish media environment has for a long time been very competitive with a range of UK-wide and indigenous Scottish platforms competing for a relatively small audience. Survival has thus depended on successfully differentiating a platform from competition, adapting to audience attitudes and trends without alienating loyal readers and viewers and, of course, monetising this successfully. Indigenous Scottish media are widely seen as having the duty to serve a distinctive public sphere and Scottish national interests, especially in the run-up to the 2014 referendum (Schlesinger and Benchimol, 2015), but at the same time they are embedded in structures which attach them to UK-wide institutions. This is the environment in which political journalists operated during the independence referendum.

The 2014 referendum and political journalism

The 2014 Scottish referendum campaign was the longest the nation had ever experienced. The official political campaigns supporting independence and the union (Yes Scotland and Better Together respectively) were launched in mid-2012 and the referendum took place in September 2014. The referendum itself came about as a result of a landslide win by the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 2011 Scottish parliamentary election. Although this was not the SNP’s first time in government, it was its strongest electoral performance to that date,
and it enabled the party to pursue its manifesto promise to hold a referendum, to which eventually the UK government also agreed in 2012. At that time, support for independence within Scotland was relatively low, at about 30% according to polls, with equal support for increased devolution and the status quo (Curtice, 2014). The length of the campaign allowed the Yes side to gain significant ground, supported by the main political parties behind it (the SNP, the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party) as well as a substantial grassroots movement that the Yes campaign helped nurture. Eventually 45% of those who participated in the referendum voted for independence. These figures suggest that the two years of the referendum campaign saw a shift in attitudes among a part of the electorate. At the end of this period, independence enjoyed more support than at the start, even though it was still not the majority’s preference.

The SNP had grown in popularity during the early post-devolution years and won all Scottish parliamentary elections from 2007 onwards, but this did not initially correlate with support for independence. Its success in those years was due to its perceived efficient performance in government, its perception as the main political representative of Scottish interests, and the parallel decline of its political opponents (Devine 2016; Johns and Mitchell, 2016). A large part of Scottish voters, including some SNP voters, had been ambivalent towards independence before 2012. The Scottish media had been largely aligned with this scepticism (McNair, 2008). During the 2012-2014 campaign, no Scottish newspaper came out in favour of independence, with the exception of the Sunday Herald only in the last months of the campaign. There are likely to be many reasons for this stance of the press, but the fact that opinion polls until then showed that the Scottish electorate was not convinced about independence might have played a role. At a time of fast declining readerships, the possible risk of alienating existing readers could not have been taken lightly. Indeed the preferred narrative of the indigenous Scottish titles (except the Sunday Herald) in their September 2014 editorials was in favour of increased devolution instead of independence (Dekavalla, 2016). This was also the preferred, or “least opposed”, option in opinion polls in previous years (Curtice, 2014). Broadcasters did not openly support either side, as broadcasting licenses bind them to rules of impartiality, even though some Yes supporters questioned broadcasters’ performance during the campaign.

The media coverage of the referendum within Scotland framed it as a decision around different policy areas, such as the economy, public services, or Scotland’s international relationships (Dekavalla, 2018a). These policy frames were promoted by both the official campaigns, each setting out their own arguments for why these areas would be better after a Yes or a No vote. By tying the referendum outcome to specific policy changes, both campaigns aimed to engage voters in what could have otherwise been a very abstract, constitutional debate (ibid).

The official campaigns were very powerful in shaping the media’s frames because journalists relied on the campaigns for their day-to-day news sources, saw themselves as external reflectors rather than shapers of the political debate, because the campaigns had newsworthy political “heavy-weights” speaking on their behalf and, despite their differences, both campaigns were similarly focusing on promoting policy frames (Dekavalla, 2018a). When trying to explain what the referendum was about in interviews I carried out with them several months after the vote, political journalists working in broadcasting referred to the policy areas
the two political sides put forward, and attributed the framing of the campaign to them rather than to their own perception or interpretation. They also denied that their media had any role in defining the issue. They felt their role was instead to reflect a discussion between the two sides that was taking place somewhere else, primarily on the campaign trail between politicians, independently of the media reporting on it. The media, in journalists’ account, followed the big political actors in the two campaigns due to their inherent newsworthiness. They had a close relationship with both official sides during the campaign checking with them on their daily schedules, as these were the main sources to consult. All this meant that the two campaigns were able to define the referendum in their own terms (Dekavalla, 2018a). The mainstream media paid some attention to grassroots campaigning too, but the agenda of the day was mostly set by the two official sides.

At the same time, the binary Yes/No question, the application of the same regulatory rules in referendums as in elections and the balance norm in broadcasting, as well as the inherent newsworthiness of the competition between the two opponent sides encouraged a parallel heavy prominence of game frames (Dekavalla, 2018a). Most journalists covering the referendum had previous experience of covering elections, where political competition is at the core of the event; while media regulation makes no distinction between referendums and elections. For broadcasters, the referendum was an exciting competition that gave them the opportunity to be at the centre of the debate and attract more viewers, while at the same time ensuring that they adhere to impartiality rules by allowing equal air time to representatives of the two opponent sides (Dekavalla, 2018a). Thus the “game” of the campaign became the most prominent frame in their coverage, followed very closely by the policy frame.

Irrespective of the details of the coverage though, the 2014 referendum was a major boost for political journalism in Scotland. In the short term, the public’s interest in the referendum meant more political news and debate content across print, broadcast and online media. In the longer term, as I will argue later in this chapter, it set in motion other changes in the Scottish media landscape.

During the campaign, print and broadcast media increased their political coverage. For the press this meant extra pages and special supplements especially in the final months. More importantly, it also brought about a short-lived increase in copy sales in the run-up to the vote (Dekavalla, 2018b: 118). For broadcasters, it meant the establishment of two dedicated public affairs programmes: STV launched Scotland Tonight in 2011, and BBC Scotland replaced its Scottish edition of Newsnight with Scotland 2014 in the final months of the campaign. This was a big step, offering dedicated current affairs provision for Scotland, to support the two broadcasters’ existing evening news bulletins (Reporting Scotland and STV News at Six respectively). Both the daily evening news bulletins occasionally ran extended one-hour editions towards the end of the campaign. Additionally, the channels screened several ad-hoc special programmes on the pros and cons of independence, including two official Leaders Debates in August and September 2014. All this generated extra hours and pages of coverage and new opportunities to engage with readers and viewers via traditional and digital platforms.
However the referendum will more likely be remembered as an occasion when traditional media were challenged by grassroots groups taking over the debate on digital media (Law, 2015). A range of dedicated websites emerged to support a Yes or a No outcome, and mainstream social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were also full of deliberation on the merits and disadvantages of independence (Buchanan, 2016). Much of this debate took place among partisan groups (Hassan, 2014) and the sensitivity of the issue meant that the participants engaging in the debate online were likely the more vocal supporters of both sides, rather than everyone in society. Still, digital and grassroots media attracted mainstream media attention in the campaign and reinforced a sense that traditional political journalism needed to adapt to embrace a part of the audience that might have felt distrustful or unrepresented by the existing institutional media.

The media landscape after the referendum: continuity and change

The five years that immediately followed the 2014 referendum saw some change in the Scottish media landscape with existing players in the market introducing a new television channel and a new newspaper. As I will suggest below, the referendum campaign and the focus it brought onto the Scottish public sphere were significant contributors to these developments. At the same time though, the ongoing struggle all media experience in maintaining audiences and/or advertising remains significant and it restricts the capacity of the Scottish media industry to innovate or open itself up to new entrants.

Although it did not lead to an independent state, the referendum drew attention to Scotland’s distinctiveness, the appetite for debate within the nation, and an emerging disenchantment with traditional media establishments among parts of the public. For example, ahead of the BBC Charter renewal in 2016, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee took evidence from broadcasters on the BBC’s performance and position in Scotland (DCMS, 2016). They did not do this for any of the other nations within the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Less than a year later, the BBC proposed to establish a new television channel for Scotland. This was framed as part of the BBC’s commitment, in its renewed Charter, “to increase investment in Scotland and to ensure that proportionately more of the licence fee is spent on dedicated services in Scotland” (BBC, 2017: 3). It was also intended “to address the BBC’s perception issues in Scotland” (ibid) (referring to concerns that the BBC was not equally trusted in Scotland as in the other UK nations), and to better represent the nation and its political structures. News provision would have a central position in the programming of this new channel, with an hour-long daily bulletin made in Scotland, covering the national and international agenda of the day from a Scottish perspective, and opening 80 new jobs for journalists (BBC, 2017: 6). This point in the channel’s plans spoke to a long-standing debate about what was known as the “Scottish Six” question, a claim raised in previous decades for replacing the BBC’s early evening UK and Scottish news programmes with an one-hour entirely Scottish bulletin. This debate had its peaks at different times over the previous twenty years, and the new channel’s evening bulletin was meant to address this call. The BBC Scotland channel launched in early 2019.

Another factor in the aftermath of the referendum campaign was that the Scottish constitutional debate stayed on the political agenda after the vote was over, and the media
became acutely aware of the division in perspectives among their audience on this matter. The referendum result showed that there was also a market for a pro-independence editorial stance, yet this political point-of-view had not been represented within the mainstream press until then. To address this gap, Newsquest, the owners of the Sunday Herald, which was the only title that supported independence in the referendum, launched a new title in 2015 named the National. This was introduced as the only pro-independence title in the Scottish market. With a younger editorial team and a more “savvy” approach to social media promotion, the National’s marketing strategy is very much based around this pro-independence position and uses it as a USP. Eventually the Sunday Herald itself was replaced by a Sunday edition of the daily Herald, both using the same journalistic team. This is another sign of the limitations imposed by the financial struggles that the print press continues to face: any investment in new print products takes place against the backdrop of redundancies and cost-cutting.

The other players in the newspaper market remained cautious in their editorial position on the subject of Scottish independence after the referendum. Independence is still a contentious topic among the public, and most newspapers’ editorial policies seem to avoid explicitly alienating any readers who may or may not support it. They try to achieve this by presenting themselves as “neutral”, at least openly. For example, the Scotsman has suggested its editorial policy is to present “a variety of views”, being “pro-Scottish but not pro any political party” (Ponsford, 2017). The Herald also supports no particular political party and is officially neutral on independence. The Herald stopped publishing its editorial column in March 2019, as another sign of distancing itself from particular political positions.

The post-referendum period did not see an explosion of online political journalism, despite the popularity of online platforms during the campaign. All the major Scottish mainstream media have news portals and mobile phone apps, however newcomers in the field of online political journalism have been few in the last decades and, among them, very few have succeeded in sustaining themselves over time. One example is the Bella Caledonia online magazine, which was established long before the referendum in 2007, and which provides commentary on politics, culture, economics and the media. The referendum gave rise to partisan websites, which are primarily campaigning organisations with an online presence rather than media organisations, such as Wings over Scotland or the Common Weal (Buchanan, 2016). Perhaps the most important barriers for new players to succeed on any media platform include the tight competition between a large number of existing media and the scarcity of advertising or other funds to support new journalistic platforms in such a small market. Mainstream legacy media still dominate in Scotland and, even amongst those, few are financially viable.

Conclusion

In political theory, journalism is often ascribed an important role in providing citizens with information on matters of public concern, and a range of viewpoints that allow them to form opinions and to participate in democratic decision making (Stromback, 2005). It is seen as responsible for maintaining a healthy public sphere and holding the powerful to account.
The 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign was a period that saw high levels of national dialogue and civic engagement. As a result, political journalism flourished to satisfy the public’s appetite for information and exchange of opinion. However this took place in the context of a media industry that was already wrestling with sustainability problems, debt, and fierce competition for a very small audience. Once the referendum was over and day-to-day demand for Scottish news returned to normal, these ongoing problems restricted the ability of the industry to change radically. Existing organisations did make moves to adapt to the post-referendum political climate - some by establishing new products to speak to their Scottish audience, and others by moving towards a more neutral editorial stance to fit the divided electorate. However the media industry remained dominated by the same players as before. The public’s interest in news and journalism during the referendum may have briefly increased readership and viewership for Scottish media, but it did not resolve these media companies’ financial problems in the longer term. It also failed to create a significantly richer or more diverse media ecology to serve active debate around constitutional issues after the referendum.

At the time of writing, the industry was facing further sustainability concerns, as a result of the international coronavirus crisis, which particularly hit print sales. In that context, there were calls for the Scottish government to intervene to support the press and help these businesses maintain their print and online products (Bol, 2020). This argument emphasised the civic role journalism plays at such moments of crisis, making it an important public good that upholds public life. Similar calls for state support for the media will likely intensify in the economic recession that seems certain to follow the coronavirus epidemic.

International economic and political developments will probably impact developments in Scotland in the coming years. What is certain is that the need will remain for a breadth of sources of political news and commentary on different media platforms to facilitate deliberation and decision making in the public sphere. How this diversity will become financially viable is a question for several actors, including the news industry itself, regulators and governments.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\] Following the 1997 referendum, the Scotland Act 1998 established the new parliament and devolved responsibilities to it.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\] Over the last years, Newsquest has run several rounds of redundancies in its Scottish titles, which continue to struggle financially.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\] JPI has unsuccessfully been trying to sell the Scotsman since 2018. Potential buyers included all of the Scotsman’s rival companies but the sale did not go through. Like other titles, the Scotsman has significant debts accumulated over a long period.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\] The strategic game frame appeared in 70% of television coverage of the referendum on BBC Scotland and 69% of that on STV in the final month of the campaign; and in 53% of newspaper coverage in seven weeks selected from different points in the two-year campaign. During the same sampling periods, the policy frame appeared in 68% of the BBC coverage, 62% of the STV coverage and 51% of the newspaper coverage. See Dekavalla, 2018a:93 for a detailed breakdown and discussion of these findings.
References


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