

Abstract

The history of the BBC's regional programming is one of perennial tension between representing and reflecting the diversity of the UK's nations and regions, and what is often perceived as an unrelenting 'metropolitan centrality'. Through charting the mixed fortunes of English-language arts television for and about Wales, this article examines how the narrow range of cultural representation available on BBC television is situated within a PSB strategy that continues to regard regional arts as inherently 'provincial' and as such, inferior to that of London. The data and analysis presented derives from a broader study based on twenty-one qualitative interviews conducted with key figures directly involved in the production and commissioning of arts content across the BBC's television, radio and online services. The accounts provided by these interviewees are also contextualised by analysis of broadcasting policy and internal BBC documents, including the BBC's annual year books and reports. The article concludes by arguing that if the BBC is to reflect more adequately the true diversity of the UK's nations and regions, and the distinct arts and cultures constituted within them, it must start by devolving its commissioning powers more equally. Rather than merely shifting centralisation from London to allocated 'centres of excellence' such as Scotland in the case of arts broadcasting, an effective public service arts proposition should strive to give greater autonomy and agency to the nations and regions so that they might build their arts strategies in their own image as opposed to that of the capital.

Keywords: public service broadcasting; BBC; arts broadcasting; television; Wales; nations and regions; provincialism

Introduction

As a publicly funded institution, the BBC is required to ‘represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities’ (BBC 2016). However, as noted by Charlotte Higgins in her account of the corporation ‘the relationship between the BBC and the UK at large has never been uncontested or straightforward’ (2015 196). As is clear from the BBC’s own discourse, in the corporation’s eyes both the English regions and the ‘small nations’ (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) are lumped together as one entity. In the history of the BBC’s ‘regional’ programming is one of perennial tension between representing and reflecting the diversity of the UK’s nations and regions and what is often perceived as an unrelenting ‘metropolitan centrality’ (Harvey and Robins 1994: 39). Although a number of scholars have examined the relationship between London and the nations and regions as one of bureaucratic control (Pegg 1983; Scullion 1995; Briggs 1995), less attention has been given to the ways in which centralised control is mobilised through artistic standards and canons of taste. As Thomas Hajkowski contends: ‘The department heads in London wanted authority over the regions in order to maintain artistic standards, not program content... BBC Scotland could not put on the plays of Brecht and the North region was discouraged from doing opera’ (2010: 114). The privileged position of London-originated content on the airwaves during this time was in large part symptomatic of a prevailing attitude that regarded regional culture as unequivocally inferior to the metropolis. In this sense, the establishment of the BBC’s Regional Scheme in 1930 represented the beginning of a continuing contradiction between ambitions to serve licence fee payers across the UK effectively and the level of autonomy and devolved funding required to reflect adequately the artistic life of individual nations and regions.

Programmes about the visual arts, opera, theatre, dance, photography, music, architecture and literature having a long tradition on our screens and radios. Since its inception

in 1922, the BBC has occupied an important and constantly evolving role as a distributor, patron, intermediary and, more recently, self-styled ‘champion’ of the arts. The establishment of public service broadcasting (PSB) in Britain was in many ways also the beginning of arts broadcasting, with the BBC’s first Director-General, John Reith, placing arts firmly at the heart of his ambitions ‘to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every human department of knowledge, endeavour and achievement’ (1924: 37). Within this context, arts broadcasting has become synonymous with and symbolic of public service ideals, with arts output hours and spend often used as a litmus test by policymakers and as evidence by the BBC as to how well the broadcaster is fulfilling its public service remit. But beyond merely providing access to high art, the broadcasting of arts and culture has attempted to fulfil a more instrumental purpose in British democratic and civic life. Informed by the influential work of the Victorian poet and cultural critic, Matthew Arnold, Reith and his contemporaries regarded ‘high culture’ as a fundamental moral good and a means by which to cultivate both the individual and create a more equal, civilised society. Arnold’s often-cited definition of culture as ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’ (1869: viii) was used to justify positioning London as not only the UK’s geographic capital, but also broadcasting’s cultural capital.

Through charting the mixed fortunes of arts broadcasting for and about Wales, this article examines how the narrow range of cultural representation available on BBC television is situated within a PSB strategy that continues to regard regional arts and culture as inherently ‘provincial’ and as such, inferior to that of London. Whilst much has been written both in academia and within policy discussions around the BBC’s representation of the nations and regions of the UK (Harvey and Robins 1994; Briggs 1995; Hajkowski 2010; McElroy and Noonan 2016), the specific history of regional arts broadcasting has not been the subject of

detailed analysis. In addition, although a significant body of research exists concerning the role of broadcasting in constructing and representing concepts of nation and national identity in Wales (Barlow et al. 2005; Medhurst 2010; Blandford and Lacey 2011; McElroy et al. 2017), this literature does not focus specifically on the role of arts and cultural programming. Because of this relative neglect, the present work contributes to both historical and contemporary debates concerning regional representation through critically analysing the continuing metropolitan-centric nature of the BBC's current arts strategy. Although regarded by many producers as merely a branding strategy for arts content, the launch of BBC Arts in 2014 also constituted a high-profile push toward a more inclusive and democratic image of arts programming on the BBC. As Director-General, Tony Hall proclaimed at its launch: 'The arts really matter. They're not for an elite or for a minority. They're for everybody' (2014). By critically examining the current dearth of English-language arts television in Wales, this article highlights fundamental discrepancies between ambitions to provide 'arts for everybody' and how this is delivered in practice.

The data and analysis presented derives from a broader study based on a critical appraisal of twenty qualitative interviews conducted between February and November of 2015 with a range of professionals directly involved in the production and commissioning of arts content across the BBC's television, radio and online services. Key interviewees informing this particular work include the former Head of Arts for BBC Cymru Wales and Chief Executive Officer of the independent production company, Flame Media; the Former Head of Arts, Music and Features for BBC Cymru Wales, founding chair of National Theatre Wales and Chief Executive of independent production company, Green Bay; Chief Executive of Arts Council Wales; Executive Producers for BBC Cymru Wales, alongside a number of independent/freelance producers. A further interview was also conducted in July 2018 with the

series producer for *Double Yellow*. All unattributed quotations are from these sources. The accounts provided by these interviewees are also contextualised by an analysis of broadcasting policy and internal BBC documents, including the BBC's annual year books and reports.

The problem of provincialism

Within an institutional context, the earliest references to what might now be defined as arts programming from the nations and regions can be found in the second of the BBC's annual year books, published in 1929. Before discussing the output for various areas of the UK in turn, the document sets out a rationale for 'regional' programming as a public service as follows:

Much has been said and written of the effect which broadcasting is having in raising standards of taste and standardising English pronunciation. In equalising opportunities for all countries, classes and conditions of men of hearing the best of culture and entertainment, surely broadcasting can at the same time foster local divergencies, keep alive the memory of historical association and import into its programmes the colour derived from romantic ceremonies and dialect survivals. (87)

Although this statement recognises the importance of 'local divergencies', it marginalises them as antiquarian survivals that afford a little regional 'colour'. In his seminal study of provincialism, Donald Read argues that the BBC failed to recognise the need for an 'outward-looking regionalism' in which the distinct social, political and cultural life of the nations and regions would be reflected across the network (1964: 252). Rather, the BBC's version of regionalism was tokenistic, animated by a recognition that, politically, it had to make some concession to regional diversity. According to Asa Briggs, the introduction of regional broadcasting in Britain was largely motivated by 'the necessary task of giving listeners in all

parts of the country the chance of listening to ‘alternative programmes’ (1995: 273). Hajkowski contextualises this point further, noting that ‘if the BBC failed to deliver alternative programming, the government might have considered revoking its monopoly status in order to give radio listeners a measure of choice’ (2010: 116). The notion of fostering ‘local divergencies’, as the above quotation shows, was subordinate to the BBC’s dominant assumption that ‘raising standards of taste’ was a product of nationalising London’s cultural offering. As Read argues, the BBC did not accept that the nations and regions might contribute positively to network broadcasting, confining ‘really distinctive regional programmes to their own regions in a spirit of inward-looking regionalism’ (1964: 252).

This fundamentally metropolitan mindset meant that from the outset, regional programming was inconsistent and precarious in its approach to arts. BBC regional directors worked within the remit of: ‘Take from London what you cannot do better yourself, and do yourself what London cannot give you’ (Briggs 1995: 285) limiting the provision of arts programming to that considered a regional ‘divergence’. From the programmes described in the 1929 year book, the majority of output from outside of London appears to be concentrated in Scotland, dwelling on aspects of Scottish theatre, opera, poetry and classical music. In regard to the English regions, the report goes on to cite ‘the North of England’s contributions to wireless programmes’ through classical music concerts broadcast from cities such as Manchester and Liverpool (99). Coverage in the Midlands also featured ‘increased output of serious music’, alongside claims that programming had been ‘enriched by contributions of considerable importance from the artistic resources of London without suffering any loss of local talent and personality’ (102). The report’s description of broadcasting in Northern Ireland is predominantly concerned with how it has contributed to improving the nation’s social and political situation, rather than specific content. For instance, the BBC’s establishment of a

permanent orchestra in Belfast is described as ‘an incalculable asset, not only to the broadcasting service, but also to the community at large’ (93). Similarly, there is little mention of actual programming in Wales with attention instead focusing on the value of radio in the ‘depressed valleys’ of South Wales and only a brief nod to ‘the excellence of the National Orchestra of Wales’ (96).

The policies and attitudes within the BBC at this time were in large part symptomatic of a broader metropolitan bias within the arts establishment itself in which the so-called ‘provinces’ were defined by their subservience to the ‘cultural centre’. In a 1962 presidential address to The English Association, art historian and presenter of the landmark arts series *Civilisation* (BBC Two 1969), Kenneth Clark, discussed the ‘problem of provincialism’, stating:

The history of European art has been, to a large extent, the history of a series of centres, from each of which has radiated a style... which was metropolitan at its centre, and became more and more provincial as it reached the periphery... It may be said that provincialism is merely a matter of distance from a centre, where standards of skill are higher and patrons more exacting. (3)

Franco Moretti criticises and expands upon Clark’s thesis, arguing that centralisation and provincialism are ‘two sides of the same coin’, with the latter ‘not so much a matter of difference from the center, but of *enforced similarity*: the conviction that ‘real’ life is only to be experienced in Paris (or London, or Moscow) – while life in the provinces is merely a shadow’ (1998: 166, author’s emphasis). Despite ambitions to ‘foster local divergencies’, this enforced similarity is pervasive throughout the history of the BBC’s regional broadcasting. In

line with Reith's instrumentalist approach to arts, the role of the BBC in standardising metropolitan culture was strikingly Arnoldian. Arguing for the centralisation of intellectual and artistic work, Arnold lambasted the 'observable note of provinciality' caused by 'remoteness from a centre of correct information' (1864: 163). As a one-to-many medium broadcasting constituted a powerful centralising force that, alongside 'standardising English pronunciation', communicated a unitary notion of culture that conformed to the tastes and standards of the metropolitan elite.

Within this context the distinct art and culture of the nations and regions is at worst invisible and at best relegated to a mere expression of a circumscribed and marginalized place rather than what Bourdieu would term 'legitimate culture' (1984). While, in the words of novelist Arnold Bennett, London is the 'place where newspapers are issued, books written, and plays performed' (qtd in. Read 1964: 246), the nations and regions are framed as offering little more than 'romantic ceremonies and dialect survivals'. The Reithian concept of 'making the nation one man' inherently constituted what Martin McLoone (1993) describes as the management and containment of regional diversity, valuing 'provincial culture' only as far as it conformed to the metropolitan conceptions described above. Yet it is important to recognise that for programme-makers and audiences in the nations and regions the notion of a metropolitan centre is a false one. As Ewyn Ogwen Williams states: 'It may be difficult for a large, London-based monolith organisation to believe that the centre of the world to people living in Wales is Wales' (1993: 61). Through exploring the evolution of PSB in Wales, this next section further examines broadcasting as a site in which the distinct national identities that make up the four nations of the UK are both constructed and contested.

BBC broadcasting in Wales: From provincial to national

From its very inception, regional broadcasting in Wales has been bound up with issues of representation and autonomy, reflecting a London-centric broadcasting ecology which treated 'Wales as a collection of regions, attached to parts of England, rather than as a distinct geographical and cultural entity' (Barlow et al. 2005: 129). Although BBC regional radio networks were established in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the North of England, the Midlands and the West from 1932, it was not until 1937 that Wales and the West of England were split into two distinct broadcasting regions. The BBC defended this initial unity of the Wales and the West of England in its 1934 yearbook, proclaiming that the 'West Regional Station reunites the Kingdom of Arthur after centuries of separation by the Bristol Channel' (189). Much like the Kingdom of Arthur, this unification seemed based more on a romanticised myth rather than any concrete notion of shared identity, resulting in conflicting claims of anti-Welsh and anti-English bias from both sides (Medhurst 2010: 171).

The push for Wales to gain greater independence on the airwaves was shaped by forces that were both political and cultural, with consistent pressure from the Welsh establishment, represented by the University of Wales, local authorities and the Welsh members of parliament, as well as Plaid Cymru's president Saunders Lewis. Lewis actively advocated for a separate Welsh service during the BBC's formative years, warning in 1929 that it would soon be necessary to arrange for thousands of Welshmen to be prosecuted for refusing to pay for English programmes (Davies, 1994). Alongside this, Welsh broadcasters mobilised the BBC's Reithian concept of PSB's 'cultural mission' to advocate for greater representation of Welsh national identity and culture. Hajkowski (2010) outlines how such debates gained increased momentum during the Second World War when regional radio services were suspended and replaced with the national Home Service. In a request to the BBC's London head office for an

increase in the amount of Welsh broadcasting on the Home Service, the Talks Producer, Aneurin Talfan Davies, made the case for Wales as its own 'National region, with very many problems peculiar to itself alone, and which can only be properly handled by the region concerned' (quoted in Hajkowski, 2010: 185).

The concept of Wales as a national region continued to gain traction after the end of the Second World War. In the approach to the BBC's 1951 Charter Renewal, the Labour government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Sir William Beveridge to undertake an inquiry into post-war broadcasting in Britain. Following the recommendations of the Beveridge Committee, the BBC's 1952 Charter established a National Broadcasting Council for Wales with the initial function to control the policy and content of the BBC's Home radio service in Wales. Nevertheless, the arrival of television in Wales in the 1950s followed a similar trajectory as radio, with the BBC transmitter at Wenvoe shared with the West of England until the launch of BBC Wales in 1964. Wales was afforded a certain degree of autonomy in relation to television output, with the 1962 Pilkington Report recommending that the National Broadcasting Councils 'should exercise the same powers in relation to the content of television services as they already do for sound'. However, as noted by Sylvia Harvey and Kevin Robins, 'the power to allocate production resources, and the power to schedule networked programmes' has always been centralised and distributed from London (1994: 42).

The importance of broadcasting to the debates about national identity has been explored in detail by John Davies in his seminal history of the BBC and media policy in Wales. Davies contends: 'It could be argued that the entire national debate in Wales for fifty years and more after 1927, revolved around broadcasting, and that the other concessions to Welsh nationality won in those years were consequent upon the victories in the field of broadcasting.' (1994: 50).

Alongside reflecting a shared national identity and creating a sense of belonging, television is also a site of struggle for ‘representation and recognition of Wales as a *nation* with *national* rights, as opposed to a minority within a region’ (Medhurst 2010: 32, author’s emphasis,). In relation to this, the role of broadcasting in the survival of the Welsh language has been a particularly contentious area of debate. In common with other national minority languages, the issue of Welsh language provision has often been more politically and culturally divisive than unifying (see Mitchell 2009: 143). In the early 1970s, BBC Wales produced six hours of programming a week in Welsh compared to five in English, often provoking ‘critical comment from monoglot viewers’ (Barlow et al. 2005: 143). At the same time significant pressure was building from across the political spectrum for a dedicated Welsh-language television channel, resulting in a high-profile campaign that ultimately led to the establishment of Wales’ fourth channel, S4C (*Sianel Pedwar Cymru* [Channel 4 Wales]) in 1982. The channel was initially funded through a combination of advertising revenue and a fixed annual government grant. However, government support is currently being withdrawn, with all public money set to come from the TV licence fee by 2022.

The BBC’s responsibility as a distributor of Welsh-language television programming effectively came to an end with the launch of S4C. Following the terms set in the 1980 Broadcasting Act, the BBC continued to produce programmes in Welsh for the new channel, with a statutory requirement to supply ten hours per week - a considerable increase from the six hours of Welsh language programming it was producing previously. Since its establishment, S4C has operated under the public service objectives to ‘reflect and strengthen Welsh cultural heritage’ and ‘support Welsh music and arts’ (BBC Trust 2013: 7). Within this remit, S4C has provided a strong arts proposition compared to its English-language counterparts. For instance, music and arts programming constituted 133 hours of S4C’s output

in 2014/15, compared to just 12.9 hours on BBC Wales (S4C 2016: 113). However, although S4C has been praised for its representation of Welsh-speaking communities in Wales, broader concerns have been raised around the relative dearth in English-language provision that reflects Welsh life and culture. As Williams asserts, ‘the expression of Welsh-language culture through television has not been matched by the English-language culture of Wales – the majority culture – because of the lack of airtime and funds’ (1993: 59). Indeed, while S4C does provide English-language subtitles and even audio tracks for some content, the notion that the Welsh language is fundamentally synonymous with Welsh life and culture is a contentious issue. With only 11 per cent of the population able to speak Welsh fluently (Welsh Government 2015), this imbalance signals a significant weakness in the overall public service provision for Wales.

The debates about the nature of broadcasting for Wales are part of the wider processes and politics of devolution in which the opening of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 was a watershed. Due to the absence of a national press in Wales, television and radio played a central role in ‘the formation and maintenance of a collective sense of belonging’ during this period of political change (Medhurst 2009: 148). As Leighton Andrews states, ‘without the Welsh broadcast media, a sense of a Welsh identity distinct from the English might be hard to identify’ (2006: 193). The coming of political devolution had shifted the dominant cultural discourse from the ‘provincial’ toward a ‘regionalist mood that is more confident and self-assertive than in the past’ (Harvey and Robins 1994: 45). Whereas provincialism is defined in relation to its distance to the metropolitan centre, and all the negative connotations associated with that distance, regionalism promoted the self-realisation of local and national identity and led to the brief growth of Welsh arts broadcasting.

More broadly, the changes that were occurring across the political landscape also encouraged Welsh artists to respond to and capture the shifting cultural contexts in which they worked. In his 2000 monograph *Imagining the Nation*, art historian Peter Lord described how the ‘Culture of Wales is in the process of re-shaping itself, or redefining itself, perhaps even of re-inventing itself for the challenges of the new century and in reaction of the new political situation in which it finds itself’ (9). In common with broadcasting, the arts provided a medium through which changing notions of national identity were imagined, realised and represented. It is therefore unsurprising that within this more propitious cultural and political context BBC Wales produced some of its most groundbreaking, innovative and in some cases controversial English-language arts programming.

A fleeting golden age: *The Slate and Double Yellow*

Even though geographical discrepancies within arts broadcasting continued to be evident throughout the 1990s, there were signs that, at least in a Welsh context, a more coherent regional strategy was beginning to develop. Sustaining a trajectory first established almost seven decades ago, Scotland continued to occupy a prominent position within the BBC’s network arts provision, with the organisation’s 1994 annual report highlighting the ‘exceptional’ output from BBC Scotland’s in Music and Arts, going on to state that ‘the distinctive nature of the contemporary arts in Scotland should continue to be represented in network output’ (19). Although there is no mention of arts coverage from the Broadcasting Council of Northern Ireland or the English National Forum¹, in contrast to the previous BBC year books, BBC Wales is also ‘commended’ for its ‘range of quality factual programmes and the excellence of its arts output and activity’ (18). As one interviewee who led BBC Wales’s arts strategy during this time recalls:

There was a bit of a spurt in the early and mid 90s in arts television and I forget how that related to Charter renewal, but it probably did. But certainly there was a bit of a spurt and in Wales that was driven hard by Geraint Talfan Davies who believed in arts television because he believed it was crucial that the nation had the cultural reflection of itself. We've probably never quite recovered that energy since.

Geraint Talfan Davies' was controller of BBC Cymru Wales during the 1990s. His previous roles had included Head of Current Affairs and Assistant Controller of Programmes at HTV Wales before becoming director of programmes for Tyne Tees Television in 1987. From his background working in both Wales and Newcastle, Davies was attuned acutely to the centralised nature of regional broadcasting, noting that 'centralised organisation has been accompanied by a centralised cultural mindset' (2002: 77). Accordingly, in his role as controller Davies was committed publicly to strengthening arts output, leading to the establishment of a number of new and innovative arts series and strands under his tenure.

Perhaps most notable of these was critically acclaimed arts strand, *The Slate* (1993-2000), described in *The Stage* as 'a new weekly "on the move" television arts series to reflect both the English and Welsh language culture in the country in the nineties' (Leavy 1993). Presented by Cardigan-born performance artist, Eddie Ladd, the series alternated between a magazine-style format and full-length documentaries focusing on singular topics. Through both formats, *The Slate* maintained a pluralist approach to culture, capturing a broad gamut of arts in Wales, from fashion to visual arts and poetry to pop music. But it was arguably the magazine format which captured most profoundly the self-assertive and confident 'regionalist mood' of the 1990s. In providing a showcase for Welsh arts and culture, the programme's commissioner, Hilary Boulding, was committed to ensuring *The Slate* magazine was creative

and innovative in form as well as content. As a former executive producer on the programme described:

Hilary made it really strong visually by getting a new generation of young directors in; people who were often out of film school, people who had even had a go at visual installation video art themselves, and then putting them in the hands of strong producers or series producers on the magazine.

This visual and editorial style reflected the contemporary focus of the programme and overtly tapped into the 'Cool Cymru' era of the mid-1990s. Emerging after a period of severe economic decline in Wales following the collapse of the UK coal industry, bands such as Manic Street Preachers, Stereophonics and Super Furry Animals were at the forefront of a 'cultural uprising' that saw 'a nation once on its knees now walking tall' (Owens 2011). During this time *The Slate* dedicated a significant number of its programmes to documenting this moment of musical, cultural and, as previously discussed, political transformation in Wales, from exploring the music scene in Newport to live performances by the Welsh alternative rock band, Catatonia. As opposed to being based in a studio, the focus on location filming also created a strong sense of locality, situating the arts and culture of Wales prominently within the cities, towns and communities in which it was produced. Reactions to *The Slate* were largely positive, with former BBC Cymru Wales Arts and Media Correspondent, Jon Gower, describing it as 'a programme which satisfied both the general viewership and the arts cognoscenti' (2009: 76).

As a successor to *The Slate*, *Double Yellow* (2001) was positioned as a fundamentally avant-garde programme, with BBC Wales declaring 'There's never been a television arts programme quite like it'. In common with its predecessor, *Double Yellow* was also presented

by artists, with actress, Rakie Ayola, dancer Marc Rees and writer, Owen Sheers chosen to 'reflect the cultural range and diversity of Wales' (executive producer). But while *The Slate* had clear roots in both the documentary tradition and the topical magazine programme, *Double Yellow* was purposefully unconventional in its approach. Inspired by the anarchic style of BBC One's children's television programme *Vision On* (1964-76), each programme constituted a series of short films linked by voiceovers designed to produce a show which in itself was a form of artistic expression. Although the series occasionally featured artists such as the poet R.S. Thomas, there was also a distinctly anti-establishment undertone to the programme that emerged not only through its eclectic style, but also in its content. As the series producer recalled:

It shone a light onto parts of the artistic community in Wales that had been neglected. So we didn't really do anything about the Welsh National Opera. We didn't really do anything about what was on in the New Theatre. What we were looking at were these little oddities— I remember there was an artist in residence on Bardsey Island and for five months she collected wool that the sheep had left lying around the island and made felt boots out of it, that was her art piece. We made the most beautiful film about that.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the first series of *Double Yellow* divided audiences. While seemingly a hit with arts enthusiasts and artists alike, the series producer recalls the *Western Mail* giving the programme a particularly scathing review, labelling it 'the worst show that BBC Wales has ever produced'. As he went on to explain: 'It was really touching nerves and annoying people, for sure. But it was also giving voice to the arts community in Wales in a very fresh and new way'. Although often considered too highbrow for general audiences, *Double Yellow* was, fundamentally, an attempt to portray the cultural life of the nation through its own voice and

on its own terms. In this regard, regional creative expression was not only manifested in the subject of the series, but also in the style of the programmes themselves.

The second series of *Double Yellow* took a slightly more conventional approach in an attempt to reach wider audiences, while still retaining a sense of eclecticism and creative style. Nevertheless, it was axed midway through after reportedly failing to prove ‘sufficiently accessible or popular’, according to a BBC spokesperson (*Western Mail* 2001). Lamenting on its loss, the programme’s executive producer described the changing contexts at the time as the BBC recalibrated its output in favour of more cost-effective and populist fare:

It wasn’t mainstream; it wasn’t intended to be mainstream. It was intended to be a bit opinionated, a bit of a critical voice, a bit edgy, and in there some wonderful stuff. Unfortunately, it was deemed too left of centre and it came off the air. For me, it was a mistake. I think we could have worked with it and developed it. It was just seen to be in the trend - and of course that’s when the trend was shifting really – that unless it was much, much easier for audiences to tap into they didn’t want it really.

For many the cancellation of *Double Yellow* was symptomatic of the changing media landscape in which it was produced, with spaces for such experimentation and innovation becoming increasingly limited by the end of the decade. As alluded to above, heightened financial pressures and greater exposure to competitive forces within the BBC at the turn of the millennium had curbed opportunities for arts series that were creative in form as well as content. Moreover, the emerging market-led media policies of the 1997 New Labour government and the subsequent establishment of the independent regulator, Ofcom (Office of Communications) in 2002 resulted in major changes in the organisational structure of the BBC

and its regional funding priorities². The next section examines how policy to move production outside of London and increase spending within the nations and region, borne from the neo-liberalist agenda in which it was conceived, also served to further the decline of English-language arts provision in Wales.

Centres of excellence: The warehouse effect

In 2008 Director of BBC Vision Jana Bennett, announced a new strategy to change ‘the very DNA of the BBC to bring the production of programmes closer to the audiences we serve’. In a speech entitled ‘Beyond the M25: A BBC for all of the UK’, Bennett outlined plans to move from a ‘scatter gun approach’ to funding ‘toward building strategic centres of expertise’, adding that ‘of course London will remain a powerhouse of creative ideas’ (2008). The establishment of these ‘centres of excellence’ was largely the result of a commitment by the BBC to increase spending on programming outside of London to 50 per cent of its overall budget by 2016. While the achievement of this target has predominantly been bolstered by the relocation of high profile series and the production of big budget drama in Wales, designated a centre of excellence for drama, funding for arts and factual programming production became increasingly concentrated in Scotland as a designated centre of excellence in these genres. As the arts lead for BBC Scotland explained:

In terms of the arts we had always made a lot of arts programmes but it was kind of sanctioned that Glasgow and London would be the two main places to make arts programmes, then there’s also a small enclave of arts specialists in Bristol as well. So we tend to get to make most of the arts programmes and I think that’s really important.

At the time of writing, BBC Scotland is now part or wholly responsible for a number of on-going arts series such as BBC One's flagship arts strand, *Imagine* (2003), BBC Two's latest topical magazine programme, *Artsnight* (2015), and BBC Four's *What Do Artists Do All Day?* (2013). BBC Scotland has also seen a number of successful single-series landmark commissions such as *The Story of Scottish Art* (2015), which aired on BBC Two Scotland before moving to the network at a later date. BBC Arts Online is also based in Glasgow, facilitating collaboration between BBC Scotland and cultural organisations in the region and enabling a more immediate response to unfolding news and events concerning the area.

This concentration of resources in London and Glasgow inevitably raises concerns about arts provision for the rest of the UK. The practical challenges of delivering arts provision for Wales within this context is recalled by the former Head of Arts for BBC Cymru Wales, who stated:

What I realised though as I took the role on was that all the network funding had been apportioned to Scotland on the basis that the music centre of excellence funding had been apportioned to Cardiff. So Cardiff became the centre of excellence for music production and Scotland got the network money. The problem for Wales was it didn't have any funding allocated to it within a BBC context to deliver that proposition. So we had to shoot round the edges then really to just pick up an extra little project here and there.

The exact fall in the number of output hours for arts programming over the past decade is difficult to discern, as rather than having a distinct category of its own, BBC Cymru Wales's annual reports group Music and Arts with Drama, Comedy and Entertainment. According to

the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA), output of Arts and Music programming ‘was limited’, constituting just 12.9 hours in 2014/15 (2015: 28). Writing in 2009, Gower also asserted that ‘quantitatively, television arts coverage in Wales is inadequate to reflect the range and breadth of current activity’ (75). As the data above suggests, this is a trend that has continued, if not increased. A more recent report from the Arts Council of Wales stated ‘in recent years we have seen a decline in capability of BBC Cymru Wales to deliver a cultural offer to Wales... Coverage of the arts in Wales has been neglected’ (2015: 5). While BBC Cymru Wales proposes to continue to put ‘Welsh arts, culture and new writing at the heart of our schedule’ (2016: 11), it would appear this dearth of funding has made these good intentions difficult to realise.

Despite an increased recognition of the importance of regional output both politically and culturally, there has been little progression toward a more representative range of programming on the BBC’s network services. A 2008 BBC Trust Impartiality report stated that ‘audiences see the BBC as too preoccupied with the interests and experiences of London, and that those who live elsewhere in the UK do not see their lives adequately reflected on the BBC’, going on to assert that ‘It is not acceptable that a BBC funded by licence fee payers across the whole country should not address the interests of them all in fair measure’ (7). The Wales Broadcasting Committee has been particularly critical in its assessment of the representation of Wales on UK television screens. In its 2008 report to the national assembly the Committee argues forcefully that ‘Each UK PSB (public service broadcaster) is, in different ways, London-centric and everyday life in Wales is reflected nowhere, in any genre at any time on the schedules’ (BBC News 2008). Although spend on first-run UK-network regional productions has increased by 1.5 per cent in Wales since 2008 (Ofcom 2015: 10), this has been achieved principally through high-profile dramas which often do little to reflect the unique cultural

identity of the nation in which it is produced. As the chief executive for the Arts Council of Wales asserted:

It's also about the representation of Wales and the culture of Wales on the BBC, and that's been slightly more challenging I think, particularly given the division between BBC Cymru Wales and BBC UK, and the fact that it is more difficult to get network coverage for things made in Wales. Also people talk a lot about well, isn't it wonderful we've got *Sherlock* and *Casualty*, all these things made in Wales. Well yes, up to a point, but in a sense Wales is just providing a warehouse for these things to be made. Of course it has benefits, but I think we'd like to see more Welsh product reflected, particularly on the network.

This concept of Wales as merely a 'warehouse' for dramas designed for national or international sales is a sentiment also echoed in the findings of a report by Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan on the proliferation of BBC drama production in Wales, highlighting concerns that most were 'not explicitly Welsh in their setting, dialogue, casting, thematic address or mode of address to viewers' and as such had 'not led to significant change in Wales's visibility on the UK television network' (2015: 3). A 2016 report by the Welsh Affairs Committee also stated that this policy to decentralise production 'has not resulted in an increase in the portrayal of the nations and regions on screen' (25).

Thus, one effect of the establishment of regional centres of excellence was to decrease the range and diversity of regional programming. As discussed, designating Wales as the BBC's Centre of Excellence for drama did not increase the representation of Welsh social and cultural life but has made it a 'warehouse' for high profile drama and neglects the value of arts

provision. Therefore, Wales continues to be the ‘invisible nation on UK television screens’ described by the Wales Broadcasting Committee in 2008 (BBC News). As Gower concludes in his critique of the state of arts broadcasting in Wales, ‘we need to safeguard and expand what few outlets and inadequate mirrors we have in Wales. Without them the arts are invisible. As a consequence, so too are we’ (2009: 79). Seen in this light, ‘centres of excellence’ must be understood as a fundamentally metropolitan-centric strategy that is more concerned with locating a certain percentage of production ‘out of London’, rather than bringing a distinct cultural offering ‘out of the regions’ and across the UK.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article suggests that there are only a few moments in the history of English-language arts television in Wales that demonstrate a genuinely outwards looking regionalism of the type Read advocated for in 1964. When creative and innovative arts programmes are commissioned, they are largely confined to regional services, limiting the potential for diverse cultural perspectives across the network. As has been demonstrated, this approach derives from a fundamentally metropolitan conception of cultural taste and values that, rather than ‘foster local divergencies’, continues to regard local and provincial culture to be inferior to that of London. More broadly, the mixed fortunes of arts television in Wales exemplifies the inherently contradictory nature of regional policy in regard to wider issues of centralisation within broadcasting. While *The Slate* and its ill-fated successor *Double Yellow*, reflected a ‘new era of regionalism’ in Wales spearheaded by political devolution, these series were primarily the product of a funding and commissioning structure that lent greater agency to the nations and regions than the ‘centres of excellence’ that superseded it. Rather than conduits for autonomy, centralising particular genres reduces the capacity of nations and regions to determine their own broadcasting strategy. In this regard it would appear little has

changed since Read first criticised the BBC's regional scheme for failing to stimulate 'provincial independence and outward-looking provincial attitudes' (1964: 253).

Although this article has focused predominantly on the situation in Wales, this lack of arts television featuring and produced in the nations and regions is an issue reflected across many other areas of the UK outside of London and Glasgow. Respondents to a 2014 public consultation on the BBC's television services highlighted the need for 'more regional coverage of arts, culture, music and festivals with less reliance on London/English events and the big national events (e.g. The Proms, Glastonbury)' (BBC Trust, 38). This dearth in regional arts broadcasting highlights a fundamental contradiction in Tony Hall's commitment to 'arts for everybody' and how this ambition is delivered in practice. While often framed in terms of accessibility and class, there is a pressing need for cultural programming that resonates with licence fee payers across the distinct nations and regions that constitute the UK. As Arts Council England advocated in their call for further regional representation across the BBC, 'it is vital that entry points to culture can be located within regional arts coverage and reflect the diversity of the population on both regional and national platforms, to engage and stimulate the widest audience possible' (2015: 6). Any commitment to increasing cultural participation and engagement in the arts must also be a commitment to increasing regional and national representation and cultural diversity within the overall arts proposition.

If the BBC is to reflect the diversity of the UK's nations and regions and the distinct arts and cultures constituted within them more adequately, then it must start by more equally devolving its commissioning powers, rather than just tokenistic shifts in centralisation from London to rather arbitrarily allocated centres of excellence such as Scotland in the case of arts programming. Such strategies often serve merely to relocate the same top-down

commissioning frameworks, frequently with the very same staff who were involved in key decision-making processes in London. At present, these ‘lift and shift’ strategies represent a fundamental contradiction between high-sounding ambitions to increase regional representation, and how regional policy is implemented in practice. Although seemingly designed to support the nations and regions, the redirection of funding through ‘centres of excellence’ serves as a control mechanism to further reduce their autonomy. Rather than merely maintaining and reproducing London-centric hierarchies, an effective PSB system should strive to give greater autonomy and agency to the nations and regions so they might build their arts strategies in their own image as opposed to that of the capital.

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Notes

¹ National Broadcasting Councils for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and English Regional Councils were established under the 1952 Royal Charter to report on the extent to which BBC services met the needs and interest of audiences in their respective nation or local English region.

² Although not an official regulator of the BBC at this point, Ofcom were tasked with producing annual reports on how public service broadcasters are performing in terms of delivering their public service remit. These reports held particular significance as they would also feed into government reviews of the BBC's Royal Charter.