

Evidence from



to the  
Northern Culture All-Party Parliamentary Group

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## 1. Who We Are

*MediaNorth* has been published since December 2018 by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (North). CPBF(North) has been active for two decades. We publish books and pamphlets and also organise public meetings/zoom events. More information about us is on our website: <http://medianorth.org.uk/>

CPBF (North) covers the North West, Yorkshire & the Humber and the North East of England, and one aim is to highlight threats to regional media, such as the assault on jobs and conditions in local and regional newspapers. We also campaign for strong regional media that sustain creative and artistic work in broadcasting, and therefore warmly welcome this inquiry by the APPG into Northern Culture.

CPBF(North) also recognises that political, economic, cultural and media power is concentrated in London and the Home Counties. Questions about how we protect, sustain and develop

Northern culture have to be located within a broader economic and political analysis which recognises this reality.

## **2. The Scope of Our Evidence**

The main focus of our evidence is on the key role local and regional print and broadcasting media have played in nurturing and promoting the diverse range of cultural activity created across the North of England.

We highlight the threats to this crucial role and argue for policies to sustain and protect this vital part of cultural infrastructure.

Another crucial part of the support system which sustains cultural activity has also been seriously eroded: the cuts of central government funding since 2010 for local government have had a damaging impact on the ability of councils to adequately finance a range of core cultural provisions such as libraries, museums and the arts.

## **3. Funding**

Culture feeds off the sap of economics. Since 2010 total government spending in the North has decreased by £6.3 billion. According to the Centre for Cities, seven of the ten British cities hit hardest by austerity are in the North. The average weekly pay in the region has fallen by £21 since 2008. People living in the North die earlier than people living in the South. Of the ten areas in England that currently have the highest Covid-19 rates, six are in the North. (1)

It is clear that areas most dependent on government support – the poorest parts of the country – have been the worst affected.

The government has begun to recognise this inequity. The Plan for Growth highlights ‘Levelling Up’ as its most important mission. This is welcome although it remains unclear how this policy will be effectively implemented.

The Industrial Strategy Council, before it was disbanded, issued its final report in March 2021. The report argued that the UK’s plans to spread economic growth into the regions of the UK appeared “over-reliant on infrastructure spending and the continued use of centrally controlled funding pots thinly spread across a range of initiatives.

“Evidence, historical and international, suggests this is unlikely to be a recipe for success,” the Council said. “Sustained local growth needs to be rooted in local strategies, covering not only infrastructure but skills, sectors, education and culture.” (2)

These points were reinforced in another report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee into the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Beis) Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund.

Meg Hillier, the Committee's chair, said the fund suffered the same problems as similar Whitehall programmes by being 'too focused on inputs, on ticking boxes and distributing funds', rather than on outcomes. (3)

The responsibility for cultural funding lies with the DCMS but lessons need to be learned from other government departments about how funding for cultural initiatives can be allocated most effectively to realise positive results.

*• We think that one key policy which the APG should consider is that funding for cultural initiatives should be rooted in strategies which draw on local and regional knowledge and expertise to ensure that it is allocated effectively.*

#### **4. Cultural Infrastructure: Public Service Broadcasting**

Television and radio have made a vital cultural and economic contribution to the creative industries in the UK. Without work available in broadcasting for actors, musicians, writers, orchestras, directors, producers and editors the UK-wide sectors in theatre, film and music would find it much more difficult - perhaps impossible - to operate successfully. Investment by Public Service Broadcasters in the first run, original content was £2.6 billion in 2018. This had fallen from £3.5 billion in 2004 though the fall is in part compensated for by an increase in co-production contributions from third parties, including from the new entrants like Netflix and other SVODS. (4)

#### **The BBC**

The funding of the BBC has always provided a cornerstone to the whole system of TV production in the UK. But the BBC's spend on first run, original programmes has reduced from £1.3 billion in 2014 to £1.2 billion in 2018 and government action in a period of austerity has reduced the value of the Licence Fee by some 30 per cent since 2010. (5)

The BBC has also had to make cuts as a result of the cost of covering free BBC licences for over-75s on benefits. This has meant that, as part of a £800m savings package across the whole of the BBC, it has axed 450 posts in English Regions. (6)

Too many big editorial and creative choices are made in London. The BBC, since the mid-1980s under John Birt, has gradually centralised the commissioning process. This has produced some scathing criticism in the area of drama in particular. Tony Garnett observed:

A centralised structure where there are many who can say no and only one who can say yes results in a narrowing of taste on the screen. We need a range of sensibilities at work. This can only be achieved if power to commission and transmit is passed down to more people. The writers will have more chance to find a sympathetic ear and the audience will have a bigger range of tastes to sample. (7)

We have a striking example of how a BBC regionally-based arts programme can do inspiring work, discovering a range of creative talent, in the work of Alfred Bradley's *The Northern Drift* which he produced when he was based with BBC North at Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, between 1959 and 1980.

The writer Alan Plater worked closely with him on *The Northern Drift* and observed: "*The record speaks for itself. The Leeds studio's output of plays, short stories and anthology programmes has introduced the work of hundreds of new writers in recent years. Many of these have moved on to other market places, writing novels, stage and television plays, or films.*" (8)

Bradley's influence lives on through the annual BBC's Alfred Bradley award. Lee Hall (*Billy Elliot, The Pitmen Painters*) received the award and says, "*That five grand supported me for about two years...It made the difference by making it possible to write rather than take other work when I couldn't afford to live off writing alone.*"

In March 2021 the BBC's Director General Tim Davie made a policy statement which might begin to redress the imbalance between central decision making and the BBC regions. The BBC will cumulatively spend at least an extra £700m outside London by 2027/28. He said, "*We will set a target of at least 60% of network TV commissions, by spend, to be made across the UK by the end of the Charter, up from 50% today. We will also double the number of co-commissions between our Network and Nations teams across Factual, Drama and Comedy.*"

He also said the BBC will "*rebalance our commissioning model to situate more decision-making outside London, including expanding the Writers Room in Salford and creating new commissioning roles in each Nation.*" (9)

The Fate of Yorkshire Television, Granada and Tyne-Tees

In the Summer issue of *MediaNorth* we will have two articles on Granada and Yorkshire Television which identify the important role these ITV franchises had in exploring, promoting and actively supporting regional culture. (9)

What the ITV franchises achieved is now receding into distant memory and the articles are a useful reminder. The 1990 Broadcasting Act cleared the way for franchises to go to the highest bidder, a destructive process which led finally to a single ITV. The impact this had on the range and quality of ITV programmes in the Nations and Regions is provided in 'Down Corporation Street: The Fall of ITV'. (11)

It is not an exercise of nostalgia to highlight what happened to the regional ITV franchises. Broadcasting policies by Conservative and Labour governments hastened their demise. The result was a sharply diminished role for regional broadcasting as a single ITV network emerged in England and Wales.

## Channel 4

The location of Channel 4 to a Leeds base is welcome. As a publisher-broadcaster Channel 4 does not directly employ any production staff in Leeds but its presence within the region is likely

to act as a catalyst for growth for the production sector. However, Channel 4's future in its present form remains in doubt. Privatising the channel remains on the political agenda.

## Channel 5

Since Channel 5 was acquired by ViacomCBS it has seen a number of changes. In particular there is a strong commitment to investing in regional production. The company has exceeded the Ofcom out-of-London quota of 10% of programming, According to its figures, 44 companies (or 40% of its suppliers) were based outside of the capital and regionally produced content accounted for 20.7% of its programme schedule last year (380 hours). This was a 27% year-on-year increase. (12)

## Ofcom

Ofcom strengthened its guidelines and compliance on regional programming in 2019 to provide 'more rigour and accountability to the regional production regime, ensuring it better delivers the policy intention of supporting and stimulating creative economies in the UK's nations and regions. (13)

- A renewed commitment by Public Service Broadcasters to reflect the richness and diversity of Northern culture requires them to have staff firmly rooted in the different regions and budgets to be able to commission new innovative cultural work from within those regions.

## 5. Cultural Infrastructure: Local and Regional Newspapers

Local and regional newspapers are a key part of the cultural infrastructure. Job losses amongst journalists mean that key areas of reporting – the courts, local government – disappear from newspapers. At the same time coverage of local authors, plays, festivals, music and the myriad other cultural activities diminishes.

Regional newspapers like the Liverpool Echo, Manchester Evening News, Yorkshire Post and Northern Echo have seen their print sales plummet.

An estimated 58% of the country does not have a local newspaper. A 2016 study found UK towns whose local newspapers had suffered closure showed a 'democracy deficit' that resulted in measurably reduced community engagement by local people. and a heightened distrust of public institutions. "We can all have our own social media account, but when local papers are depleted or in some cases simply don't exist, people lose a communal voice." (14)

The Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism recognised the need for urgent intervention to address the crisis in local and regional journalism. The National Union of Journalists has also published a policy response, From Health Crisis to Good News, which argues for new interventions and support for local and regional newspapers. It argues, "*This is*

*not and cannot be about the preservation of the status quo...In supporting existing parts of the press, we also need to create greater diversity, including meaningful investment to help new media models get off the ground, and measures to boost quality editorial content and resources.” (15)*

## **Cultural Deficit**

We can also talk about a cultural deficit as local and regional newspapers cut back on journalists with a specialist arts and culture brief. It means, for example, reviews of books by authors published by smaller independent publishers do not appear or their frequency is sharply reduced.

The large global book publishers have the resources to promote their blockbuster publications. The UK's five major publishers - Penguin Random House, Macmillan, Hachette, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster - could become four if Penguin Random House's £1.45bn bid to takeover Simon and Schuster is successful.

At the 2018 Bradford Literature Festival, The Bookseller chaired a round-table discussion with independent publishers based in the north of England to discuss the problems faced by such presses in a market dominated by London-based corporate publishers.

Kevin Duffy of Bluemoose Books said, *“There is an entrenched privilege at the metropolitan publishers and a sense that if you are not in London then you are not a ‘proper’ publisher. If anything, it has got worse. They seem to think there is no readership outside London. Our latest book, The Gallows Pole by Benjamin Myers, was turned down by every major publisher, but it won the Walter Scott Prize.*

*“London-centrism also impacts the chains, and despite what James Daunt says most of Waterstones’ book buying is still done out of Piccadilly. We offer the same ridiculous discounts as larger publishers and we still can’t get into any retail promotions. We wouldn’t exist without initiatives such as New Writing North, libraries and indie bookshops.” (16)*

Smaller independent book publishers based in the Northern regions do not have the marketing budgets to compete with these book behemoths and the gap between these two types of publishing is likely to increase unless this imbalance is adjusted by specific initiatives, like New Writing North which supports publishers and writers, being strengthened.

- The need to sustain local and regional journalism, and to support new start-ups of smaller co-operative and community models of journalistic enterprise, can play an important role in promoting and sustaining cultural activity in the North.

## 6. Conclusion

The North, in spite of deindustrialisation and the shifting power and economic dominance of London and the Home Counties, still accounts for a quarter of the UK's population and parliamentary constituencies, and a fifth of its GDP.

The North has had previous periods of creative ferment. The period from the late 1950s – the years of Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*, David Storey's *This Sporting Life*, Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving*, through to 1968 with *A Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines – stand out. All these titles became popular films which people crowded into cinemas to see, bowled over by, at last, seeing their lives, their language, their experiences, their towns and cities, reflected back to them on the big screen.

*MediaNorth* hopes that the proposals which emerge out of the Northern Culture APPG inquiry will lay the basis for another renewal of creative activity across the North.

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