BBC Radio Ulster: Public Service Radio in Northern Ireland's divided society

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Abstract

BBC radio has been broadcast in Northern Ireland since shortly after the establishment of the country in the early 1920s. Throughout this period it has been faced by the challenge of how to deliver public service radio in a divided society, one that has for many years experienced violent conflict. Today as BBC Radio Ulster, the station has the highest audience reach of any BBC network radio service or those nations services in Scotland and Wales. This article outlines how BBC policy serves to deliver this performance, by examining a BBC Trust Service Review in relation to culture and diversity.

Keywords: BBC Radio Ulster; BBC Northern Ireland; BBC policy; BBC Trust; BBC nations; Radio; Public service broadcasting; Public Service Media; History of Northern Ireland.

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Introduction

Writing in 1996, Des Cranston argued "Let there be no ambiguity: it is wireless broadcasting that provides the continuity for the seventy years of the BBC in Northern Ireland" (Cranston, 1996, p.35). Now almost twenty years later, with the BBC having passed its ninetieth anniversary of broadcasting in Northern Ireland (NI), BBC radio broadcasting continues to play an important role within public service broadcasting (PSB) in NI (Moore, 2003). The BBC began broadcasting in the fledgling NI on September 15, 1924, with the launch of the 2BE station (McLoone, 1996). It is a quirk of history that the station launched only three years after the partition of Ireland (Francis, 1996, p.6), which led to the establishment of the Parliament of NI. Indeed, the presence of the BBC in NI and the country itself are almost coterminous, meaning that the corporation in NI has been present throughout the country's early development, its involvement in the Second World War, and throughout the violent period of the "Troubles"—the period of civic unrest and terrorist activity that mainly occurred between the late 1960s to the late 1990s—resulting in the deaths of over 3,500 people. While a degree of peace was established with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (NIO, 1998), extra-judicial attacks and killings still take place. Aside from the greatly diminished violence, however, NI remains a divided society, at the levels of education and culture, as well as with spatial and social issues (Hamilton, Hansson, Bell and Toucas, 2008; Nolan, 2014; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006).

In this environment, the BBC in NI has, for more than ninety years, had to find ways to broadcast to a divided society (Moore, 2003). While in NI broadcasting is part of the British broadcasting system (McLoone, 1991, p.12)—a system whereby all governance factors are tied to the UK media policy and regulatory systems—BBC radio in NI, mainly in the form of BBC Radio Ulster (hereafter Radio Ulster), has found ways of providing public service media (PSM) content which is widely listened to across the socio-politico-religious divide, split mainly between people brought-up Protestant and people brought-up Catholic.

As this article will outline, Radio Ulster provides programing that has the highest weekly audience reach of any BBC nations (radio in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) or network service (radio broadcast across the UK) at 36 per cent out of seventeen stations (Ofcom, 2014a, p.67).

This article draws on policy documentation and existing audience research data sets to discuss the results of policy (as shown in its Service License) on Radio Ulster's performance, as measured by audience response and public value assessment. As such, it addresses the 2011 *Service Review* of Radio Ulster (and Radio Foyle) (BBC Trust, 2011a)*,* an exercise that forms part of the UK-wide regulatory functions for BBC content that are the responsibility of the BBC Trust, the BBC's main regulator. Addressing audience statistics— generated by or on behalf of the BBC Trust, and by the UK's communications regulator, Ofcom—shows how media policy governing Radio Ulster has delivered very strong performance for Radio Ulster in public service radio in the areas of culture and diversity, as rated by its audience, despite significant challenges that the selfsame audience presents.

BBC Radio in Northern Ireland

As the main public service broadcaster in NI, and the only provider of public service radio, the BBC is faced with the challenge of how it should uphold the PSB principles of independence and impartiality (EBU, 2012, p.4), especially with regards to its news and journalism output. This has caused the corporation numerous problems over the years in terms of establishing a journalistic style that could fairly represent society (see Butler, 1995). Given academe's broad interest in NI, it is of no surprise that there is extensive literature dealing directly with media and broadcasting in NI generally (eg. Rolston and Miller, 1996; Miller, 1994), including wider studies that deal with the broader UK setting but place a strong focus on the history and politics of broadcasting in NI (eg. Schlesinger, 1987; Seaton, 2015). In the following section, a short historical introduction will be given to the origins of BBC Radio in NI, before the 1975 introduction of Radio Ulster; a focus will be placed on

challenges Radio Ulster has faced as a public service broadcaster within a divided society. There is something of a distinction to be made between the BBC's wider activities in NI, and Radio Ulster itself; radio broadcasting by the BBC in the region preceded Radio Ulster, while its television broadcasting had also been ongoing.

At its September 1924 launch, the 2BE station—launched by the British Broadcasting Company, later the British Broadcasting Corporation from 1926 (Seaton, 2010, p.105)—had a small staff of some thirty people (Cathcart, 1984). In their *Social History of British Broadcasting,* Scannell and Cardiff (1991, p.305) note that Belfast was one of nine new stations set up through the 1920s to augment the (later) BBC's coverage already established in the main population centres of London, Manchester and Birmingham (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, p.305), alongside those in places such as Cardiff and Aberdeen. These stations were "producing about six hours of their own programme material each day" (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, p.305).

Since its establishment, BBC radio in NI was to face substantial challenges, with the 1920s providing "two conflicting nationalisms", a cultural climate in which "Cultural appropriation made the role of public service broadcaster exceptionally demanding for the BBC in Northern Ireland" (Loughrey, 1996, p.68). Questions of how BBC radio in NI would and should act, in terms of national and cultural identities, have marked the corporation's operations since then (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, p.289). How could the BBC deal with a complex set of overlapping cultural and national identities, that combines Unionism, Loyalism, Nationalism and Republicanism, each with their differing approaches to how the question of the sovereignty of NI might be answered? Coleman (1998, p.10) argues that, from its beginnings, "BBC broadcasting in Northern Ireland was caught in the Unionist trap of affirming the Britishness of its public". Moore (2003, p.91) argues that this approach lasted until the 1960s, where broadcasting on the whole "functioned to uphold the dominant Unionist culture".

The BBC station, Radio Ulster, which remains in its present form, began broadcasting on 1 January 1975, just before Downtown Radio was launched, NI's first

commercial radio station (Cranston, 1996, p.44). Cranston notes that the NI Advisory Council considered other names, such as "Radio 6" and "Radio Northern Ireland" but found them "pejorative" and "too clumsy" respectively (Cranston, 1996, p.46). (The name Radio 6 would later be adapted in the digital station BBC Radio 6 Music.) Here, it is interesting to note for our present study, that, in the run up to the establishment of Radio Ulster, Richard Francis, who was the Controller of BBC NI in the 1970s, mentioned the role that radio could play in a divided society (by that point the Troubles were underway): "There can be little doubt about the part which the BBC could play in helping to heal this troubled community in the years ahead" (Francis, 1974, p.2 as cited in Cranston, 1996, p.45). Later we will see that, while "the community" (if that term might be applied) remains "troubled", Radio Ulster has established itself as a broadcaster that caters to both communities, while bringing them together into a central communicative space.

Public Service Broadcasting in divided societies

Context is provided for this discussion by viewing the challenges that have faced the BBC in NI through a wider European lens, where multiethnic and linguistically diverse states have designed and maintained public broadcasting systems (Bašić Hrvatin and Thompson, 2008). Countries that have faced such challenges include: Belgium, where the broadcasting system must cope with a major linguistic division between Flemish and French (Donders, 2012; Dhoest, 2014; Raats and Pauwels, 2013); Switzerland, where there are three major language groups to accommodate (Bašić Hrvatin and Thompson, 2008; Saxer, 1992; Skopljanac, 2008); and Spain, where central government has a stronger level of regulatory control over radio than television in the autonomous region of Catalonia (Fernández-Quijada *et al*., 2013, p.26).

Other studies have addressed PSB in Macedonia (Sopar, 2008), a country since 1991 that, prior to the 2001 violent conflict, had been a "model of effective conflict prevention and pluralism in the midst of ethnic conflict, because members of all ethnic groups in Macedonia

continued to participate in government and state institutions" (Broughton and Fraenkel, 2002, p.265). Broughton Micova (2006, p.139) notes that, after the 2001 conflict, the public broadcaster's television channels (MRTV) had "a combined market share of 36.8% in … the region most affected by the conflict in which tensions were at their highest." Thus concludes Brougton Micova, "The public broadcast, at the time, was still an excellent way to reach a large population of viewers in the affected areas" (2006, pp.139-140). Finally in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jusić and Džihana (2008) outline how, despite having a PSB system designed to take account of the three main language groups, PSB in the country "is characterized by a huge discrepancy between normative stipulations on one side and actual practice on the other", where "public service broadcasting remains a contested field, subject to constant political power struggle and manoeuvering, and characterized by a continuous state of crisis" (p.83).

Each of these examples, to a lesser or greater extent, provide contextualization for the present subject. Linguistic diversity in NI is not as pronounced as in many continental European countries, as English is the overwhelmingly dominant language. As discussed below, there are speakers of Irish and Ulster-Scots to accommodate for, as well as Cantonese, but speakers of these languages are by far in the minority compared to the countries discussed here where there is more than one major language group, such as in Switzerland. At the level of regulation, NI does not operate under a devolved model, with the UK government holding equal legislative powers when it comes to television and radio, in contrast to the case in Catalonia.

Defending Vulnerable Values

One way of framing these issues theoretically is to address how the context for PSB has changed in the midst of increased migration, economic crises, and changing trends in nationalism. Trends in commercialism have led to the market continually seeking to undermine the public service ideal (Blumler, 1992b), and given the diminished problem of

spectrum scarcity and other technological changes, Blumler identifies the principles underpinning PSB as *vulnerable values* (Blumler, 1992a). While Blumler was writing some years ago, public broadcasters today struggle with many of the same challenges he set out. Moreover, Blumler is dealing with television, but many of his arguments can be extrapolated to public service radio, such as in relation to technological change and marketization, with the move to digital radio in the UK allowing for the expansion of regional analogue services to become national digital services. In particular, from his seven *vulnerable values*, "diversity" and "cultural identity" perhaps are of most relevance here (the remaining values are: *program quality; independence of programme sources from commercial influence; integrity of civic communication; welfare of children and juveniles; maintenance of standrards*).

Specifically in relation to pluralism (which is included under diversity), Blumler notes that, with regards to PSB, "If society is diverse in composition, it follows that each of its sectors should be able to find materials in the schedules reflective of its interests and with which it can identify" (Blumler, 1992a, p.32). This has happened to an extent in NI's neighboring nation-state the Republic of Ireland (ROI) (Titley, 2014), while in NI Radio Ulster has made similar provision (which is discussed in more detail below). The "vulnerability" inherent in this "value", was from the risk of the influence of the market (in terms of television at least) bringing about a "*pragmatic* pluralism, yielding only that amount and those forms of diversity that are likely to pay" (emphasis in original, Blumler, 1992a, p.32).

On "cultural identity," we can well recognise Blumler's point that "Multiple identities vie with each other inside geographic and psychic spaces alike" (1992a, p.33) in the case of NI. There, traditional sectarian divisions become increasingly joined by class divisions and stratification in income and wealth in the "New Northern Ireland" (Ramsey, 2013), where the reshaping of the built environment following the cessation of the worst of the violence seen in the region has to a degree supplanted an emphasis on the physical division between Protestant and Catholic communities. On this value, vulnerability comes again from commercialization,

in the homogenization that stems from greater cultural imports, which Blumler (1992a, p.34) notes mainly emanate from the USA. The solution here is to enforce language diversity in broadcasting; utilize regional broadcasting policies; and set quotas from domestic production.

While this is less of an issue in relation to radio than in the case of television, there is still relevance for radio. Recent changes have been made to the BBC's Window of Creative Competition (WoCC) where it relates to radio—that relates to the quotas that enable independent producers to compete to produce radio for the BBC—with proposals in place to allow for up to 60 per cent of "eligible network radio hours" to be made by independents (BBC, 2015, p. 64). Here there will be a need for the BBC and the BBC Trust to balance the greater expansion of market providers with the maintenance of the values of public service radio. Following the outline of the methodological approach and the use of sources, this article will turn to the case of Radio Ulster, where it will be shown how the policy set by the BBC Trust deals both with diversity and cultural identity, as later assessed in the *Service Review.*

Methodology

Methodologically, this article draws on a number of policy documents and reports emanating primarily from the BBC, the corporation's regulator the BBC Trust, and Ofcom, the wider UK communications regulator. These reports provide the main data for analysis, which have been generated from large-scale audience research, dealing with listening figures, audience reach and attitudinal surveys (eg. Ofcom, 2012a; BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011). In this article, a communication policy analysis approach will be employed (Hansen et al., 1998) to analyze the broadcasting policy under which Radio Ulster operates (eg. BBC Trust, 2014), utilizing qualitative documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009; Mason, 2002). The main policy documents and statistical reports used are drawn from 2011 to 2015, while other policy and regulatory documents come from a wider time period, to provide broader context (2004-2015).

Radio in Northern Ireland

This section sets the context for Radio Ulster, by outlining various features of the radio marketplace. First, NI radio audiences have 31 DAB (digital radio) stations available to them, though only four of these are local commercial stations, a level of market provision which is "significantly lower than the other UK nations" (Ofcom, 2014a, p.65). Thirteen of the 31 DAB stations are BBC radio stations, while on analogue radio there are 10 local commercial stations, in addition to BBC services. Second, audiences in NI listen to fewer hours of radio per week than the UK average, and have the lowest listening levels in the UK (ranking last after Wales, the highest, then England and Scotland). NI audiences listen to 19.8 hours of radio per week, while the UK average is 21.4 hours per week (Ofcom, 2014a, p.66). Moreover, the reach of radio in NI is 88.9 per cent (defined by RAJAR [Radio Joint Audience Research], on which the Ofcom research is based as the "percentage of the area adult population who listen to a station for at least five minutes in the course of an average week"). This is lower than the UK average of 90.4 per cent, but higher than the reach in Scotland of 85.9 per cent (Ofcom, 2014a, p.66).

BBC Northern Ireland and its radio output

The BBC's operations in NI are collectivized under BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI), headquartered in Belfast. At 2011 it had a budget of £53m (BBC, 2011), but as part of the wider Delivering Quality First programme of cuts across the BBC (BBC Trust, 2011b) BBC NI was required to find savings of 15 per cent for the period 2013-16 (BBC, 2011, p.14). At the time, BBC NI estimated that this would lead to the closure of 50-70 posts (BBC, 2011, p.2), out of approximately 650. Its main activities are focused on BBC NI television, which broadcasts the national television channels BBC One and Two, but under its own brand, BBC One Northern Ireland and BBC Two Northern Ireland (BBC, 2011, p.8). A significant amount of its content produced solely for NI audiences is inserted into the schedules, for example 391 hours of news and weather in the period 2013-14, with 761 hours in total (BBC Northern Ireland, 2014, p.2, 3).

The second main strand of its work is running Radio Ulster and BBC Radio Foyle, producing 8,880 hours in the period 2013-14 (BBC Northern Ireland, 2014, p.3). While the primary station will be described as "Radio Ulster," an opt-out station titled BBC Radio Foyle is run from NI's second city, Derry. It mainly replicates Radio Ulster's schedule, but it "should reflect the needs and interests of listeners in its particular transmission area" (BBC Trust, 2014, p.2). Thus, when the main Radio Ulster morning news programme *Good Morning Ulster* is being broadcast between 6:30-9:00 A.M., Radio Foyle broadcasts *Breakfast* from 7:00-9:00 A.M. Radio Ulster's remit, as set out in the Service License issued by the BBC Trust "is to be a speech-led service for listeners seeking programmes about the life, culture and affairs of Northern Ireland. Its programing should combine extensive coverage of local issues, interests and events with coverage of national and international developments" (BBC Trust, 2014, p.1).

Radio Ulster is required to have a news and current affairs output of 27 hours per week (BBC Trust, 2014, p.4). Both stations simulcast BBC Radio 5 Live (the UK-wide station) during the night from 0:00-6:30 A.M. Total expenditure for Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle in 2013-13 was £23.6m, compared to the total spent for nations radio in Scotland (£38.4m) and in Wales (£35.4m). (BBC, 2014a, p.122). However, due the substantially smaller population of NI, BBC spending on radio per capita was highest in Northern Ireland (Ofcom, 2014a, p.69), equating to £12.95 per head of population, as compared to spending £7.23 in Scotland and £11.52 in Wales per head of population (Ofcom, 2014a, p.70).

Radio listening trends to BBC Radio in Northern Ireland

NI's radio listening population is more inclined to listen to BBC radio originating from its own country (ie. Radio Ulster) than the listening populations of Scotland or Wales. Thus, Radio Ulster has the highest audience reach of any BBC nations or network service at 36 per cent, which represents an increase of one per cent over the previous year (Ofcom, 2014a, p.67) compared to: BBC Radio Scotland (21 per cent); BBC Radio Wales (18 per cent); BBC Radio Cymru, the Welsh language broadcaster, (five per cent). On this measurement, Radio Ulster is

the most successful nations or network radio station out of seventeen stations. When compared to BBC local radio throughout England, the aggregate reach is 17 per cent; however, when the most recent breakdown of figures is assessed, only BBC Radio Guernsey had a higher reach than Radio Ulster (45 per cent, Q4, 2014), out of 40 radio stations. Measured on reach alone, Radio Ulster can claim major success in outperforming almost all other BBC Radio services.

The dominance in terms of Radio Ulster's reach in NI is accordingly matched by a lack of dominance of UK-wide BBC radio, when measured in terms of share of listening hours in NI for the BBC's network stations (eg. listening to BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 Live etc.). In NI, listening to network radio in the period 2010–2014 has been significantly lower than UK averages, and those of the other nations, with NI audiences listening to a little more than half of the UK average share of listening hours of BBC network radio of 46 per cent (see table 1). While there has been some drop in the share of listening hours in NI to Radio Ulster, there has been no increase (and indeed a drop since 2011) in share of listening hours to the networks.

Another anomaly falling under this category, is the listening share to radio stations in NI other than BBC services, and local and national commercial radio (ie. most radio broadcast from within the UK). At 12 per cent, this is considerably higher than the UK average of 3 per cent, or, for example, the 2 per cent recorded in England (Ofcom, 2014b, p.240). The main likelihood is that that is made up of listening to stations from the ROI, which are widely available in Northern Ireland, a point confirmed in an earlier Ofcom report that listening to RTÉ is probably included within this (Ofcom, 2012b, p.40). However, while the share of listening hours across the four nations by BBC local/nations and network radio (see table 1) is significant, the remainder that is mostly taken up by commercial is still very significant (in 2014: England, 43 per cent; Scotland, 41 per cent; Wales, 36 per cent; Northern Ireland, 44 per cent) (Ofcom, 2014b, p.240). While NI audiences thus listen to more hours of national and commercial radio, it is listening to BBC nations radio (Radio Ulster) rather than BBC network radio that is anomalous when viewed in the context of the wider UK.

Table 1. Share of listening hours of BBC Local/Nations radio and BBC network radio by nation (%)

	NI		UK		England		Scotland		Wales	
	L/N*	N**	L/N	N	L/N	N	L/N	N	L/N	N
2010	23	25	9	46	9	47	8	37	12	49
2011	22	27	9	46	8	47	8	37	12	50
2012	22	24	9	46	9	47	8	37	12	49
2013	22	24	8	46	8	47	9	38	10	51
2014	21	24	8	46	8	47	8	37	10	51

* Local/Nations
** Network

Sources: Ofcom, 2010, p.221; Ofcom, 2011, p.185; Ofcom, 2012b, p.211; Ofcom, 2013, p.249; Ofcom, 2014b, p.240

BBC Radio Ulster: public service remit and policy

As the main starting point for the mapping out of the politics and culture of "post-conflict" NI, the aforementioned Good Friday Agreement (GFA) contained material on how the issue of language would be handled under the newly setup institutions. While the GFA contained eight clauses on the promotion of the Irish language, including, with reference to broadcasting, the clause to improve the coverage of TG4 (see Ramsey, 2015), the focus was wholly on television and film, in the context of seeking "more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland" (NIO, 1998, Section 6, Paragraph 4). However, Ulster-Scots—a language associated with the Protestant community—is only mentioned once briefly in the Agreement (Section 6, Paragraph 3).

In a way that is remiss, radio is not mentioned once in the GFA, a surprising and significant omission in the context of this article. Nevertheless, Radio Ulster contains a range of programmes in both languages. Here Radio Ulster encompasses all its minority language programing within the main schedules, to "Broadcast at least 220 hours of indigenous minority language programming, including Irish and Ulster-Scots output, each year" (BBC Trust, 2014,

p.5). In this respect, NI is different to Scotland and Wales, as both these nations have separate radio stations for this purpose: in Scotland, BBC Radio nan Gaidheal, and in Wales, BBC Radio Cymru.

Blas is Radio Ulster's main Irish-language program, broadcast Monday-Thursday in the 7:03 P.M. slot (after the Seven O'Clock news bulletin), lasting 27 minutes; on Fridays, *Blas Ceoil* is a music programme lasting 57 minutes (BBC, 2015b). *Blas* is described as containing "Stories, debate, reviews and guests on Radio Ulster's Irish-language magazine show" (BBC, 2015c). This programme sits alongside a range of other Irish-language programs on Radio Ulster, and also on BBC NI television. The main radio programme that delivers Ulster-Scots programing is *A Kist o Wurds,* which began in 2002. Episodes run weekly, on a series basis. The program makers suggest, "Each week we bring you a selection of music, poetry, news and crack from all over the country. Tune into BBC Radio Ulster and find out more about the language, culture, literary traditions and history of Ulster-Scots" (BBC, 2015d). The significant (in relative UK terms) ethnic Chinese population in NI is catered to by the Cantonese-language programme *Wah Yan Jee Sing* (BBC, 2015e). The lack of a Mandarin Chinese offering is due to the fact that the majority of NI's Chinese population originate from Hong Kong and southern China.

While this article does not intend a full analysis of Radio Ulster's programing, a few other programs that fit within this strand are worthy of note. For example, Radio Ulster has partnered with other BBC radio stations in *The Listening Project,* where conversations between listeners are broadcast; *Your Place and Mine* seeks to report on human interest stories in NI; finally, Radio Ulster broadcasts coverage of numerous local sporting fixtures. However, there is little about these programs which differ from their equivalents on Radio Scotland and Radio Wales, etc. Finally, while this article does not take as its focus the role of Radio Ulster within the media system at the center of the deliberative public sphere (Habermas, 2009), it is worthwhile in passing to mention some of the station's core news and current affairs programing, including those that have attracted attention in the academic discourse. Broadcast each weekday in the 9:03-10:30 A.M. slot is *The Stephen Nolan Show*. The show is phone-in

based, and typically includes Nolan playing one caller against another, invariably on opposite sides of an argument. Despite this, openly sectarian views do not go unchallenged, and Nolan actively tries to protect Radio Ulster as a neutral space, where norms of balance and aversion to hate-speech govern, and are of paramount, almost unquestioned importance.

Adopting a more measured tone is *Talkback,* running at 12:00 P.M., for 90 minutes each weekday. The current presenter, William Crawley said when appointed in 2014 that "for many years during the Troubles, this was one of the few venues where an open, honest and inclusive conversation about the future of our society was even possible" (BBC, 2014b). Moore (2003) views *Talkback* in this light, with (the then presenter) David Dunseith acting as a middle-man, "gain[ing] a reputation for allowing the most extreme examples of sectarian hatred and bitterness to be aired. The presenter will at times attempt to mediate with contributors but never tries to moderate what is being said" (p.92). Moreover, Coleman's (1998) article-length study of *Talkback* assessed the political and cultural importance of the program within the NI public sphere; he noted "The significance of *Talkback* as a public sounding board in a deeply divided community … is beyond question" (Coleman, 1998, p.12).

The role of the BBC Trust: setting strategy and measuring performance

As the BBC's regulator on most of its functions, two of the BBC Trust's four main roles are to set strategy for BBC services and then to monitor their performance. The BBC Trust regulates public service radio in the UK through the *Reach, Quality, Impact and Value for Money* Performance Framework, which functions as a means to monitor the performance of BBC services against the so-called "drivers of public value" (see BBC, 2004; BBC Trust/Coyle, 2012). As a means of measuring performance at Radio Ulster, the Trust carried out a *Service Review* in 2011, as part of a wider review on nations radio in NI, Scotland and Wales (BBC Trust, 2011a). Such reviews are carried out on a five-yearly basis (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.3). The aims of the review, as set out by the BBC Trust, are to "assess how well each station is performing against the commitments set out in its service licence", "to consider

whether the BBC's future plans for the stations are robust and deliverable", and "to consider whether the service licences should be changed to drive performance or influence future plans" (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.27). This section will apply most of its focus to the review, before concluding by addressing the recent changes in the Radio Ulster/Foyle *Service Licenses,* the main policy documents that set strategy.

The 2011 Service Review of BBC Radio Ulster

Kantar Media carried out research to ascertain whether Radio Ulster/Foyle was meeting the requirements of its Service License, to measure perception of the stations among its audience, and among other things, the extent to which it was contributing to the BBC's public purposes (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.3). The research was based on 500 interviews carried out in November 2010 (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.4). Of particular interest for this article is the report's measurement of the performance gap, which is "is the difference between the performance and importance scores for each statement" (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.5). Based on a likert-style scale, percentages are generated to measure the gaps between how important various attributes are perceived to be, and in this case, how well Radio Ulster has performed on them. These quantitative ratings provide a clear indication as to how Radio Ulster is delivering against what the audience value most. This article focuses on the results of only one of the BBC's six public purposes, "Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities." The public purpose remit, one of six, states that the BBC has a responsibility to "reflect the many communities that exist in the UK… based on geography, on faith, on language, or on a shared interest such as sport" (BBC, 2013, p.1) (1). Under this section, the BBC Trust/Kantar Media report measured the performance gap on nine measurements in relation to how Radio Ulster/Foyle was reflecting NI culture and NI traditions in its broadcasting (see table 2) (2).

When the whole audience is considered, only two areas had a statistically significant negative performance gap, each with negative-five per cent (3). BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle provides content and programing that caters to the population of NI and BBC Radio

Ulster/Foyle reflects my local interests and concerns. In all of the other eight measures, the performance gaps were either insignificantly negative, neutral, or strongly positive. In its report, BBC Trust/Kantar Media (2011) only note cross-tabulations on certain measurements, and thus a full statistical comparison on all factors is not possible. However, the report does offer information on four measurements with regards to how respondents from Protesant and Catholic communities compare, and it is to that we turn. On the survey statement "BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle is good at portraying my particular culture or community to other people in Northern Ireland", Protestants reported a performance score of 73 per cent, Catholics reported a performance score of 81 per cent, with respective performance gaps of negative-nine and negative-three (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.34). On "When I listen to BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, I hear a range of accents from around Northern Ireland", Protestants reported a performance gap of positive-twenty three, while Catholics reported a more modest performance gap of positive-six. However, the importance of this attribute recorded on this public purpose was the third lowest recorded for this public purpose (see table 2).

Table 2. Performance, importance and performance gap ratings (%) on the regions and communities Public Purpose

	Performance	Importance	Gap
Range of Accents	91	74	+17
Events and Anniversaries	86	85	+1
Content that caters for NI population	86	91	-5
Reflects diverse faiths, cultures, communities	84	86	-2
Reflects my local interests/concerns	84	89	-5
Coverage of sport	75	75	0
Culture/community to other people	74	78	-4
Supports Irish Language	59	49	+10
Supports Ulster Scots Language	50	43	+7

Source: BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.33

The findings of the Service Review, and the impact on the Service License

The general assessment of Radio Ulster/Foyle was very positive from the service review, reflecting the success of Radio Ulster/Foyle's reach, and the approval score by the audience of the station of 8.1 out of a possible 10 in nine months recorded in 2010-11. This approval score has increased since 2005-06, when it was 7.9 (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.94). Despite a clean bill-of-health, the Trust argued that the station could do more with its strong position to contribute to the BBC's public purposes.

While the Trust set out four main areas of action points emanating from its review—*Preserving distinctiveness*, *Prioritizing distinctive content*, *Maximizing efficiency*, *Maximizing effectiveness* (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.9)—in this section, the specific points that apply to Radio Ulster are the areas of diversity and culture. Firstly, under *preserving distinctiveness*, the BBC Trust argued that the stations needed to maintain their listenership, under the conditions of societal change in NI, where the station's "strengths has been as a source of news and information during the Troubles" (BBC Trust, 2011a, p. 10). It went on to suggest that all the BBC nations radio stations have their status as broadcasters of "distinctive music" safeguarded, with the NI case being that "88 per cent of listeners believed it was important that the station supported music from Northern Ireland." (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.14). The distinctiveness of Radio Ulster was underlined in the report, as highlighted by the audience approval of its distinctiveness:

> Radio Ulster/Foyle's blend of news from a Northern Ireland perspective, documentaries, sport, specialist music, the arts and comedy is not provided by any other station in Northern Ireland. Audiences recognise this and in our survey some 81 per cent of listeners identified something that Radio Ulster/Foyle offered that they could not get from any other radio station.
>
> (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.96)

Secondly, under *maximizing efficiency,* the Trust argued under action point 7 ("Working in partnership") that where "content has wider relevance across the UK" (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.19), audio from the nations radio stations from all three countries should be played out on network radio, and that co-commissions should be explored to a greater extent around common themes (with the example given of Celtic music and arts). Following the 2010 Service License—the license in force at the time the review began, in October 2010—the BBC Radio Ulster license has been reissued each year to 2014 (the end-date of this study) with minimal changes. What changes there were have been mainly technical in nature; for example in 2013 allowing for the budget increase since the previous year, from 16.1 million in 2012-13 to £18 million in 2013-14 (BBC Trust, 2013, p.2). However, this service review did not result in any substantial changes to the BBC's Service License, suggesting that the station's remit was leading to successful delivery, and thus did not need substantial revision, a sign that Radio Ulster is delivering public value under current conditions.

Discussion

This article has considered some of Radio Ulster's programs from its minority language and news and current affairs strands. Having taken account of the BBC Trust's *Service Review* and various measurements among the audience on its performance, there are three themes that deserve additional analysis:

1. That Radio Ulster has higher reach than any other BBC nations or network radio station is noteworthy in the context of this study. As NI's radio listening population is more inclined to listen to BBC radio originating from its own country, we see strong audience demand, which surpasses that of the other nations, for content produced in NI, about NI. The extent to which this is the case is not marginal: the 18 per cent audience reach in 2014 of BBC Radio Wales, noted above, is half of that in NI for Radio Ulster. As reported in Table 1, the share of listening hours (remaining stable over five years) again shows the share that Radio Ulster

gains in NI more than double the Welsh share. Moreover, the fact that BBC network radio has a much lower share of listening hours than in Wales and Scotland shows that the NI radio audience for BBC radio is something of an anomaly. As to why there is such a distinct audience in NI for specific types of BBC radio, markedly different from the rest of the UK, is in some ways unclear, and in need of further research. While the demand for "local" radio is clearly very strong, and while there is certain apathy towards BBC network radio, it is difficult to precisely ascertain why this might be the case.

The data presented here show that to an extent audience demand is for radio that reflects NI culture, while there is a comparative ambivalence towards programing predominantly produced (in terms of population) for people all across the UK. Do accents play a role here, with strong distinction (on the whole) between the accents of the Northern Irish as compared English, Welsh and Scottish? As shown in table 2, the +17 performance gap for "When I listen to BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, I hear a range of accents from around Northern Ireland", shows very strong audience approval here. It is worthwhile noting that Cranston (1996, p.38) suggests that, as early as the 1930s, pronunciation on BBC radio in NI was a problem, originally being "Received Pronunciation" in its form, and thus substantially different to the typical local accent. At table 3, when the breakdown between Catholic and Protestant importance and performance ratings are shown, with the resulting performance gaps, we see that, while Catholics had a higher importance rating of 83 per cent (compared to 72 for Protestants), it was Protestants who had a much higher approval rating of positive-twenty three. It is not clear what can be extrapolated from this, and moreover, this does not explain why Welsh and Scottish audiences, again with very distinctive accents as compared to those of the English, would not also favor regional accents in their broadcasting on these terms (and thus boosting listening to nations radio as a share of listening hours). Additional research on this point is necessary to enlighten understanding on this area, but within the limitations of this discussion it is nevertheless noteworthy.

Table 3. Importance, performance and performance gap ratings (%) by Catholic and Protestant respondents

	Catholic			Protestant		
	Performance	Importance	Performance Gap	Performance	Importance	Performance Gap
Culture/ community to other people	81	84*	-3	73	82*	-9
Range of Accents	89	83	+6	95	72	+23
Supports Irish Language	69	67	+2	55	34	+21
Supports Ulster Scots Language	51	37	+14	55	46	+9

*Figure not given in report, but inferred from both performance score and performance gap

Source: BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, pp.34-39

2. On the public purpose that we have placed our focus, the nations, regions and communities purpose, Radio Ulster's approval among the audience is very strong. On only two out of nine ratings, is there a statistically significant negative performance gap, and at negative five each, these are quite slight. For example, elsewhere in the report, when measuring performance gaps on the citizenship purpose, a performance gap of negative-eleven was found on the statement, "BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle gives me a better understanding of news and topical issues in the Republic of Ireland" (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.40). There must be some caution exercised here, given the limitations in the data (where only one data set is being analyzed, and is not compared to those from Scotland, Wales etc.). However, within the terms of what is considered, audience approval is high on the set of factors measured despite the large cultural divisions within NI that can be traced back across the history of BBC Radio in NI. The breakdown shown in table 3 on religious background, shows that, where there are significant gaps in performance ratings (at least where the Trust gives us the breakdown), they are positive gaps.

For example, depite a low importance rating from Protestants on Irish language, among this group there is a performance gap on the matter at 19 percentage points higher than Catholic listeners. However, that these ratings should be so favorable at all, is perhaps somewhat remarkable, when we view BBC Radio in NI (and later Radio Ulster) across its ninety year history. While broadcasting in a divided society is littered with challenges, the audience strongly approves of Radio Ulster's output, shown in these ratings. That is not to say that this one review is enough basis upon which to unequivocally praise Radio Ulster for the way in which it operates in such a society; yet, to not highlight the positive of impact of public service radio, where it seems to be clear, would be remiss.

3. The *vulnerable values,* in the area of diversity and culture, are currently well-protected in the case of public service radio in NI. First, given the BBC's current regulatory framework— where the Trust assesses performance and adjusts strategy accordingly—being successful in such reviews is very important for a BBC service to continue to deliver this form of broadcasting, shown to be so effective in a divided society. Being given approval to maintain the status quo may be something of a *fait accompli* if the audience approve of your programing (leading to a successful BBC Trust review outcome); however, it is something of a truism that, while BBC services do not stand or fall by audience ratings the way that those of commercial broadcasters tend to do so, having such a strong performance on measurements like audience reach can really strengthen the hand of BBC NI when it deals with the wider corporation on matters such as funding. As noted previously, NI radio had the highest BBC spending per head of population in the UK. It could be argued that BBC NI management has justified this by delivering on its remit more successfully—that radio be produced on "the life, culture and affairs of Northern Ireland"—than that of its nations radio counterparts.

Conclusion

One persistent problem is the notion that audience reach and share of listening hours need not necessarily be equated with audience *approval* of Radio Ulster/Foyle's broadcasting. Audiences can be equally oppositional in their listening, perhaps listening to the programing to be confirmed in their prejudices against the opportunity, or for entertainment, where entertainment is not an intended purpose of the programme. Indeed, former Controller of BBC Northern Ireland Richard Francis took this approach, arguing that listing to BBC Northern Ireland broadcasts was about the "reinforcement of their prejudices" for some of the audience (1996, p.57). However, this kind of oppositional listening is mitigated by the quantitative approval ratings discussed above, which do show that, in addition to strong listening figures, Radio Ulster is also well-received by its audience. It must be restated that the data considered here is mainly limited to one of the public purposes considered as part of this review, and thus there must be caution to avoid over extrapolation. However, when considering the performance of Radio Ulster compared to the other BBC nations services, and given the history and social-division of NI, the data show that the current policy mix can deliver successful public service radio.

Finally, the material considered here draws attention to the case of public service radio in NI. Since the main accounts were written that mainly dealt with the Troubles (eg. Butler, 1995; Francis, 1996) and the activities of the BBC in NI during that period, there has been something of a dearth of research on contemporary policy and the role of the BBC Trust in monitoring radio output in the region. This article has shown that periodical Service License reviews, such as the one considered here, allows for the reassessment of the contribution of BBC services to the corporation's public purposes. Through this process, the researcher can gain access to copious amounts of information placed in the public domain, data that would otherwise be very difficult to collect on this scale. While this article considers a small portion of the overall information available, there is nevertheless strength in bringing to bear critical analysis on the information published by the BBC Trust, which otherwise

remains descriptive and lacks analysis. That said, the researcher becomes constrained by the methodology set by those collecting the data, and on what is reported. As is outlined above, this proved to be a limiting factor when discussing the performance gaps between Protestant and Catholic listeners. Further research would be useful to fill in these gaps, as would additional work to determine why BBC network radio services do not have a greater share of listening hours in NI. Whether this comes positively, due to the strength of Radio Ulster's offerings, or negatively, through a perception of it as "British" radio, which is out of touch with the local population, they do perform poorly against what has been shown to be the value of locally produced public service radio for a divided society.

Notes

(1) The full public purpose states "BBC viewers, listeners and users can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK. These communities may be based on geography, on faith, on language, or on a shared interest such as sport. The BBC will stimulate debate within and between the communities of the UK, and encourage people to get involved with their local communities." (BBC, 2013, p.1).

(2) The nine statements that those interviewed were required to respond to are summarized in table 2 (BBC Trust/Kantar Media, 2011, p.33).

(3) While BBC Trust/Kantar Media (2011) calls these negative-five per cent gaps "significant", we are told elsewhere, that "Only differences between importance and performance scores greater than 5 percentage points should be considered significant" (BBC Trust, 2011a, p.99). The approach here is thus taken to note the negative-five per cent gaps, while acknowledging that they are only at the beginning of the negative scale.

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