



Scotland's Referendum and the Media: National and International Perspectives, Neil Blain and David Hutchison with Gerry Hassan (eds), Edinburgh University Press 2016, £24.99, 252pp, ISBN 9780748696598

Media politics were right at the heart of the 2014 Independence referendum in Scotland. This collection offers a considered, often insightful analysis of the role and perceptions of the media during and after the supercharged political atmosphere. The editors usefully bring together three different perspectives on the referendum: 1. media within Scotland; 2. UK media; and 3. the view from a range of other Western nations. Such an international lens is particularly welcome given that all nations, Scotland included, seek affirmation of their own ideal self-image in a world of other nations.

In terms of an insider's view from Scotland, James Mitchell sets the scene succinctly with an expertly judged opening chapter on the framing, opportunism and democratic dynamism

during the referendum campaign. If the real winner of the referendum was the renewal of democracy then this was not well reflected by the press and broadcasting infrastructure in Scotland. As Neil Blain and David Hutchison note, the longer-term viability of the media landscape in its current form remains moot for a self-styled democratic nation, a point reinforced by the negative example of the far weaker media landscape in Wales described by Sian Powell.

A major issue for democracy and media pluralism in Scotland is the influence and privilege of a small, self-referential overlapping network of media insiders that Gerry Hassan calls the media 'commentariat'. They form a non-expert media, academic, policy and think tank elite shaped by a shared collective memory of the historical trauma of Thatcherism who routinely formulate generic narratives on almost any public issue. For some, social media promises to give a fillip for democratic participation, as Margot Buchanan argues in her chapter, though the referendum campaign also produced its fair share of misinformation that merely served to confirm the groupthink reflex of existing circles of 'friends'.

While the Scottish press may exude a shared sense of cultural and political intimacy with its readers, as Marina Dekavalla claims in her analysis of editorial content and John Harris and Fiona Skillen argue in the case of media coverage of sports events in Scotland that year, only one title, the *Sunday Herald*, reflected the Yes option favoured by almost half of all voters. In terms of television and radio, John Robertson's forensic analysis of

broadcast news in Scotland demonstrates both the unintended dimensions of anti-Yes bias as well as more egregious examples.

A similar pattern of implicit bias in how news reports were constructed discursively was evident beyond Scotland in 'English' TV news, or rather 'British' TV news as Andrew Tolson points out in his chapter. 'English TV' adopted the point of view of metropolitan outsiders, with Channel 4 news reducing Scotland to hackneyed tourist representations. In the case of Northern Ireland, Anthea Irwin suggests that the political division between unionism and republicanism was reflected in broadly positive (*Irish News*) and negative (*News Letter*) press coverage of the campaign while BBC NI tended to highlight the benefits of the union and UTV stressed the momentous significance of the Yes movement.

Part 3 of the book presents perspectives from other nations of three kinds. First, two chapters cover the small stateless nations of Catalonia and Quebec. Second, there are chapters from the Anglophone countries of Ireland, Australia and Canada. Finally, two chapters offer the point of view of European state-societies, one focusing on France and the other on Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

By far the most intensive interest in the Scottish referendum was taken by the media in Catalonia and Spain, as Enric Castello, Fernando Leon-Solis and Hugh O'Donnell highlight in their chapter. Scotland was held up as a 'mirror' that either reflected or distorted unresolved territorial tensions between centralised Spanish constitutional legalism and Catalanian

popular self-determination. In contrast to more recent events in Catalonia, the Scottish referendum process can appear to observers there as exemplifying moderation, 'fair play', civility and democracy, with even David Cameron appearing as 'the hero of the Catalans', a view unlikely to be shared by many Scots. Quebec has a different trajectory to either Catalonia or Scotland, as Catherine Côté shows in her chapter, with Quebec nationalists losing two referendums in 1980 and, by the smallest of margins, again in 1995. With nationalism weakened, comparisons with Scotland allowed the Quebec media to adopt a more knowing tone and a relatively informed and balanced coverage of the issues at stake as well as the leading personalities.

By contrast, and despite deep historical and cultural connections with Scotland, English language media in Canada proved largely indifferent to the Scottish referendum until, as Christopher Waddell shows, the unexpected surge of the Yes campaign in the last few days. Brian McNair describes a similar pattern of a late deluge of media interest evident in Australia, another society with strong Scottish ties. It may also be of little surprise to learn that in the UK the English press largely ignored the referendum until the latter stages of the campaign to the extent that Karen Williamson and Peter Golding compare its transient coverage to that of foreign news. A similar pattern of foreign distance was found by Kevin Rafter in his analysis of media coverage in the Irish Republic, with more immediate concerns expressed about the consequences of a Yes vote for the political situation in Northern Ireland.

In the case of France, Didier Revest claims that the Scottish referendum also appeared to be happening in a distant universe with media coverage assuming the inviolability of existing nation-states. By contrast, in a fascinating discussion of media coverage of the referendum in the German-speaking countries of Austria, Germany and Switzerland, Klaus Peter Muller examines Scotland in terms of how the 'narratology' of a dramatic storyline determined the ideological meaning of events and stereotypes, including reflections on the future viability of the nation-state and the EU.

Much of the short-term prognosis about the media politics of independence has been thrown off-course by the EU referendum and the revival of UK parties in Scotland. Nonetheless, this volume is essential reading for all students of media and Scottish politics in turbulent times.

Alex Law