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‘Rooting’ the BBC: an interview with Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director of BBC Nations

The BBC has long been ‘rooted’ in the nations and regions – a characterisation we draw from our interviewee, Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director of BBC Nations. This rooting has had a profound impact on the mission and delivery of public service broadcasting in the UK. It simultaneously attempts to marry a unified voice emanating from the *British* Broadcasting Corporation with more localised services which speak to varied histories of political devolution, flows of financial capital and cultural boundary-making. It also shapes more mundane technical elements – ask someone along the Welsh border who finds their TV automatically tuning to BBC West Midlands.

This is in part an organisational rooting which includes a physical presence, production facilities and headcount dispersed across the UK. Today, over half the BBC’s spend, and half of its teams are ‘out-of-London’ (BBC, 2020). But more than just an organisational structure, the BBC is also rooted in the varied experiences and evolving identities of those people who inhabit these places, whether it be through its representational and narrative power, or its democratic function fulfilled by filling the gaps left by declining local print journalism.

In the last decade the Corporation has doubled the proportion of network TV programmes produced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (BBC, 2020). For instance, *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-19), set and filmed in South Wales enjoyed the biggest TV audience of 2019. Primetime dramas such as *Line of Duty* (2012-) filmed in Belfast, *The Nest* (2020) set in Glasgow, Manchester-set *Years and Years* (2019) and *Gentleman Jack* (2019-) set in Yorkshire have all enjoyed commercial and critical success. At the same time factual output ranging from *Angels of the North* (2019-) to *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History* (2019) give viewers an insight into the daily lives and histories of people across the UK. There have been missteps and some representations are best forgotten - *Pitching In* (2019-), a comedy set in a caravan park in North Wales received widespread criticism for its casting of non-local actors and its reliance on outdated cultural stereotypes. Despite this, through the range of network and nations and regions services it is the routine appearance of locales and people across the UK which underpins a critical part of the public value of the BBC.

Whilst several scholars have examined the relationship between individual nations and regions to the BBC (Christophers, 2008; Cushion et al, 2020; Genders, 2019; Hibberd, 2010; McElroy et al, 2019; McElroy and Noonan, 2016; Noonan, 2012; Potschka and Golding, 2012), few scholarly accounts have looked holistically at the relationship between the BBC and the concept of Nations and Regions. The exception to this is Harvey and Robins (1993). The arguments of many of their contributors continue to be remarkably relevant nearly thirty years after publication. In the context of the Covid19 pandemic, arguments persist about the unequal allocation of financial resources across the UK and the centralisation of commissioning and scheduling power to the BBC's London office. Despite the licence fee being collected from all parts of the UK, for its critics, the creative strengths of the nations and regions have been curbed as resources and commissioning power are held in and distributed from London. There have been powerful criticisms that that BBC has failed to address the distinctive needs of the audiences and creative businesses in these locales.

A major regulatory intervention under the Communications Act 2003 came in the form of Ofcom's 'Out of London' production quotas, introduced to stem the tide of centralisation, especially as the regional character of ITV diminished, and to ensure that the BBC and the others public broadcasters remained major investors in the UK's growing independent production sector beyond the M25.ⁱ

Therefore, circulating in and around the BBC's nations and regions strategy are much wider civic arguments regarding the changing nature of democracy in a devolved UK, the distribution of public-funding support for regional economies, and the need for richer cultural representations that reflect the diversity of the UK today.

Development of major creative centres across the UK is in part the product of local pressure and activity, not least from the maturing political and cultural apparatus associated with devolution and local government. The BBC has invested in many of these centres including

Roath Lock Studios in Cardiff which is home to *Doctor Who* (1964-) and *Casualty* (1986-), MediaCity in Salford where BBC's sport and children's departments are located, and Pacific Quay in Glasgow which hosts a diverse range of programmes including long-running entertainment show *Eggheads* (2003-). These investments present an opportunity to grow and capitalise on local production capacity. However, they can also be regarded as overdue

political responses by the BBC to criticisms of centralisation and an institutional bias towards London. In this the BBC are not alone. In 2018, Channel 4 announced its '4 All the UK' strategy which entailed relocation of its headquarters to Leeds, and the establishment of creative hubs in Glasgow and Bristol.

This interview took place on 19 March 2021, a few days after the BBC announced its plans to further shift its creative and journalistic centre away from London, thus providing a further component in the plans by Tim Davie, the new Director General, to take the BBC through the next charter renewal in 2028. Amongst the headlines of *The BBC Across the UK* (2021) were a commitment by 2027/28 to an extra £700m in spend cumulatively across the UK; at least 60% of network TV commissions to come from the nations and regions; significant parts of BBC News to move to centres across the UK and BBC Studios in Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow to grow; funding for two new returning drama series— one from the North of England and another from one of the Nations; and over the next three years more than 100 new and returning drama and comedy titles which promised to 'reflect the lives and communities of audiences outside London.'

However, such commitments must be set alongside recent cut jobs across the BBC's nations and regions services including 150 jobs cut in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the announcement of 450 jobs lost in English regional services (Ofcom, 2020: 46). These are in part due to a £125m shortfall in BBC budgets following the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is this broader context that gives new life to the increased scrutiny of the BBC's contribution to life outside of London. The coronavirus pandemic has placed renewed emphasis on the importance of the BBC serving all its audiences across the four nations of the UK (McElroy, 2020). Reporting of policy differences between devolved governments shifted from being a niche interest of policy wonks to being a matter of widespread public debate impacting citizens' understanding of what they were or were not allowed to do in each of the four nations (see Ofcom's ongoing audit of Covid news consumption).

If the UK political context is demanding new strategic thinking by the BBC, then technological disruption and acceleration of competition in the broadcasting market is also shining a light on the distinctive value and delivery of local programming as integral to public service media's legitimacy. We have previously argued (McElroy and Noonan, 2021)

that the UK needs invigorated and more innovative public service media to emerge from this moment of market disruption if we are to enjoy both a wide array of content geared to diverse audiences and provision of long-term professional careers and production businesses in the regions and nations.

SVODs like Netflix are vaunted for their economic investment with UK productions and for augmenting audience choice. However, both their economic contribution and diversity of production pale in comparison to the sheer range of genres and services produced by the BBC. For instance, much has been made of Netflix's localisation strategy (see Lobato, 2019) yet its ideas of local are markedly different from those of the BBC, and it takes considerable advantage of the capacity building done by the BBC and other PSBs in places across the UK.

Whilst this political economy of nations and regions is an important dimension to television in the UK, for audiences it is on-screen content that matters. There has been a general decline in broadcast television viewing in the UK since 2014, though the PSB channels have broadly managed to maintain their share of total TV viewing in each of the nations among all audience segments. UK audiences continue to value regional and local programming, but they are also often frustrated with limited forms of representation and negative portrayals. Research from Ofcom tells us that whilst audience satisfaction is relatively high, those living in the West/South-West of England and those living in Scotland (where a new BBC Scotland channel was launched in 2019) are the most likely to have the lowest perceptions of how often they see their areas represented in BBC output, and the authenticity of the portrayal (Ofcom, 2020: 66). This contrasts with those living in the South/South-East and London who are the most positive about how where they live is represented and portrayed. When we view nations and regions through the eyes of the audience, we see persistent and uneven disquiet rather than wholesale dissatisfaction with the current provision.

These were some of the issues in the in-tray of Talfan Davies when he began as Director of Nations in January 2021, a role that sits within the BBC's Executive Committee. It is a role which will see him lead all the work serving the nations and local audiences across Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, alongside his additional responsibilities as Director of BBC Wales, a post he has held since 2011. The purpose of our conversation with Talfan Davies was to understand the decisions that flow from translating the often abstract concept of national regions and English regionalism into a coherent set of organisational strategies, commissioning priorities and local production. We also wanted to explore the value of local

programming in an era of global television. We began by asking him how he, as Director of Nations understands the term ‘nations and regions’ and what he regards as its value in conceiving of public service broadcasting today.

Rhodri Talfan Davies (RTD): In some sense, you have to understand ‘nations and regions’ as a bit of an internal construct at the BBC. Essentially, the BBC is a unitary organisation that delivers services on a pan-UK basis - partly underpinned by distribution, and the way technology works, but also partly underpinned by a commitment to universality. So if you’re taking a licence fee from every member of the community, they should usually have access to every service that you deliver.

In a sense, ‘nations and regions’ was created in order to ensure that very distinctive regional and national differences were provided with a level of tailored or targeted services. Because obviously we’re talking about a multinational state. Typically, they have been produced through the medium of English, but additionally in Scotland and Wales, and to some extent Northern Ireland, you have provision for minority languages, which need their own distinctive supply. So, nations and regions essentially became everything the BBC did that wasn’t delivered on a pan-UK or ‘network’ basis.ⁱⁱ

Ruth McElroy: Bringing that up-to-date now, why is nations and regions important to the BBC, and then the other way around: why is the BBC important to nations and regions?

RTD: Well, I don’t think the divisional construct is particularly important. I don’t think audiences care how the BBC is particularly organised, but I think it was incredibly important over many, many decades that - alongside what you might regard as a British sensibility, which is what the network services were essentially projecting - you had services and programming that were more immersed in a sense of regional or national identity within Wales, England, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

I think that was important in terms of the legitimacy of the BBC as a service for the whole of the UK. It was also important in terms of the BBC as a champion of diverse culture within the UK. And, particularly in the context of Wales, it was vitally important in terms of the development and safeguarding of the language.

It often makes me smile when people talk about the BBC as some Imperial imposition on Wales because actually, from the very first moment that broadcasting was created in Wales,

Welsh language broadcasting was to the fore. Even today 50% of the output coming out of BBC Wales is through the medium of Welsh. So in many ways, the BBC has been an incredibly proactive champion of the language, despite some regarding it as a highly Anglocentric organisation. The BBC has always been much more complicated than it can sometimes be depicted – it has many different faces.

RMcE: You mentioned legitimacy there. In light of the announcements yesterday to push more ‘out of London’ and to be genuinely across *all* of the UK, can you say a little bit about how you think that issue of legitimacy pertains today. We’re in a post-Brexit world, we’re in a post-Covid world, where some of the specific issues in different nations have really come to the fore.

RTD: When I joined the BBC for the first time in 1993, I joined an organisation where 90 percent of the television expenditure of the organisation was spent within the M25, within London and the South East. I joined an organisation where 70 percent of the staff were located in one city in the UK and I joined an organisation where every single network editorial decision was taken in one building in the UK.

However appropriate that might have been in 1992, it would be a ludicrous position for the BBC to be in today. The UK is changing. If it was ever monocultural, if ever there was an excuse for metropolitanism, it’s an utterly outdated concept now. We have to demonstrate that not only do we serve the UK, but we are rooted in every part of the UK. I think the big shift that we announced yesterday is that our network services must also demonstrate that commitment to the whole UK – this goes way beyond the nations and regions division.

The issue I always had with ‘nations and regions’ as a division was a suspicion - particularly when I joined the BBC back in the nineties - that it essentially allowed the network creatives to continue to live in a very, very metropolitan London bubble. In a sense we were the ‘get-out-of-jail card’, because nations and regions would deal with all that diverse stuff and those diverse identities and the messiness of identity in the UK - and the London commissioners would continue to commission what they believed represented their view of Britishness.

It was that separation of the network commissioning teams from those who were essentially based outside London - and lived a different life and had a different conception of what Britain was - which I always thought was problematic. Because even the word ‘nations and regions’ within the BBC is problematic. When we say nations and regions inside the BBC,

we don't include London. Well, the last time I checked, London is a region. So, the old model – and it's long gone - was essentially saying we'll do our stuff in London for network, and 'nations and regions' could you take care of the rest of the country.

Caitriona Noonan: That's quite a big criticism of the BBC approach internally and thinking about the purpose of this volume as being a reflection on the last 100 years.

RTD: Don't get me wrong, there are a million and one exceptions and examples of inspired commissioning that reflected the UK, and it has changed radically since then. But the key thing in the announcement yesterday is that the responsibility to reflect the nations and regions of the UK is a responsibility that has to be integral to every division of the BBC.

That's the significance. The significance isn't the spend. The spend is lovely and the jobs are terrific, and the economic underpinning and the skills story, they are all fabulous. But ultimately, it's what we deliver to audiences that matters, and in a UK that is changing in the blink of an eye, it has to be right that network news, that network television, that network radio, that they all have to demonstrate that they are rooted across the UK.

CN: So, the announcement represents a fundamental change in the culture of the BBC?

RTD: It has to be. There are a number of drivers here. First, there's a societal change: that sense of the messiness that is 'Britishness' and the polarisation around the constitutional settlements and all that stuff. But there is another thing going on which is interesting as well.

If you look at the emergence of the global media players - the Amazons and Netflixes - in a way it reminds us what the unique responsibility of the BBC is.

There are plenty of other people that can do 'globalised' - the sort of programming from nowhere and everywhere. What the BBC can uniquely do is demonstrate that it is utterly rooted in one country, or four nations, however you want to describe it – that it produces content utterly rooted in the authentic experiences of a diverse country.

We produce 20,000 hours of network television and radio every year and Netflix produces maybe 200 hours set in Britain. So, we won't be able to compete with the budgets of Netflix very often but what we can uniquely demonstrate, and the reason we take the licence fee from every home in the UK, is that we will serve you and reflect you in a way that no other broadcaster can.

RMcE: Ofcom have, in their reviews, pointed to some dissatisfaction, relative to the general support for the BBC. There has been evidence of dissatisfaction around the representation of nations and regions amongst audiences. What's being promised here is quite a step change culturally within the institution, but also what audiences will see will be different. For you, what is going to be the measure of knowing if yesterday's announcement has brought about a change, not just within the BBC but a change that audiences will value?

RTD: I think, at a fairly crude level, it's whether audiences believe that the BBC is for them - and that's *all* audiences because we're a universal service. You can measure it any which way you like. You can ask quite academic questions about, does it represent my community or my nation? In the end it's about whether people believe that it's a service that is relevant to them, and relevance can be constructed in many different ways. But if you don't fundamentally believe that the BBC is a service that is relevant to you and your life and your outlook, then it's quite hard to justify the universality of the licence fee.

There are many audiences who feel the BBC is incredibly relevant to their lives, but we know there are some audiences, particularly in the Midlands and Northern England and some of the devolved nations, where that's not as strong. That's part of the story of what we announced yesterday. We need to demonstrate that – there is jeopardy for the BBC in the next five or six years, we know that – we can get closer to some of the audiences that feel a bit detached from the BBC at the moment. That isn't just about portrayal. It's about tonality, it's about age, it's partly about class, a lot of our audience think the BBC is a bit posh and has a certain world view that is slightly dismissive of their view of the world.

RMcE: When people talk about London, they're often talking about a class as much as a geography.

RTD: They are. There's a phrase I often hear, which makes me shudder, which is when people talk about programmes being their 'guilty pleasures'. If you unpick it and listen to who uses it, it can often be quite dismissive of what we might call popular culture, and I'm quite wary of that. There is still a very Reithian view of what it is the BBC should be doing. The truth is there are many, many ways of serving the public and they're not all about a sort of intellectualism.

CN: How will some of these changes cut across genre? I'm thinking here about what the previous Director General, Tony Hall, said a few years ago about the vitality of a nation rests

on more than its journalism (Hall, 2014). How do you see this playing out in different formats, or in different genres?

RTD: Just to step back for a second, one of the changes that we announced yesterday is about collapsing the boundaries between the different divisions of the BBC. I'll give you one example. Historically, for as long as I can certainly recall, we have had a pot of money sitting in London to make stuff in Wales and we've had a pot of money in BBC Wales to make stuff for Wales, and just occasionally the stars align and we take money from both pots and we make something special. But it's ad hoc, it's sporadic, it comes and goes.

So, one of the things that we're going to do – and we'll announce this in more detail in a couple of weeks' time – is we're taking those pots and we're putting them together. Of course, there will still be some pots that are specifically for BBC Wales to do things that would never work on network. But we should also do more together. At the moment we typically co-commission with network, across the three devolved nations, to the tune of about £6 million or £7 million per year. Personal view? That should be closer to £25 million a year.

The other thing that's shifting is how we think about volume. Just remember how much choice the audience has. The audience doesn't really care about how many hours we produce per se, it's whether we produce anything of scale and significance they want to watch. So when you think about creative ambition, it's about bringing money together to make bigger pieces that are going to cut through the limitless choice that audiences have. That's why co-commissioning is so key, and it will cover drama, comedy, factual, entertainment, the whole suite of genre.

It's about a new spirit of partnership. In future, there won't be any major portrayal project of Wales that doesn't have the support of the BBC Wales Commissioner, and that's never happened before. Historically, network teams would go off and commission their own programming to portray Wales and BBC Wales would do its own thing. Now what we're saying is that every major project about the portrayal and representation of Wales will require the support of those local commissioners who work on the ground in Wales and know the place best.

That's about proper devolution of power. Because there was lots of people saying, what you need are more network commissioners flying into Wales and basing themselves in Wales. No, you don't. You've already got a commissioning team in Wales. What you need to do is

empower them to make choices not only for Wales but also for network channels. That's the direction of travel.

RMcE: I just wonder if we can shift slightly, because obviously part of what the BBC's responsibility, and how it operates, is to support the creative economy across the UK. This change to the way of doing commissioning, what impact is that going to have on independent production companies and how they work across the UK?

RTD: I think inevitably you'll see a number of things. You'll see more indies set up outside London. I'm sure you'll see a number of London based indies move out of London, or create offices outside of London. So you will see a shift of production focus outside the M25. I wouldn't overstate it. The BBC used to be the only show in town and we're not the only show in town now. So the dynamics of the UK creative economy is still very London centred, irrespective of what the BBC does, but there is a £700 million opportunity outside the M25 that wasn't there the day before yesterday. So that will focus minds.

I think the other thing you will see, and it goes back to the point I was making earlier, are bigger projects that are genuinely, authentically set in the different nations. So this won't necessarily translate into lots more volume but it will translate into bigger projects. So you will probably see the tariff for programmes increasing because we're pooling resources, but again we're not chasing volume.

We're seeing some consolidation in the sector, and I think that consolidation will continue, because broadcasters are looking for indies who are able to really deliver scale, and formats, returning formats. Probably you will see fewer one-off films. One-off films are very, very hard to market, they're very hard to take to market these days, because there's just too much choice. So you tend to see more investment in long-running and returning formats, because you are able to build an audience. It's very hard to build an audience for a single documentary.

RMcE: Do you think that that will work across all genres because, cynically, you might think that that actually is more about being able to make sure that you get eyeballs on some really high-end drama productions, whereas some factual or entertainment material might be much less visible in that kind of a context. What does scale and impact mean in that sense?

RTD: Arguably entertainment is probably the most expensive genre of all. Pulling off a scaled entertainment format successfully is incredibly high cost. What does it mean? I think it will be horses for courses. Within the BBC Wales mix, we would still need to commit to some singles. We would still absolutely protect our commitment in terms of current affairs and investigative reporting, and obviously news and sport – they're sort of exceptions.

In terms of co-commissioning, what we're talking about is landmark factual, comedy, drama. We don't do a huge amount of entertainment in Wales. I just think the shift of focus is about better, not more. You think about it. When I was growing up I turned on the telly and I had four choices. I can watch anything tonight that's ever been made.

RMcE: There are many routes to finding what has been made, and that includes BritBox. The other thing that struck me recently, when you and Tim Davie were giving evidence to the Senedd (CWLCC, 2021), was the conversation around iPlayer. It seems to me that iPlayer has become more of a focus for commissioners in how they think about commissioning content. But how then does iPlayer become part of a nations and regions strategy more generally, whether that's through personalisation or whether it's through the commissioning route.

RTD: It's a big internal conversation at the moment. In yesterday's announcement there was a lot on spend and portrayal and all those important things. For me personally, the most significant thing is the commitment to a level of local personalisation within iPlayer, Sounds and the BBC news and sport apps. Because in a sense our traditional routes to market - in terms of Wales or Scotland or Northern Ireland - are slowly reducing. So in terms of protecting the prominence of Welsh content to Welsh audiences, we'll only be able to foreground those by having a level of personalisation within the online product set. I know it's all a bit technical and a bit boring – but it's fundamental. It's about how we're going to get our content... how we're going to make sure Wales remains prominent within the future media mix.

It was easy on BBC One Wales. You just pulled a network programme out of the schedule and put a Welsh one in. It's far, far more complex within the iPlayer, but that's exactly what we want to do. It's the same with news. I'm a Newcastle United fan and I go onto the BBC Sport app every day and look for Newcastle United stories. Despite doing that, every time I go to the app I have to go and look for it again, so it doesn't learn anything from me. It

doesn't think actually that's Rhod and I know he's passionate about Newcastle United. Similarly, I go and look for Welsh stories every day, but every time I go on to the BBC News app, they're not there in front of me. So our online services at the moment aren't listening to me and they're not learning from my behaviour, and that's where we need to get to.

CN: That is a technical solution to that, but there is also a strategy around curation. You can editorialise as well in terms of the iPlayer.

RTD: Yes, and I don't think the BBC will ever move to a fully algorithmic experience. If you think about news, there will always be some stories that we feel on a pan-UK basis everybody should see. So it's always going to be a mix. My only point is, if you look at the BBC News online product at the moment, it can feel like a UK broadsheet. Basically, here are all the big UK and global stories and if you want to go and find the local stuff, or the devolved stuff, you'll have to go and find it yourself.

It has to feel more of a blend. You have to go on to that BBC news service and feel it has some interest in where you are and your view of the world, and it needs to adapt and reflect how you interact with it. If I keep going to Welsh stories, that should be telling us something and the curation should reflect that. If it keeps sending me down four or five indexes to dig out the Welsh stories, why am I being ignored by the BBC? But you're right, it's a balancing act.

CN: There is a risk, though, in terms of what we actually know about the other nations. Because if I go on iPlayer or on any of the services and I'm automatically directed towards Wales, how do I know what's happening in Northern Ireland? Surely that is important in terms of the BBC's mission too?

RTD: I agree with that. This is a conversation I was having on the phone this morning. Someone said to me in London, what you want is a Welsh iPlayer. I said, no, I don't. I just want an iPlayer that... if I've searched out *Keeping Faith* (2017-21), or I've searched out *Hidden* (2018-), or I've searched out *Wales Today* (1962-), or I've searched out *Scrum V* (1995-), and I'm consistently doing that, that's telling you something about where my interests and passions lie, and just occasionally iPlayer should be dialling that up for me. It's not about saying suddenly the iPlayer is Lucy Owen ⁱⁱⁱ and nothing else. It's always about a blend.

RMcE: Can I ask a question that's slightly moving from Wales? Given you're in this role and you're still relatively new to it, do you see particular challenges in terms of the different nations, and working across nations, and then also regions? Are there tensions in trying to work across those?

RTD: Yes, there's always tensions and there's always a danger it becomes a zero-sum game: it's that the old saying, I can only be a winner if I see all my mates losing. There has been that sort of internal competitive dynamic., but I don't see it with my colleagues, to be honest, and I think there's a reason, which is that many of the things that we need to do as devolved nations are things that we hold in common.

So, this point about personalisation, that's something we all need. This point about co-commissioning with network, it's something we all need. Network news better reflecting devolved politics and devolved stories is something we all need. So when we sit down and talk about actually what our shared interests are, there is a remarkable alignment.

Now I'm not pretending, when it comes to pure money, that you don't get into those tensions. But actually in terms of the strategic direction of the devolved nations and what we need from the wider BBC, I think there is a very high level of alignment. It's been very striking even in the six or seven weeks, talking to external stakeholders, how different parts of the UK can regard each other. So, all I get in Wales is why can't we be like Scotland? And all I get in Scotland is, why we can't be like Wales? It makes me smile because, regardless of where you are, there's that sense that somebody else is getting it a bit better.

I think the English regions is complicated because what you've got in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is a cross genre multiplatform business. The essential business of English regions, or England as it's now known, is essentially the local radio network and the 6.30pm news programmes. So it's highly journalistic. It's very service driven rather than project driven. So it's a very different dynamic and clearly the television piece beyond news is largely driven by network.

RMcE: For an international reader, they might wonder so where does the entity of England appear in the BBC then?

RTD: That is a fascinating question, but I suppose it's a much bigger question than the BBC. I know many would argue that the apparent absence of England from the conversation about

the future of the UK is part of the challenge we have at the moment. The truth is, of course, that 83 percent of the population of the UK lives in England. So what you can get is a cultural conflation of what Englishness is and what Britishness are and for many people, particularly in England - the sense that they're not so different those two things. Whereas, if you're sat in Glasgow or Cardiff or Belfast, it feels very different.

So I recognise that challenge but, for example, it's hard to conceive of an English national television service because, in truth, how different would it be from the UK network television channels? If you look at ARD [Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland] or the German federal broadcasting structure, what you've got there are multiple states of broadly similar size. So perhaps a level of federalism works there in the sense that there is some level of parity. The asymmetry of the UK is its blessing and its challenge, I guess?

CN: What has been the impact of Covid on nations and regions. What do you see happening, and how do you think the BBC has responded in the nations and regions?

RTD: Is this a creative industries or audience question?

CN: It can be both.

RTD: I think, in audience terms, it's been a phenomenal period. It's been hugely challenging technically and personally for many colleagues, but the demand for public service broadcasting particularly the BBC news services in this period has been off-the-scale. *Wales Today* in January was 40 percent higher than where it was a year ago. It's just an extraordinary demand.

I think, overall, the BBC has done some pretty amazing things in learning, in news, in radio, in so many facets of life, and in terms of supporting cultural partners as well. I hope we've demonstrated why you need a BBC.

As for the creative sector, the key thing you can do as a broadcaster in any crisis is to keep spending. There are lots of initiatives of course - we've got the small indie fund and we had some very quick commissioning rounds post-Covid, but the heart of our creative sector strategy during Covid was to keep spending money.

I could list the six or seven initiatives that we announced but the critical thing was to keep spending.

CN: In our book (McElroy and Noonan, 2019), we talk about for the significance of local production in a global era of digital television. And we had some examples of localising elements, things like language and locations, which effectively opened up international markets for that content – *Hinterland/Y Gwyll* (2013-16) for instance. What do you see as the opportunities, and indeed the risks, for local content in a market of global streamers?

RTD: Having done the role in Wales for a while, one of my observations is that a lot of the criticism around the role of the BBC in Wales was around the invisibility of Wales on the BBC network services, and that sense that Welsh culture was being crowded out by London based, or Anglocentric - or whatever you want to call it - media. In some ways what I think is really interesting about the emergence of Netflix and Amazon is that same perceived peril that we used to have for Welsh culture, or that sense of Welshness, may now be at play in a British sense.

If I look at the consumption patterns of my own children, compared to when I was a child, I would guess 90 to 95 percent of their consumption is American content. Now if you believe that's not going to have a cultural impact, I would say you're being incredibly optimistic. Now you can argue what's the problem with that? It's great content, it deals with lots of social issues. It portrays real, true diversity in a global sense. But if we think that the distinctive cultures of the UK are something worth preserving, reflecting, and supporting, then you need a major public service intervention.

My point is that the BBC is that intervention. In many ways the case for authentically rooted UK content is even clearer now than it has ever been. Because, without it, we would simply have a diet of global content. And however good that content might be, I think it would inevitably have a social and cultural impact on our sense of who we are.

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ⁱ The M25 is a ring road surrounding London and is often employed as an artificial boundary to denote the border between the capital and the nations and regions.

ⁱⁱ The network refers to BBC services available across the UK. National and Regional BBC channels can ‘opt-out’ from network and provide local programming in their schedule. For instance, each BBC One service will provide a different 6.30pm localised bulletin following the main news at 6pm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucy Owen is BBC Wales Today news anchor and broadcaster familiar to BBC Wales viewers