

Gaelic Broadcasting

Any language needs to be used in a variety of ways to maintain its relevance, and Gaelic is no exception. With modern advances in technology over the last few hundred years, and the advent of radio and television broadcasting, the Gaelic language and culture has been given the chance to reach thousands of people across the world.

This essay shall look at the history of broadcasting through the medium of Gaelic in a chronological order, and more in depth at the progression of Gaelic radio and Gaelic television until the 1990s. From this point in history, both methods of broadcasting became increasingly intertwined, and this essay will consider the progression of broadcasting from then until the present day.

The first Gaelic broadcast was made on Sunday the 2nd of December 1923 from King's College in Aberdeen. The broadcast was a 15 minute long religious message from Reverend John Bain. Two weeks later, the next Gaelic broadcast was made, this time it Christmas songs were played. For much of the rest of the '20s and '30s, Gaelic music is the only medium of the language to be found on the airwaves, although the first play, *An Dùnach*, was broadcast in 1933 as well as Gaelic lessons being aired in 1934 (BBC Tasglann, 2012).

A major step forward for Gaelic came in June 1936, when the BBC established a dedicated Gaelic department. This department pushed for more Gaelic content, but the outbreak of the Second World War meant that there was less focus on providing it. However, in April 1940, a weekly five minute news bulletin was established, giving Gaelic speakers a new way of keeping up with the war.

The aftermath of the Second World War, and the reconstruction efforts of the time, meant that Gaelic broadcasting did not return to any focus in the Government until the 1950s. It was then that the first television broadcasts were made and radio scheduling began in earnest.

The Gaelic language was first brought to television in October 1952, when the Grand Concert that concluded the Royal National Mod, held in Rothesay, was broadcast on the BBC. All of these broadcasts to this point were introduced in English, which while perhaps deemed necessary so as not to confuse non-Gaelic speakers, caused a sense of inferiority about Gaelic broadcasting.

In the 1950s, Gaelic radio began to receive one and a half hours of airtime per week. Obviously, Gaelic speakers believed that this was a paltry total for what was demanded. Things got even more difficult for Gaelic radio in the 1970s, as Gaelic radio programmes were changed to be broadcast via VHF (Very High Frequency) wavelengths which were nicknamed 'Very Hard to Find' in the Highlands and Islands due to their incompatibility with the region's geography.

Shortly after this move though, action began to be taken to improve the standing of Gaelic radio. The Gaelic Advisory Committee, set up in 1976 to look after Gaelic interests in general, formed BBC Radio Highland later that year, based in Inverness and Radio nan Eilean was formed in 1976 for the Western Isles. These channels were still English dominated in terms of content, but effort was put in to Gaelic broadcasting that targeted the local communities.

Despite these measures, many Gaelic speakers felt that more needed to be done to provide Gaelic content. A major turning point came in 1984, when Neil Fraser, a fluent Gaelic speaker, was promoted to the head of Radio Scotland. He had personally campaigned for more Gaelic on the radio and wasted no time in setting up provisions for it.

Radio nan Gaidheal was formed in 1985 by the BBC to provide a dedicated Gaelic radio service. Over the years BBC Radio nan Gaidheal has broadcast for an ever increasing number of hours per day. By 1996, Radio nan Gaidheal had 45 hours per week of programs and reached 90% of the Gaelic audience.

Gaelic television did not receive quite the same interest and attention that its radio counterpart did for much of the 20th century. The first programmes that were not Mod coverage began in the 1960s, with a programme called Ceol nan Gaidheal. Current affairs programming began in 1970s with the programme Bonn Comhraidh (BBC Tasglann, 2012).

The Gaelic Advisory Committee suggested soon after its formation that there was not enough content on radio or television for children, especially with plans being in the works for Gaelic Medium Education throughout Primary School. The programs Bzz and Mag is Mog, were created in the early 80s, with the infamous Dotaman programme beginning in 1984, to satiate the needs of this new demographic.

In 1989, Gaelic television received a major boost with an £8 million Gaelic Broadcast Fund being created to fund the production of Gaelic television programmes. 1992 saw further progress, with the creation of the Gaelic Television Committee, who were given the power to commission, but strangely not to produce, Gaelic programs. The GTC created many high quality shows, some of which continue today, such as the award-winning current affairs show Eòrpa, the soap Machar and the instructional program Speaking Our Language (BBC Tasglann, 2012).

However, in 1996 the GTC “had its remit expanded to include radio but without being given increased finance” (Cormack, 2004, p27) as it took on board the management of radio programmes as well, being renamed the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee in the process. This meant that the subsequent programmes of the GBC were not of as high quality.

The Gaelic Media Service, also known as MG Alba (Meadhanan Gaidhlig) was formed in 2003 by the Communications Act to oversee both radio and television

broadcasting in Gaelic (The Communications Act, Sec. 208). This new organisation absorbed the Gaelic Television Committee, which had renamed itself as the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee shortly before, and assumed the management of BBC Radio nan Gaidheal.

MG Alba was set up with a budget of £12.8 million to provide Gaelic programmes for radio and television, with the view to setting up a dedicated Gaelic television channel within a few years of its' creation. The budget of the company has decreased slightly to £12.1 million for the 2011-12 financial year. (MG Alba, 2012, p44)

BBC Alba, the first Gaelic television channel, launched with a live ceilidh on the 19th of September 2008, as a joint venture between the BBC and MG Alba, with some production support from STV as well.

The channel was seen as a major step forward for Gaidhlig, but a gripe that many had with the channel was that it was only available via Sky satellite broadcasting, which meant that many, especially in the Highlands and Islands where the demand for it was highest, could not receive the channel (BBC, 2007, p27). It was argued that not enough people were watching BBC Alba at the time to justify the costs of broadcasting via Freeview. However, critics retorted that viewing figures weren't as high as they could be because the channel is not on Freeview. After years of pressure, the channel was finally launched on Freeview in Scotland on June 8th 2011, on channel 8.

The channel broadcasts for 7 hours a day between 5pm and 12pm, providing a wide range of shows, from children's shows De A-Nis? to news programmes such as An La to entertainment programmes such as Air an Rathad, a Gaelic version of the show Top Gear (BBC Tasglann, 2012).

The channel has an average viewership of over 500,000 adults over the age of 16 per week (MG Alba, 2012, p9), almost 10 times the fluent Gaelic population of Scotland. Many point to the channel's broadcasting of sports events such as re-runs of Scottish Premier League football matches, and in future, live matches and Magners League rugby games (both with Gaelic commentary and punditry) as a large source of viewers for the channel, which continues to prove controversial in the Gaelic community.

Gaelic broadcasting is a strong shape today. Radio nan Gaidheal currently has a budget of £3.8 million, as of 2011, to provide programs. It has currently runs from 7:30 in the morning until 11:30 at night. Over the course of a year there are now 3,500 hours of Gaelic radio and 2,500 hours of Gaelic television.

With BBC's iPlayer and Radio services online, people around the world can now access Gaelic programming. This is especially useful in promoting the language in communities abroad where there are already a group of Gaelic speakers such as in Nova Scotia, Canada.

In future we can expect Gaelic broadcasting to grow as a field. Gaelic radio has been slowly growing over the last few decades and a full 24-hour Gaelic service is not too far away. As for Gaelic television, with growing numbers of viewers, there will be more demand for content, meaning again more hours for Gaelic television.

An important factor in the future of Gaelic broadcasting will be the outcome of the Scottish independence referendum, which could result in broadcasting power for Scotland being governed solely in Scotland, rather than being governed in London.

Gaelic broadcasting is essential in the modern world to keep the language present in the culture of Scotland today. With high quality broadcasting, on both television & Radio, Gaelic will continue to show that it is far more than just a language spoken by a minority.

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