



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Local Portrayal and Production in
Broadcasting**

17 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Johnston)	BBC NI
Mr Eddie Kerr)	Playwright
Mr Gary Mitchell)	Playwright

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McNarry):

I am pleased to welcome Peter Johnston from the BBC, and playwrights Eddie Kerr and Gary Mitchell. Good morning, gentlemen. I invite Peter Johnston to speak first, followed by Eddie Kerr and Gary Mitchell. I hate using this remark, but each of you has five minutes — not to get out, but to make your case. I will be inviting questions from members following your presentations, and I am sure that that will be interesting.

Mr Peter Johnston (BBC NI):

Thank you. Hopefully, members have had a chance to look at my submission. I am aware of a number of questions and topics that have been raised by the Committee, and I know that it has also had discussions about the digital Britain report and other issues. In my paper, I tried to set out a broad swathe of what we do and some of the challenges that we face. I realise that my colleagues are particularly interested in talking about specific topics, and that will be addressed best as we get into the detail.

I will pick out a few key points from my submission. I tried to present an overview of what we do in our local broadcasting output across the range of genres, which is a crucial point. Quite often, we have good and healthy debates about certain genres, but we are charged to provide a broad portfolio of output across a range of different genres and, depending on people's particular interests, that often creates tension. Our challenge is to get the best balance.

I will highlight a few headline points on each of the genres for which we are responsible across radio, TV and online. A big debate about news and current affairs is ongoing, and the Committee has been considering that topic under the digital Britain framework. Northern Ireland is better served with local news and current affairs coverage than anywhere else in the UK, especially given the relative health of the market with UTV and so on. Challenges are still being flagged up, but the audience's appreciation of the market and its sheer consumption is evident.

Our real strategy with sport is to target the four or so biggest sports in Northern Ireland by interest and listenership and to try our best to get as many of the live rights for those different sports as we can. Obviously, that is dependent upon them being available to buy, the cost involved and how that affects budgets for other areas. However, I have set out what we currently broadcast in that regard, and I am sure that we can pick up on specifics.

Outside of news and current affairs programmes, we must decide on the range of programmes that we provide and on the range of topics for local television, which is beginning to touch more on the issues that the Committee will be talking about with my colleagues. I have, though, provided the Committee with a few examples of programmes that are coming up in the autumn schedule, which members will see on their television screens in the next few weeks and months. We try to provide a wide range of documentaries, comedies and entertainment.

Drama, which is a topic that we will discuss, has tended to be produced mainly through network television, which brings its own challenges and opportunities. Although there has been the odd development activity, of which we have tried to do a bit more, we have produced relatively little local drama for television. Part of the reason for that is the sheer costs that are involved. When trying to put a portfolio of local output in balance, we could obviously use documentary, entertainment or other formats to deal with different interests or objectives. We have to make those choices, and we then try to flow into the network with that.

It is important to remember that Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle are part of the mix. Given their sheer audience reach and appreciation, those are two very successful stations. We also now have the website, and its news service is particularly important. Educational output is another important aspect of our remit, some of which is achieved through outreach. ‘Sesame Tree’ is a good example, although I am not sure how many members will have seen it — it depends on whether they have children or grandchildren of a certain age. It is shown on CBeebies, and is aimed at three- to six-year-olds. It features Muppets with Northern Irish accents and is a bit surreal. However, it also showcases a range of films about the lives of children in Northern Ireland in which they go about their hobbies and interests. It brings that to life for its audience and it is very much attuned to the curriculum.

I am conscious of the time constraints, but a big problem for the BBC over time — I did not have the chance to read in detail the submissions from the others, but I had a quick scan — has been network television representation from Northern Ireland and production. Last year, the BBC recognised that was a problem in the three nations, and that it needed to do something about it. We have now been set a series of new targets. A number of elements need to be progressed in that regard, including sheer quantitative targets of doing more. As I outlined in the submission, local independent companies now have six network television commissions. Last year, there probably would not have been any.

Drama is an important genre in which we have had some great creative successes in the past. However, the thrust with drama is now to respond to some of the input and the criticisms from some people about making sure that more is made in Northern Ireland, such as ‘Occupation’, or about Northern Ireland, such as ‘Five Minutes of Heaven’, and to build on that in a developmental way more productively in the future.

I hope that members can see some signs of improvements in the coverage of Northern Ireland issues in the UK news networks, which is a particular priority and challenge that we are working on. Members will probably have seen Mark Simpson reporting more regularly on different topics, including the economy, for the ‘Six O’clock News’ and the ‘Ten O’clock News’.

Added to that, we are undoubtedly under great scrutiny at the moment about the scale and scope of spend of the BBC. According to the Ofcom report, for local output, the audience in Northern Ireland is well served per head of population. However, at the same time, we have some stretching efficiency targets. We have just completed 60 post closures over the past two years. So far, we have been able to do that through voluntary redundancy. More financial challenges will have to be faced in the future, especially with the big debate about the overall licence fee and the value that is delivered from that. On the back of those challenges, which, admittedly, are more extreme in the commercial sector, we have to find the most value from the licence fee. We have some interesting work ongoing about partnerships with, for example, the Ulster Museum and other public bodies to get the maximum value out of what we do.

Finally, just to make life completely difficult, with the digital switch-over coming in the next few years, we have to face all the technological developments and challenges. That will create particular opportunities and challenges for audiences in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that, Peter. If members have no immediate questions, we will move on to the other presentations and take all the questions at the end of those.

Mr Eddie Kerr (Playwright):

Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting me to come along to say a few words today. I also submitted a paper, so I will give a quick precis of that paper. I ask that members take a look at it if they get the opportunity; after all, it may be a great cure for insomnia for some people.

I focused more general terms, for example, how people see us, and I questioned whether we really care about how they see us. I considered the notion of stereotypes and how generalisations of cultures and nationalities can be a source of identity, pride, conscious or unconscious racism and even bad jokes. Members will see some bad jokes peppered throughout the paper.

Stereotypes can also cause a great deal of harm. History and current events show that unfavourable stereotypes contribute to prejudice, discrimination, persecution and even genocide.

How does the rest of the world see us? How neurotic, extrovert, open agreeable and conscientious are we? The evidence that the world is given generates feelings that determine how people see, feel and hear about us. Such evidence then influences the judgements that they make about us. Local politicians are in the public eye more than most people in our community, and people can decide whether they want to switch on or switch off, and whether to listen to what they are saying. Therefore, how do the rest of us see local politicians?

We are an odd bunch living here. We are clumped together on a floating rain-swept island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and we look south and east for national comfort. We are smaller than the average size of a nondescript city in Britain or Europe, and we think that we are the centre of the universe — and, of course, we all agree that we are. If we could only teach the English how to talk, and learn how to listen, society here would be quite civilised.

When the rest of the world sees us, do they see two desperate or disparate warring tribes? Do they see us overcoming endless pantomime villains, extremists and assassins? Do they see us as explosive, vindictive, thick and full of hatred? Or, do they think that we are just good craic? Do they hear people who continually fail to agree, and who are not really content unless tentatively bordering on the reckless? Maybe they see us beyond any possibility of a real and lasting solution. Do we play right into their hands? The element of the stereotype comes from us. Do people see us as some bad joke waiting for an even worse punchline?

Our society is evolving and working together more. Someone said to me that it was almost like an arranged marriage. We are developing more as a multicultural and diverse society. Even the bigots, the intolerant and the hate-mongers have changed with the times. We now have new tags, such as the gay-bashing, hate-mongering racist capital of Europe. Prevailing images are appearing in the media, particularly after what happened during the summer when people from the Roma community were seen moving around Belfast in search of sanctuary. That reinforced the stereotype that we were an intolerant society. It brought shame upon us, and that shame was permeated throughout Europe through the media. I was in a different country at the time and became aware of it through the media. The way that people responded to that was unbelievable.

I do not want to live in an intolerant society; I want to live in a society that embraces cultural diversity. We are a changing society, and we are becoming much more multicultural. That must be reflected in the way in which the media portrays us.

I detest the concept of regional accents. I have a profound Derry accent, of which I am proud, and I am proud of where I come from. It is regional and it has a dialect because people in the south of England, Belfast or Dublin tell me that I have a dialect that is different from theirs. Linguists use the term “dialect” to denote patterns of the way that we use language. The way that we use language is very enriching, and it is important to celebrate the language that we use. Some of the greatest English language writers have been Irish. Some people say that that is because we have no regard for the English language.

When the BBC was established in the 1920s, it used presenters who had a south-east England accent, which was very clipped and pronounced — the King’s English at that time. Social change and a celebrity status have created new accents in the media, and we welcome that. However, some of our own people have been lampooned because of their accents: for example, when the BBC’s Gerry Anderson went to work for Radio 4 and when Nadine Coyle appeared on ‘Friday Night with Jonathan Ross’. John Cole was also the butt of much lampooning on television. It is very easy to isolate our language.

Since 1968, approximately 40 major Hollywood films about the North have been produced. Some of the ways in which they portrayed us on screen have been dire and atrocious. Examples include Sean Bean in ‘Patriot Games’, Brad Pitt in ‘The Devil’s Own’, Richard Gere in ‘The Jackal’, and who can forget Tommy Lee Jones’s portrayal of Ryan Gaerity in ‘Blown Away’? Maybe most of us should forget it right away. Someone who commonly subverts that trend by playing the good guy is Jimmy Nesbitt of ‘Murphy’s Law’ fame.

The best-known example of a Northern Ireland accent on television is that of Jim McDonald in ‘Coronation Street’ — so it is. Variations in speech are at the core of social and historical identity and are interwoven into the fabric of cultural differences. We do not do enough to celebrate the richness of our language.

Many of our young people have turned away from traditional forms of news and opinions. They eagerly consume all aspects of social networking channels, such as Facebook, MySpace,

Twitter, and so on. It is said that in 2006, the world generated 161 billion gigabytes of digital information, which is three million times more than all the books ever written. By 2010, we will be creating six times more than that, 70% of which will be created by users, not by the media or the related industry.

The BBC in particular has been a major producer of quality television and radio drama for many years. BBC NI is the only broadcaster that provides Irish language or Ulster-Scots programmes. It is the only provider of school programmes that meet the common curriculum. BBC NI showcases many of the island's great sporting events. Such high quality has been affected in recent years. That is widely recognised and it is disappointing. We were at the top level in producing quality films, radio programmes, series and other programmes. Such work has been hit hard, not just by the recession but by a change of strategies at the BBC.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You can have one more minute to finish your presentation.

Mr Kerr:

Many of us now have access to digital television, and we can zap almost 200 channels of sometimes poor quality or car-crash television, for want of a better term. Therefore, there is less quality, less choice and less quality standards to ascribe to. The media are part of the creative and imaginative energies that drive the modern world. We are part of that world, and we want to play a much more important part in it.

Some 9,000 people are employed in the creative industries in Northern Ireland. Let us invest in them. If we do not like the story, let us change the script. If we do not like what we are seeing, let us make our own. If we have a word to say, or a story to tell, let us do it ourselves. We do not need other people to tell us how to do things. We have the talent, ability, resources and people on this part of the island to do all that ourselves.

The local industry needs support and investment, and it needs to make things different.

Mr Gary Mitchell (Playwright):

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak about this topic. I will focus on my area of expertise, which is drama, and I will talk with particular reference to BBC NI drama.

In 2006, I was invited to a conference called Shifting Brilliances. Peter Hain was the Secretary of State at the time, and he made a fantastic and optimistic speech about the opportunities that we were about to get in Northern Ireland for writers, directors, actors, and for everyone else.

I will present some facts to the Committee, and offer a comparison, which I summed up in my written submission. In 1981, Chris Parr was the main man in BBC Northern Ireland drama. In his two years, he produced two plays by Graham Reid, two plays by Anne Devlin and plays by Bernard MacLaverty, Maurice Leach, Stewart Love, Derek Mann, Fredrick Aicken and Harry Barton, all of whom lived here at that time. All those plays were made in Northern Ireland.

As Peter Hain suggested, more drama units are now available to BBC Northern Ireland; therefore, more hours are available on television for BBC Northern Ireland than when Chris Parr was running it. However, we have seen dramatically less productions being made in Northern Ireland. Only two programmes that are worth mentioning were actually set in Northern Ireland, and one of them was not even written by someone from Northern Ireland.

It worries me that we are still talking about it, because in 2006, people were making speeches saying that we must exert pressure on the BBC to commission writers. Everything in drama has to start with a script. From that, we can make those dramas and increase output. That would give experience to professional people, as well as providing opportunities for younger people to learn. None of that has happened since 2006. In fact, production has diminished, and we have less and less output.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you very much Eddie and Gary.

Peter, how successful are you at marketing and merchandising local drama productions to networks outside Northern Ireland? Does the BBC do those productions due to a duty of service or because it wants a financial spin-off?

Mr Johnston:

The sheer scale of spend on drama these days means that there are often a number of co-

producers or financial deals involved. For example, 'Five Minutes of Heaven' had various manifestations in America and subsequently became a film. We do not make those programmes with a view to receiving a financial spin-off; the realities of the economic model are such that often a lot of investment is required to make those multimillion pound projects work. I will give the Committee an idea of the scale of the challenge that that presents and why I was talking about local drama for local television: a big drama series on BBC1 could cost £6 million, which is how much we spend in an entire year on all the independent productions, documentaries and everything else.

Part of my response to what Gary said relates to your question. Since Chris Parr was in charge, which was a long time ago, television, and drama on television specifically, has changed fundamentally. Some would say that that change has been for the good and some would say that it has been for the bad — it depends on your point of view. You were really asking me how successful we are. Some of what Gary said is right. The conference with Peter Hain was not a BBC conference; we were there, and that was part of that debate about whether are we representing as we should be and giving productive economic benefit to the three nations, particularly in the ways that we might do, such as through drama. We are not. Can we do something about that? We are at the first step of a work in progress.

In my role at the BBC, I have the challenge of selling our skills and strengths to the network commissioners in London. I then must ensure that what we produce has integrity. At the same time, part of my task with the local creative sector is to, as Gary said, find the talent and also manage our expectations of what is achievable in such a tough, high-profile genre in which the quality and cost is such.

I also consider whether we can take new measures to stimulate local creativity to help bring that talent through. Gary and I were talking outside about his frustrating experiences with television. He did have a play on BBC Radio 3 earlier this year, and there has been more of a stream of activity in that medium. Therefore, we must ask whether we can get more transfer of talent from radio to TV and whether there are other local things that we could be doing. In our autumn schedule, you will see more use of dramatic construction in factual programmes. The other drama that we did this year was about George Best, which was written by a local writer called Terry Cafolla. I realise that I mentioned only three projects and that we need to see whether we can do more. Having said that, our business is very competitive.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Are you given a budget or do you decide your own budget?

Mr Johnston:

Part of the problem in the past was that there was no set budget or target. Invariably, there were some broad targets across the three nations —

The Deputy Chairperson:

What do you mean by “the three nations”?

Mr Johnston:

I refer to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as per the new plan.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Not England?

Mr Johnston:

No; the new plan has specific targets for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Underpinning those targets are specific targets for the different genres. The important change in the target for the drama genre is that the way that the criteria have been reset means that we would not get any credit for anything that did not have a genuine local base — the programme has to have either been made here or the vast majority of the team or the writer must be from here. That plan is called the BBC network supply strategy. It came out last year and flowed from the process that Gary described, which included the conference.

The Deputy Chairperson:

How conscious are you that Northern Ireland consistently has problems with out-of-work actors who are unable to earn a salary? They must have a great love for what they do, but there are no financial rewards. Is there anything under the duvet that suggests that the BBC may create a drama company?

Mr Johnston:

Most drama on television tends to be made through independent companies, and there has been a problem for some time in that there has not been an indigenous drama company to pitch for BBC

network drama. However, very recently, Kudos, one of the largest drama production companies in the UK, which made the successful ‘Occupation’— in itself a very successful project, which made use of local skills, and starred James Nesbitt — has formed an alliance with Generator Entertainment, a local company that has been involved in some of the film work here. I hope that that is a positive sign as it will create an alliance and a local base to enable us to have a more sustainable presence in the future.

On its own, TV drama will never solve the problems that we are talking about. Film and other productions have helped, but if you are asking me where we sit with drama, the answer is that the past year has been more positive. There have been fewer projects than in the past, but at least the projects were made in Northern Ireland, and two of them were about Northern Ireland. However, it is possible to do better than that, and the real challenge for us is to do what Wales has done and create a more sustainable presence. For example, ‘Doctor Who’ is made there, and that has had an economic impact, and we in Northern Ireland want to create an equivalent here, and the film business has helped with that in the past year.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I know that Eddie was talking about dialects earlier, but we have plenty of daleks running around the Assembly if ‘Doctor Who’ requires some. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCartney:

I thank Peter, Eddie and Gary for their presentations and their papers. I have several questions that I would like to ask, but time may restrict me somewhat.

I recall Jennifer Johnston once saying that she went to see the first play that she wrote on its opening night, and swore that she would never allow any of her plays to be changed so much again. Obviously money was involved, but she said that she wanted to put herself in a position in which she had complete control of all her works in the future. Indeed, I believe that Ronan Bennett made a similar point with ‘Love Lies Bleeding’, in that he found himself writing a fairly decent script, but intellectually he wanted nothing to do with it. However, it paid him well and that became the driving force for doing it. In your experience, do the parameters of the mainstream limit your creative ability?

Peter, how much does commission work restrict creativity? In other words, playwrights want

to write particular types of plays that are rooted in their community and life, but because they are writing a commissioned work they are restricted and their creativity is curtailed as a result.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Gary and Eddie, can you deal with the first part of the question together, and Peter can you deal with the second part?

Mr Kerr:

There is a constant problem between the commercial and the creative. What the writer wants to create — and I am sure that Gary will agree with this — is sometimes different than what is actually put on the stage, because of commercial and production reasons.

That is a particular problem that I have had, because I refuse to write in any other dialect but my own. Indeed, I have been lucky enough to have had a couple of plays produced in New York, and when I went there the first thing that they said to me was that they could not understand a word that the actors were saying, and I had to create a glossary of terms to meet them halfway. If it was a Russian play by Chekhov or a South African play by Fugard, dialect would not be expected to have to change, so I refuse to make them also. It has been a constant struggle, and that is part of the game that we play. We always try to create our territory through negotiation and consensus, which the Committee probably knows about better than I do.

I have had a precarious relationship with the BBC and other production companies over the years. As a writer, I get courted every so often. When one of my plays goes well or makes the headlines, the production companies buzz around me because they want a piece of me — and as you can see there is a lot of me.

When Danny Boyle, the now famous film producer, was a producer at the BBC, I submitted my first idea to him. Ten ideas down the road, I was in a cul-de-sac that bore no resemblance to anything that I wanted to do. That is when I pulled away from doing such work. When I was last at the BBC for a workshop, I was given a metal badge to wear that read “aspiring young writer”, which I love to be. However, that is when I thought to myself that I cannot do that anymore. Now, I just plough my own furrow.

Mr Mitchell:

I just write about my experiences, my community, my life and everything that I see around me. That is the best opportunity for me to show how much talent that I have. If I were to write a play that is set in London or Manchester, it simply would not get anywhere, because people would say that I am not from there and that I do not know anything about those cities. Therefore, I end up returning to my community and producing works about it.

When I started, I was probably the only playwright who wrote about the loyalist community. Every time that I submitted a play it was turned down by production companies that said either there would not be an audience or they could not afford it. Then, the Abbey Theatre took a chance. When it took that chance — and you must see this from its perspective, because this is what I get from the BBC all the time — it said that it was going to run the play for a couple of weeks in its small theatre that holds only a couple of hundred people in order to give me the opportunity to fail. The theatre said that it did not expect big things from my play and that it was probably just going to fade away. Everyone was happy with that. The play, called ‘In a Little World of Our Own’, ran for 14 weeks, toured, began the career of Colin Farrell, and won awards. People were blown away by it. The decision to take a chance on me and on that subject matter was rewarded by the success.

After writing ‘As the Beast Sleeps’, as well as other plays, I heard the same argument consistently: there is no interest in that subject matter. My plays have been produced all over the world, including America and Australia, and have been translated into various languages, including Czech and Russian; so, there is a definite audience. BBC Northern Ireland’s drama department has told me that there is no interest on network television for that area.

‘As the Beast Sleeps’ was very successful, but I have not been able to get anything else produced since then. That surprised me, considering that the play was voted the second best film in Europe. I thought that that proved me right and the executives and the commissioner in particular wrong. However, their attitude to my work is exactly the same as it was before. I have had meetings in which executives said that they would do ‘The Force of Change’ if the main character were a homosexual, but I am not writing about a homosexual; I am writing about a specific experience that I have had and researched. I am not homophobic, but they were putting pressure on me to change my play to what they wanted.

Since then, I have made about seven or eight submissions. I will continue to offer my work to BBC Northern Ireland regardless of what its executives say. The most consistent problems — so I have been told — are that I am too negative, that I look at the past, and that I do not offer to England or elsewhere any hope or anything that we can be proud of. The success of films such as ‘Hunger’ proves that wrong. That is set in 1981 and was successful around the world. However, it is not from my community; rather, it is from the other community. So, why then can my community not talk about what happened to us in 1981?

The Deputy Chairperson:

I assure you that this is the best Committee in Stormont, but one of the problems we have is that we get into a subject matter and then we look at the blooming clock; I apologise for the clock.

Mr McCartney:

David is a very good editor, if you are ever looking for one.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I always have to remind witnesses to be conscious of the time. We also find that people do not really get tired of anything that we talk about, so we could talk all day. I think that you could talk all day, but I cannot let you.

On the second part of the question, Peter, is there anything that you heard and want to respond to?

Mr Johnston:

I know that this debate could go on for a long time. In the corridor outside, Gary and I agreed that we would meet up and have a bit of a chat. Somebody asked a question about the commissioning process, which is interesting. We work with 20 to 40 independent companies in our local output across a broad range of documentaries, many of which have had a great impact. It is interesting how fluid and flexible the numbers of topics are. They are often difficult, often very light or often very serious — there is a real broad range of them.

The problems tend to come more to bear in drama because of a number of tensions in the commissioning process. There is the tension about whether very risky, difficult, good, creative work can translate to television or some kind of broad audience, or whether it is better in a

theatre. We should not give up on that challenge, because there are many examples of serious important work that prove that that can be done. We are then into the mix of the portfolio because of the scales of the budgets that are involved. If three, four or five years are spent making a drama that costs millions of pounds, the best value must be attained from, which includes the audience impact and so on.

An interesting, healthy debate is ongoing, not just in Northern Ireland, about the over-engineered nature of the drama-commissioning process across the industry — probably not just the BBC. There is a degree of over-engineering to it. Single films are something about which Gary cares passionately, and I think that we all do. Many people, such as Robert Cooper — with whom Gary worked with on ‘As the Beast Sleeps’ from BBC Northern Ireland drama — still make those films.

In the coming years, I hope that members will see us trying to constantly get that balance and ensure that we try to find creative ways to make that a bit easier. A few ideas are still not finalised. As was said, it requires dialogue with colleagues elsewhere. I often see both sides of the argument. I do not know how many members saw ‘Five Minutes of Heaven’, or whether they liked it. Gary has not seen it, but it is a piece with integrity and is a good example of a challenging single film. We also need to do more of those in other topics.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Very briefly — and perhaps you will think about this towards the end — is it likely that, from what we are discussing, the conclusion will be that the policymakers are somewhere up high? Is Big Brother politics playing a major role inside the BBC? You do not need to answer that now; I just need you to come back to it, because I think that that is what we may be thinking. That is part of our role and remit.

Mr Johnston:

OK.

Mr K Robinson:

Gentlemen, thank you for your presentations, particularly your submissions. They were extremely interesting. Part of Peter’s submission states that:

“93% of people make use of BBC content”.

“Make use of” is a very telling phrase. Why did you not say “choose”? I will leave you to ponder that, but it said a lot to me about the attitude of the BBC, not just locally but across the water. The media and arts are a powerful tool for good or ill. However, since our two communities are not equally balanced in their approaches to the arts and their use and appreciation of, and contribution to, either the arts or the media, what steps would you take to ensure that that balance is corrected?

Gary has given a list of productions. In the community from which I come, we would all say thank goodness we have been able to see them. We have all thought about that and we have all had that reaction to those portrayals all the way through. As someone who is particularly interested in Irish history, I have watched some of those programmes again and again. To put it mildly, there was a bit of gloss and spin on them, but it was nice to see them.

You come from Rathcoole. I briefly lived in Rathcoole before I was married, so I know what that community is like. I know that it has difficulty with telling its story. I was considering the situation of the Roma incident, which was referred to. I wonder whether we ever got the full story of that particular incident. I suspect that we did not and never will.

At the recent Poland v Northern Ireland football game, it was reported that there was going to be blood on the carpet and blood everywhere else. That violence was hyped up, but it did not happen; however, the damage was still done. Did we ever hear the full stories behind the Holy Cross or Drumcree incidents? Through those news items and other means, the Protestant community, which is struggling to tell its story, is constantly portrayed in a negative way, and that is doing great damage to it.

Gary, I congratulate you, as I congratulated a previous contributor to the Committee, for your attempts to redress that balance. I give you great credit for doing so.

Can all of the witnesses please address that simple question for me?

Mr Mitchell:

I will give the Committee an example of the negativity in our media: I wrote a play in 1993 about a riot that was sparked when an Orange Order march was stopped halfway along its route. I offered that idea for a play to BBC Radio, but I was told that they would not commission it,

because the idea was outrageous, and could never possibly happen. In 1995, when it did happen at Drumcree, I received a call from the BBC asking me to revisit the idea. That call came from the BBC on a Tuesday, and I was told that the play must be ready for the following Sunday as it wanted to put it on air the following week. I was delighted, and I went to Drumcree and spoke to several people including a policeman, a member of the Orange Order and some relatives. I returned to Belfast, wrote a 30-minute play, cast it with local actors, and it was recorded and went on air the following Tuesday.

Interestingly, the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ wrote about the play under a headline like “Loyalist Writer Marches Over Poor Catholic,” because, unfortunately, a Catholic fella had his play shunted to make way for ‘Drumcree’. Therefore, rather than reporting the fact that I had created a drama within two days, and had produced it for the radio in one week — which I thought was exceptional and newsworthy — that paper portrayed the play in that light when the schedule change was not my decision, and, in fact, had nothing to do with me. That, I feel demonstrates the negativity that exist here, and the forces that are against creative people in our community.

Mr Kerr:

A wider issue of process and product needs to be considered. There is not enough investment in the creative process here, and we do not invest enough in our young writers and creative artists, or indeed in the whole process to create the product. That investment needs to happen in every community. Everyone has a story inside them, and we should nurture the telling of those stories, whether they are painful, happy, sad or morose. We must give people the tools to create their own stories, and we must examine how we can help them to generate that information.

If we are to undo what has happened in the past through the use of the creative process, let us invest in it. If it is part of the healing prices, let us invest in it. Even if it that creative process is about creating something that people can simply go along to and have a laugh, let us invest in it and make it happen.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Are people writing those types of plays? Are playwrights writing pieces for free and putting them on in a community hall for example? Or, do playwrights always have to sell their work?

Mr Mitchell:

I am constantly writing and pitching ideas for free through my work with independent production companies from London, the Republic of Ireland and locally. I do that work for free, simply because I cannot get the commissions. As part of that work, I recently won the pitching award at the Galway Film Fleadh, by pitching an idea for a movie called 'Get the Pope'. No one in Northern Ireland would ever listen to an idea like that, and such work would not be commissioned.

There is a wealth of Protestant and Catholic writers in Northern Ireland who are producing a great deal of work. The money is coming into BBC Northern Ireland, and the dramas are being made, they are just not being made here or being written by local playwrights.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Are we actually talking about Protestant and Catholic writers? You are not talking about it, but do the people who commission the work think that they need a balance and suggest having a Catholic writer one week and a Protestant writer another week?

Mr Kerr:

If you let them away with it, they would.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Is there solidarity between the writers?

Mr Kerr:

They would also have an eastern European and disabled quotas. They would have every quota, if one were to write the ingredients for them. To me, it is not about Catholic or Protestant writing; rather, it is about the creative process of writing, which is non-denominational. It is about investing in people and communities, and allowing people to have the access to the resources to do that. It is the same with the Arts Council and all those who are given the responsibility to invest in the arts. I write from a community perspective —

The Deputy Chairperson:

Some of us are dubious about the Arts Council.

Mr Kerr:

You should to look at its community arts budget in comparison with the rest of its expenditure.

Mr K Robinson:

We are drifting away from my original question. I did not ask about Protestant writers or Catholic writers. There are two communities; one of which is very well schooled in the arts and very well implanted in the media. The problem for the other community is that it does not have those skills. How do we address the issue of getting that community up to speed? Eddie mentioned giving them the tools. Can we return to that point? That is what I want to tease out of all three of you.

Mr Kerr:

I attend a lot of writers' workshops. I work with people who hone their skills and people who are trying to develop their ideas. Most people come to me and say that they have a great idea for a play. I ask them about it, and they give me one line. They do not know that writing a play is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration. They have to learn. Like any other skill, it is an apprenticeship and something that must be developed.

Mr K Robinson:

Can Eddie tease out an issue? When Pat Ramsey was a member of the Committee, we went to Londonderry and we teased the matter out with the people who were giving evidence. There was a lot of buzz at community level. However, that buzz does not exist in the Protestant working-class or loyalist areas, whichever label you want to put on it. How do we create that buzz? Obviously, the talent is there.

Mr Mitchell:

We have got to change. For instance, I can name three movies that have been made about Bobby Sands.

Mr K Robinson:

I wish that you would stop talking about all those Rathcoole people. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Mitchell:

What about Ian Paisley? I wrote a film about Ian Paisley, and it cannot get made. Three movies

have been made about Bobby Sands. If someone were to go into the loyalist community and ask people whether they wanted to get involved in the arts, they would ask why another film needed to be made about Bobby Sands.

Mr T Clark:

I slightly disagree with the way that Ken put his question. Gary answered that question. Why create something if it is not going to be screened? I agree wholeheartedly with Gary. I had not thought about how bad the situation was until I read the submission and saw it through different glasses. Obviously, someone is looking at the matter through green-coloured glasses, because there is all bias against the loyalist and Protestant community.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I allocated each witness five minutes at the start. We have now five minutes to wrap the matter up.

Mr Johnston:

Gary used examples from 1993, and things have changed since that time. We have screened three dramas this year with local connections. One was a drama about George Best, another was a portrayal by Jimmy Nesbitt of a British soldier in Iraq, and the third was 'Five Minutes of Heaven'. The people involved in making 'Five Minutes of Heaven' would find it offensive to be on Gary's list as being for one side of the community or the other. Anyone who saw the film will have seen that it is a very sensitive portrayal of two sides of the community, and it involved some difficult issues. It is not sectarian by any stretch of the imagination.

Mr Mitchell:

But, it is about a Protestant shooting a Catholic.

Mr Johnston:

In your play, 'As the Beast Sleeps', Gary, you portrayed loyalist paramilitaries doing —

Mr T Clarke:

What about the films about the hunger strikers?

Mr Johnston:

What I was about to say to that was what —

Mr T Clarke:

What way is that to portray things. People in the Protestant/unionist community were offended and prison officers were offended, but it was OK to put it out.

Mr Johnston:

I was about to say that I am not here to talk about the film business; that is not my business. I am here to give the facts about BBC television.

The Deputy Chairperson:

There are other things that drama could incorporate.

Mr Johnston:

I do not want to be unduly —

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am getting a bit disturbed that it is now a natural thing. We are the best Committee and we get on the best. We hate each other, but boy, we get on the best. *[Laughter.]*

We will return to the issue of what your news is reporting. I do not want this Committee to make the news. We want to hear from you. Where you are going to take us?

Mr Johnston:

I want to pick up on some of the factual issues. It would be wrong not to defend some of those involved. Ken made a very interesting point about how to best reflect this complex and diverse society as effectively as possible. Ken made a good point: it is quite difficult sometimes, as many people see the society through the eyes of the news coverage, and news has a particular job to do. The question is whether we can do rich, creative things to move beyond that.

The BBC has been trying to ensure that we have a good range and balance in documentary television output to reflect that. Ken made a point about what was really going on at Drumcree with the Orange Order. Drumcree was covered in news terms in all the ways that you are familiar

with. We also filmed a light observational documentary with the Portadown Orange Lodge, in which we followed it for a year. We had much criticism from others about whether we could or should have been doing that.

We also made a powerful documentary last year, in which we followed the ladies of the Shankill ladies' darts league. That gave a real insight into the community that you are talking about in a different way. One of our challenges is to use those kinds of formats. Drama has a role to play, as do people such as Gary. That is challenging stuff, which brings us back to commissioning and the difficulties with that. We must keep working at it, and getting it right.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you for that answer, Peter. I congratulate you on the Jimmy Nesbitt programme about the soldiers in Iraq; it was very powerful.

How do you get inside the Protestant community? That community has an ingrained fear of the media, because they have seen themselves portrayed historically in a certain way. How does the BBC, as an organisation, link in to what is going on in that community? How can you help them to produce the tools that Eddie mentioned?

Mr Johnston:

The way in which to do that is through people such as Gary. I understand Gary's frustrations, and I recognise some of what he is saying about the vagaries of commissioners and their approaches at times. Many of us can be frustrated by that. We have got to continue to work on that. The Shankill darts documentary was made by a film-maker called Alison Millar, who spent a long time getting to know those ladies. I think that she still plays darts with them many years later. She put a lot of time and effort in to that documentary.

Mr Mitchell:

As regards documentaries and drama, Robert Cooper, who was the executive commissioner at the time, said that 'As The Beast Sleeps':

"tells us more about the Loyalist community in Northern Ireland than any number of documentaries."

You cannot compare a documentary to a drama. Dramas are far more powerful.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That is a fair point. I am going to write a play after this [*Laughter.*] There will be hell to pay if you do not run it, Peter.

Mr McCartney:

I have a question about creativity. The number of films about a particular person or a particular incident is sometimes down to creativity. The most striking issue about Steve McQueen's 'Hunger' is that when he was asked why he made the film, he was very honest: he said that it was because he wanted to. He did not have to give some fancy reason; he was asked to make a film. Creativity should allow people to open up all doors. What people write about is not the point; if creativity is of a quality, the door should be open.

Lord Browne:

As Eddie said, television is a very powerful medium, and I think that you have illustrated that with the terrible plight of the Roma people who were forced to leave Belfast. That was viewed all over the world, as far as Montenegro and Turkey.

The Deputy Chairperson:

How do you know that, Wallace; were you there?

Lord Browne:

I was in Turkey at the time. [*Laughter.*] Sometimes, people can be a little bit put off by the simple drama, where an Orangemen's daughter falls in love with a Catholic, and then faces problems. I know that 'As The Beast Sleeps' is much more in-depth and acceptable, but is there a danger of local writers stereotyping people here in Northern Ireland, and that view going into the mainland and further afield with those dramas?

Mr Mitchell:

The point that we are making is that there is no danger of local writers doing anything, because money is not being spent on them. Local writers can decide to stereotype anyone that they want; the programmes will not be made. It is that simple.

Lord Browne:

How are we going to break through then?

Mr Mitchell:

I do not know how to do it. If I had the power, I would say that the money for BBC Northern Ireland must be spent in Northern Ireland. I am not saying that it should all be given to the loyalist community; it should be shared. I do not want everything to be made in Belfast. If we were to produce one weekly series, such as a nomadic detective series, we could take the main characters all around Northern Ireland. We could run it every week. It has to be remembered that 'Dr Who' was not created by a Welsh person; the series was given to BBC Wales. All the people in Wales who benefit from that did not come up with the series; it was not a writer in Wales who came up with it.

Mr Johnston:

It was a Welsh writer. Russell T Davies wrote the new manifestation of it.

Mr Mitchell:

I am talking about the original 'Dr Who'.

Mr Johnston:

The creative impact of the new series was down to the Welsh writer, Russell T Davies.

Mr Mitchell:

We need somebody here to come up with something like that.

Lord Browne:

Do you believe that there could be drama series such as 'Neighbours'?

The Deputy Chairperson:

There is smoke coming out of each of Eddie's ears. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kerr:

I am hanging on by my fingertips here, between Muppets who talk funny and claims over the origins of 'Dr Who'. *[Laughter.]* But what I am quite alarmed at —

The Deputy Chairperson:

We thought that you were going to be referring to us when you said “Muppets”.

Mr Kerr:

I was quite nervous at the start about coming into this sort of environment; now I am quite relieved that I am leaving it. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you feel part of it?

Mr Kerr:

No, I do not feel part of it at all, because what we have managed to do in the process of an hour is to reduce art from all its manifestations down to something that is a sectarian headcount on the number of plays that come from one community or another. I am not interested whether someone comes from Timbuktu, Rathcoole or Creggan estate in Derry. It is what is created that is important. If a community’s voice is being spoken and something is being said that manifestly reflects what goes on there, it does not matter what community that is. People love the stories they have to tell. I am alarmed at what we have managed to reduce the debate to.

Mr K Robinson:

Eddie, that is not what I asked in my original question. What I asked was about how one community that is quite obviously —

Mr Kerr:

What happened? If we backtrack, what happened between you speaking and where we are now?

Mr K Robinson:

The debate has moved, and several times, I tried to pull it back.

Mr Kerr:

That is one of the issues that we have.

Mr K Robinson:

If there is latent talent in a community that is not coming out, how do we arm that community

with the tools to bring it out? You mentioned the word tools, which I thought was very helpful. If plays or other forms of drama are produced, how do people get it on air so that we can choose to watch it?

Mr Kerr:

If I could just go back —

The Deputy Chairperson:

Before you come back, I think that there is going to be another criticism. Trevor would like to get in to the debate. This is where you are going to earn your money now, Eddie.

Mr Kerr:

This is a freebie, by the way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr T Clarke:

I am, perhaps, one of those who are guilty of taking the debate in another direction, and I make no apology for that. However, returning to Ken's point, and taking on board the points that Gary made, what is the point of people from one section of the community trying to produce work if it is not going to be commissioned and used? That is where it does get down to a sectarian headcount. What is the point in Gary producing good work? Ken has suggested that perhaps there is not enough good work out there, whereas Gary has said that there is plenty of good work out there, which is not getting used. That is where it is sectarian. The sectarian problem is actually in the BBC, because it is not commissioning the work.

Mr Johnston:

Far be it for me to speak for Gary, but what he said was that none of it is getting made. It is not that one community's work is not getting made; none of it is. I admit that it has taken a long time, but it has finally been addressed, and the new rules for how we measure our drama output mean that certain productions must be made in Northern Ireland. That is the key point. I suspect that Gary's frustration is more to do with English writers or other writers producing work, not that it has been one side or the other.

Mr T Clarke:

I may have been unfair in the way that I suggested that Gary said it. However, taking the

examples that Gary has given us, regardless of who made them, where they were produced, or who wrote them, it is actually about what the topic was about. Therefore, there is a problem from one section of the community. The topics of those dramas are not about one section of the community either.

Mr Johnston:

My problem with what has been talked about is that most of them are not BBC dramas. Gary's point was about the challenges of getting the best local talent engaged in network television drama output for BBC television. I strongly refute that there is some kind of inherently sectarian commissioning process. The challenges are far less complex than that to be honest. I think that Gary put it well.

Mr T Clarke:

Gary, I am sorry for quoting you, as I have never met you before. You said that two or three programmes have been made about the prison breakout and the hunger strike. Yet, Dr Paisley is still living, and a film could not been produced about him. What is the reason behind that, Mr Johnston?

Mr Johnston:

The BBC did not make that programme about the hunger strike.

Mr T Clarke:

But, it used it.

Mr Johnston:

What do you mean?

Mr McCartney:

The BBC did not use it.

Mr Johnston:

The BBC did not use it.

Mr McCartney:

That is my point: those successful films are not being shown on the BBC. That is a big question that we will ask another day.

Mr T Clarke:

On which channel was it shown on?

Mr McCartney:

Channel 4.

Mr Johnston:

It was on Channel 4.

Mr Kerr:

I wish to make one plea: if one section of the community feels as though it is at a disadvantage or that it is disengaged from the creative process, it is really up to this Committee and others to invest in that community to ensure that it gets access to resources, skills and expertise. People such as Gary are leading lights in that community. However, that should not be to the detriment of any other creative process. It has to be about creating a level playing field, in which creative processes and juices can flow.

The Deputy Chairperson:

The worst thing about short meetings such as this one is that the situation sometimes comes across like this is now. There are many subjects on which one side will feel that it is not in the process, that it is being deprived from joining the process or that it is not getting its fair chance. Then, the next day, it is the other side that feels like that. The worst thing is that we are then talking about sides. We are a Committee, and my job is to keep us as a Committee. Therefore, at the end of our discussions with you and our deliberations on the matter, we will sit down, as a Committee to work through this. I assure you of that.

Mr Kerr:

That is reassuring.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That is how we work; that is the process.

Mr Kerr:

It is reassuring to hear that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

By the way, I am glad that you are doing this for free.

Mr Kerr:

Well, I was until you mentioned the issue of money.

The Chairperson:

Dominic will ask the final question. Do you see how balanced this Committee is? I left it to a member from “the other side” to ask the final question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr D Bradley:

Thank you, Chairman, for that unbiased introduction. *[Laughter.]* I take issue with Ken’s point that one community somehow has a monopoly over the creative process.

Mr K Robinson:

Sorry, I did not say that. I said that one community has some catching up to do.

Mr D Bradley:

Let me finish. Many people from a similar community background here have contributed to a canon of literature, including Louis MacNeice, John Hewitt, Sam Hanna Bell, Stewart Parker and Gerald Dawe. The actors Jimmy Ellis and James Nesbitt have made a similar contribution in their profession. Those people come from a similar community background. They are all extremely creative and successful. I do not think that one community is blessed with some sort of creative gene. There are various influences and circumstances that lead people to express their creative abilities. Ken may wish to respond to that point.

Mr K Robinson:

I will.

Mr D Bradley:

Very often, the impetus behind producing films and plays is commercialism, especially in the film industry. That industry's prime and sole interest, at least at the beginning, is what will ring the till. There may be other considerations after that; however, quite often — and I think that you said this yourself — the actual artistic content can often fall to the bottom of the pile and even the original idea can become distorted.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Dominic, I know that you are coming to a question.

Mr D Bradley:

Do you agree that commercialism and possibly popularism are strong influencing factors on what the commercial arts industry churns out?

Mr Mitchell:

Prestigious theatres, such as the Royal Court, have a main stage that is all about getting bums on seats in the audience. However, they also have a space in which writers can fail or succeed, which is almost like a platform. Those theatres are not risking a great deal of money; they have invested a little bit of money for a writer and a team, including a director and actors, and they are giving someone a chance. There will not be a significant loss in that practice.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Is there potential for such a stage in the proposed metropolitan theatre that we are interested in funding?

Mr Mitchell:

I tried to get the Lyric Theatre to consider the possibility of having a smaller space. The Grand Opera House has two spaces; unfortunately, someone called the smaller space the “Baby Grand”, which turns a lot of people away because of the childish notion that it creates.

Mr D Bradley:

The new Abbey Theatre will have three spaces.

Mr Mitchell:

Exactly. What I am talking about is not commercialism; we want broadcasters, such as BBC Northern Ireland, to have a space on television for people to fail or to experiment.

Mr Kerr:

Is that not called BBC 2? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Mitchell:

I wish. All that is needed is one or two hours somewhere. That could also be used to train younger people.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Out of 10, what mark would you give the BBC on the subject that we are discussing? I do not want to put you on the spot, but will you give us an assessment? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kerr:

I would love to say six, but the BBC probably deserves about four out of 10.

Mr Mitchell:

As was said, three programmes were made with a Northern Ireland connection, so I would give the BBC three out of 10.

Mr Johnston:

By the way, I would not give us a high mark either. That is why I put the issue under the heading of “challenges”. As you have heard today, there are some things that we all agree on.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That is healthy.

Mr K Robinson:

Can I have right of reply to Dominic?

The Deputy Chairperson:

Talk to him in the corridor, Ken. *[Laughter.]*

Mr K Robinson:

As Hansard is providing a report of the meeting, we must get this correct. Dominic, I think that you were part of the Education Committee delegation that went up to St Mary's College in Londonderry.

Mr D Bradley:

I did not actually go.

Mr K Robinson:

The talent in that school, that community and that part of the city was palpable. If we are doing a headcount about communities, the areas on the other side of the fence are the ones that have been developed. We now have a great opportunity to develop talent in all the arts in the other community, such as the talent that I saw in Londonderry on that trip. That is why I asked how we can do that. Eddie said that the young people need to be provided with the tools. How do we identify those people? How do we encourage them? Gary, I do not even know how you got involved in the arts, drama and writing.

Mr Mitchell:

I simply bombarded people with ideas.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I thank the witnesses for their contributions, which will make interesting reading in the Hansard report. We might make a play out of it. *[Laughter.]* The BBC might take that up, particularly as Peter's last comment was that he agreed with Gary and Eddie. Perhaps, we will return to the issue. Thank you again.