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Relocation, relocation, relocation: examining the narratives surrounding the Channel 4 move to regional production hubs

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ABSTRACT



Promotion of regional cultural production is seen as critically important both in ensuring a television content that reflects a diversity of voices and in strengthening regional production hubs to support sustainable creative economies across the UK (Ofcom, [19th December 2018]. Review of Regional TV Production and Programming Guidance Consultation. Accessed 8.12.20. Available from: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/130911/Review-of-Regional-TV-Production-and-Programming-Guidance.pdf). The problem of London's domination of the UK's screen industries has long been recognised. In October 2018, Channel 4 confirmed that Leeds would be home to its National HQ, while Bristol and Glasgow would be the locations of two new Creative Hubs. This decision followed a competitive bidding process which fits within a broader paradigm of local and regional development led by the cultural and creative sector and specifically links to an articulation of the value of creative hubs. Within the context of the promotion of a creative hubs paradigm, this article responds to the need for more detailed investigations of political and pragmatic investment decisions around regional screen production. It examines some of the public narratives around the bidding process for the Leeds HQ and Glasgow Hub, as well as those aspects of the relocation that were “hidden” from official accounts put forward by C4 and local, regional and national government bodies. Finally, it reflects on the future of regional screen hub development in the context of continuing devolution of broadcasting.

KEYWORDS

Channel 4; public service broadcasting; cultural policy; nations and regions; creative hubs; screen production

Introduction

The promotion of regional screen production is seen as vital in ensuring a wide range of content is produced for UK viewers reflecting a diversity of voices and in strengthening regional production hubs to support broader sustainable creative economies across the UK (Ofcom, 2018). The communications regulator Ofcom has insisted on the necessity for the public service broadcasters (PSBs) “to disperse and stimulate investment and job opportunities in the sector throughout the UK” and to ensure “a diverse range of

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programmes and editorial perspectives” (2019a, p. 1) and in 2018 undertook a major assessment of current regulations and provision in its Review of Regional TV Production and Programming Guidance. Channel 4’s move out of London in 2018–2019 to three new locations – its headquarters in Leeds and two “creative hubs” in Bristol and Glasgow – was a much publicised instance of this ongoing process.

The decision to select Leeds as the new National HQ and Bristol and Glasgow as new Creative Hubs followed a competitive pitching process which was initiated in 2018 with the announcement by Channel 4 of the “4 all the UK” strategy. Over 30 UK cities and regions pitched themselves against specific criteria underpinned by Channel 4’s vision and objectives for the National HQ and Creative Hubs. Following a shortlisting process involving 13 of the pitches, 6 cities were involved in “advanced negotiations” for the National HQ or Creative Hub option (Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester) and 3 further cities for the Creative Hubs (Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow) (Channel 4, 2020). Despite skepticism about the economic and social value of earlier examples of broadcasting decentralisation, such as the BBC relocation to Salford (Christophers, 2008; Noonan, 2012), there was an enthusiastic engagement in this competitive process, particularly in the final six cities, with significant resources devoted to developing public-facing campaigns.

This bidding process fits within a broader paradigm of local and regional development led by the cultural and creative sector and specifically links to an articulation of the value of creative hubs. As Gill et al. argue, however (2019), “creative hubs have become a cornerstone of economic and cultural policy with only the barest amount of critical discussion or scrutiny” (2019, p. 7), and it remains an under-examined and under-theorised term. The “flexible” definition of hubs has resulted in clusters, cultural quarters, co-working spaces, incubators, festivals, virtual networks and more all included in contemporary conceptualisations. The logic of “hub” thinking has become the dominant trope in creative industries capital development initiatives since at least 2010, evolving out of an earlier discursive focus on “creative clusters”.¹ Distinct from creative clusters and their focus on agglomeration economies and hard infrastructure, the emphasis within the examination of hubs has rested on their softer infrastructure including business support activities and processes like networking and collaborations (Virani & Malem, 2015) as well as providing mitigation of some of the precariousness of creative work (Crogan, 2015). Commonly existing conceptualisations tend to characterise the role of hubs as intermediaries with them variously described as acting as a “convenor” (British Council, 2015); “a lighthouse for the new urban economy” (Dovey et al., 2016) or their managers as “brokers” (Virani & Malem, 2015) which hints at their dynamic, tacit and contextually specific nature. The overwhelming focus of creative hub case studies has been urban, often deindustrialised centres, with examples such as WASP studios founded in Glasgow, Watershed in Bristol and The Sharp Project in Manchester presented as diverse, yet paradigmatic, case studies (Dovey et al., 2016) also signifying a clear link to the creative cities agenda (Virani & Malem, 2015). Within the context of the promotion of a creative hubs agenda, this article responds to the need for a more detailed investigation of the interurban competition process for regional screen production using the timely case study of the Channel 4 move. Specifically, it seeks to explore the public narratives around the bidding process relating to the case studies of Leeds and Glasgow as two of the successful bids for HQ and Creative Hub, as well as those aspects of the relocation that were “hidden” from official accounts put forward by C4 and local, regional and national government bodies.

A case study approach was selected as it can take account of the historical, place-specific features that have shaped the narratives of the bidding process. The case study method is especially helpful in attempting to interrogate context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The critique offered is based on a close reading of commentary in the local, national, and trade press and of the limited available documentation relating to the campaign, particularly during the 2018–2019 period. In incorporating such “grey literature” into the corpus of texts for analysis, we regard these documents, in agreement with Lawrence (2017, p. 391), as representing “symbolic content produced in a variety of forms and formats in institutionalised structures” and, therefore, operating as a type of media, although one often overlooked. We draw on the material which is publicly available to assess the way in which the move was framed by various stakeholders: C4, policy-makers, regional and national media and the competing bidders. Much media commentary and coverage has been dedicated to the bidding process and its aftermath; there are also a number of publicly available documents pertaining to it, such as Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership website materials (Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2018) and Glasgow’s G4C4 bid prospectus (Glasgow City Council, 2018). Key documentation is still, however, unavailable to the public – crucially, for example, the detailed bids from the competing regions and cities which have been deemed to be “commercially sensitive” (ICO, 2019) and are still confidential, making a detailed analysis of the rationale for C4’s decision impossible. The article also, therefore, explores some of the less visible discourses and issues around the bids as a means of critically evaluating the process.

The background to the bidding process and C4’s reluctance to leave London

In order to understand the historical significance of the C4 move out of London, it is important to have a brief overview of changes within the TV industry in the UK in recent years. Public service broadcasting in the UK consists of the BBC as the main public service broadcasters (PSBs) funded by the licence fee model, along with ITV, C4 and C5 who function in distinct ways as commercially oriented broadcasters with significant but varying public service remits. Despite the historical existence and development of significant regional production bases in parts of the UK outside of London (notably Bristol, Manchester and Yorkshire), the closure of key studios and the demise of the ITV franchise model from the 1980s onwards, along with the commercialisation of the independent television industry led to British broadcasting becoming increasingly London-centric in the years that followed (Crisell, 2002; Lee, 2018). In 2008, following many years of political debate, the BBC moved key parts of its production capacity to Salford to the MediaCity site; a move that fitted the prevailing clustering logic and focus on hard infrastructure of the New Labour years (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2015). From at least 2015, C4 came under increasing pressure to regionalise its operations, but this time within a very different political and economic climate, where there was less of a focus on buildings and hard infrastructure and more on the logic of creative hubs.

The background to Channel 4’s relocation has been contentious and protracted: spanning two British culture secretaries and two Channel 4 chief executives. In 2015 there were number of reports that the Conservative government was considering proposals to

privatise Channel 4, which is state-owned but supported by advertising. After initial government downplaying of consideration of a sale, a document setting out options for a sell-off was photographed in the hands of a civil servant entering Downing street (Martinson, April 2016) and Culture Secretary at the time John Whittingdale went on to speak out in favour of privatisation of Channel 4 claiming that it might benefit from “a private sector partner who has deep pockets” who “was willing to invest in the growth of the business” (Quoted in Martinson, April 2016).

A Channel 4 commissioned report carried out by Ernst & Young LLP in 2016 suggested the uncertainty and complexity of privatising the broadcaster could risk its public value remit. After a period of bitter debate around the ownership review, which left strained relations between Channel 4 and the government, privatisation was ruled out, but a full or partial relocation of Channel 4 out of London emerged as the most likely option, and a consultation process was initiated.² “Increasing the Impact of Channel 4 Corporation” launched on 12 April 2017 and ran for twelve weeks, closing on 5 July 2017. The Secretary of State’s foreword set out the rationale for the consultation:

This Government is committed to spreading jobs and prosperity throughout the UK, and we want Channel 4 to be part of that. We would like to see Channel 4 have a major presence outside London, stimulating creative and economic activity right across the country. In doing so it can play a leading role in a public service broadcasting system that reflects our United Kingdom. (DCMS, 14 September, 2017, p. 4)

During this period, there was considerable resistance to privatisation and relocation from Channel 4 under the leadership at the time of chief executive David Abraham. In discourses that echoed the 2011 BBC move to MediaCity UK around staff unwillingness to leave London, he warned that up to 80% of its workforce would quit if they were forced to move out of the capital and called the pledge to move Channel 4 out of London “irresponsible” and a “highly destructive proposition” (quoted in Walker, 2017). The shift of leadership at C4 from David Abraham to Alex Mahon, appointed as CEO in July 2017, was undoubtedly a significant factor in C4’s changing internal and external narrative around the move between 2017 and 2018, with Mahon a vocal supporter of the opportunities the relocation offered C4 and the UK’s creative industries.

In March 2018 it was agreed that Channel 4 would move its HQ and 300 of its 800 staff out of London by 2019 whilst keeping its London base and in April 2018 pitching guidance in the form of the “A Call 4 All the UK” document outlined the search criteria for its out of London sites (Channel 4, 2018).

What did C4 ask for?

Despite C4’s initial reluctance to relocate, they were decisive and strident in stating what they required. This set of requirements framed the bidding process and the ways in which the bidding city regions framed their pitches to C4. For the National HQ, C4 asked for potential locations to meet the following criteria:

- To be within three hours travel to London.
- To have a working population of more than 200,000
- To have a “high level” of physical and digital connectivity/infrastructure

The Creative Hubs were required to:

- Be within four hours travel to London
- Have a working population of more than 75,000
- Be in proximity to a well-developed independent TV/ Digital production community (Channel 4, 2018, pp. 18–19)

Of course, this immediately ruled out some hopeful regional cities in relation to being C4's new National HQ but left the majority of British cities in play to pitch to be a Creative Hub.

In keeping with the political and economic hegemony of “creative hub” discourses for regional and urban development (Gill et al., 2019), Channel 4 stressed that the new locations should offer “cutting edge connectivity” to “enable fully agile working and a seamless experience between our geographically dispersed locations”. Moreover, in line with Floridian arguments around talent attraction (Florida, 2002), the “quality of life” offered by the competing cities was described as “paramount” (Channel 4, 2018, p. 9). Educational links to develop new talent and opportunities were also positioned as a prerequisite, as well as availability of local talent. Finally, quality of working space is embedded throughout the tender documentation, although the specific requirements were left somewhat opaque (“Specifically, we are looking for a space that will provide Channel 4 with the ability to design a dynamic and innovative environment that will represent our remit.” (C4, 2018, p. 12)).

Perhaps the most restrictive requirement was the need for relatively fast travel to London (three hours for the national HQ and four hours for the hubs). Despite C4's pitch brochure being entitled “A Call 4 All”, these criteria ruled out a number of potential locations, and of the thirty locations which originally submitted an expression of interest to C4, only 13 cities were in the first shortlist for consideration as HQ or hub (Sweney, 2018) which could be regarded as a form of “geographical exclusion”. Furthermore, the bidding process could be seen as functioning through a process of discursive exclusion as a result of the “creative hub” logic embedded throughout the pitching process which excluded discourses and ideas about cultural value and regional audiovisual production beyond the parameters of this now dominant cultural policy discourse. This matters because of what is excluded from this framing of cities as much as what is included. This public language and framing of the bidding process is discussed in the next section, using available material from bid documents, press releases and other campaign materials.

What was emphasised in bidding campaigns?

As already mentioned, the full bidding campaigns are not publicly available, but a number of key themes were emphasised in the bidding process as found in media reporting, press releases and website materials from key associated organisations,³ and the limited available campaign materials⁴ predominantly in the 2018–19 period.

Existing capacity in regional production

Despite not necessarily being seen as the obvious powerhouses of existing production, like MediaCity UK or perhaps also Cardiff with its base of broadcasters, Pinewood

Studios and BBC Drama Village in the bidding process (Goodfellow, 2018), both Leeds and Glasgow emphasised their existing regional production strengths within their bidding campaigns. Stuart Cosgrove the chair of the Glasgow bid highlighted “the strength of the city’s independent production” (Miller, 2018) and the Glasgow bid prospectus itself describes the sector as “one of the UK’s biggest and most diverse production communities ... unique in the range and depth of its independent production” (G4C4, 2018, p. 8). In relation to Leeds, Sally Joynson, Chief Executive, Screen Yorkshire, noted the “production expertise and potential for further growth” of Leeds (Screen Yorkshire, 2018). Thompson Brand Partners, the agency leading the Leeds “Be the Spark” campaign, noted the recent growth in the local sector, highlighting that “Yorkshire’s Film & TV Industries generated an annual turnover of £424m across 590 creative businesses (an increase of 247% against the UK average of 118%)” (Ramshaw, 2017)

Interestingly though there was considerably more emphasis across the two bids on the digital strengths housed in each city region. The “strong pipeline of digital talent” in Leeds linked to Sky’s technology hub and sports business Perform Group was drawn out (Goodfellow, 2018) along with the positioning of Glasgow as a “dynamic digital city” (G4C4, 2018, p. 23) and the explicit mention of high profile digital firms based in central belt of Scotland including Rockstar North and Blazing Griffin within the bid prospectus (G4C4, 2018, p. 25). Leeds emerging status as a “tech city” (Tech Nation, 2018, 2019) has become a key part of Leeds reframed narrative to attract businesses and inward investment over the last five years. This keenness to emphasise digital talent links to emphasis within the original Channel 4 briefing information and the plan to house a digital production unit within the headquarters (Channel 4, 2018, p. 9) and “the thriving digital industry” been explicitly mentioned as part of the rationale for selection of Leeds for the HQ Leeds (Channel 4, 2020).

Creative cities

The bids from Glasgow and Leeds were both led by consortia with strong presence and leadership from the local authorities and regional development bodies noted already to be in line with a creative hubs paradigm. The regenerative potential for the physical fabric of the city, as well as the direct and indirect economic impacts, was a focus of the proposals. Both campaigns suggested a number of possible locations for Channel 4 bases within the city. In the case of the Glasgow bid (G4C4, 2018, pp. 32–37), five suggested locations were outlined, including perhaps the most obvious site, the Pacific Quay hub, where there is an existing cluster of media production including the BBC, STV, MG ALBA, and Film City Glasgow. The other four locations suggested in the bid prospectus are much more closely tied to areas of significant regeneration, including the Clyde Gateway area, linked to the associated redevelopment of the 2014 Commonwealth Games and the Collegelands site also to the East of the city and the focus of considerable recent public investment but neither discernibly linked to existing media production. The impacts of Channel location in these two sites are variously referred to as having a potentially “transformational” (G4C4, 2018, p. 34) and “significant economic and social impact” (G4C4, 2018, p. 36).

In the event, none of the five Glasgow locations were chosen for the Glasgow Creative Hub, and both the Hub and HQ sites have now been confirmed. The HQ will be based Leeds office will be in The Majestic, a former nightclub which the broadcaster will take

three floors of from late 2020. It is proposed that the new office will contain a studio that will be used to co-host Channel 4 news. The Glasgow base will be also be located centrally in a restored industrial building, The Garment Factory. Neither base is located within the existing production clusters of the cities, but both sites are very much in keeping with the post-industrial creative cities aesthetic hinted at in the pitching briefs with their emphasis on the attractiveness of workspace and the importance of quality of life (Channel 4, April, 2018). This focus on aesthetic appeal and urban modernism is reflected in the subsequent promotions of these sites by the property management companies involved. For example, The Garment Factory website speaks of the “the restoration of many of the original features – including exposed ceilings, steel and brickwork, wooden flooring and ornate staircases – with the introduction of contemporary finishes throughout.” (The Garment Factory, 2020), and the Majestic website boasts of itself as “designed to meet the needs of the modern business” (Majestic, 2020).

Diversity and inclusion

Surrounding the bidding process, beyond the possible economic impact of relocation, there was strong emphasis from Channel 4’s Chief Executive Alex Mahon around the opportunities for enhanced diversity and inclusion associated with the move. Reflecting the diversity of UK culture and values was a principle strongly emphasised in the Channel 4 pitch brief documents, although not prescriptively present in the criteria:

The move is part of the channel’s plan to “change the flavours and the values and the accents and the communities that you see on screen and change the way that decisions are made about what is on screen ... it is hard to get that diversity of thought and creativity and backgrounds that go with that if everyone works and lives in London”. (quoted in Miller, 2018)

Both cities very strongly pushed a broad language of diversity in their bids with Stuart Cosgrove emphasising the “social diversity” (Miller, 2018) of Glasgow and Leeds campaign champions noting “fascinating cultures, diversity and talents” and the “strong pool of young, diverse, creative and digitally-savvy talent” (Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2018). Within the Glasgow bid prospectus, the city is positioned as one, both historically and more recently, shaped by waves of immigration and notes its status since 1999 as an approved asylum city (C4G4, 2018).

In contrast to the ideas around enhancing diversity geographically via greater regional representation, there has been some critique of the out-of-London programming push in relation to its potential impact on diversity, specifically in relation to BAME employment levels (Goldbart, 2018). In defense of the Channel 4 move and choice of locations and in response to an open industry letter highlighting a possible negative impact on BAME employment Alex Mahon was quoted as saying that “inclusivity and diversity was a “central plank” of the “4 All the UK” pitch process and pointed out that Leeds’ neighbour Bradford has a BAME population of 32.5%” and that a base in “Glasgow will enable C4 to harness the city’s ‘rich cultural diversity’” (Goldbart, 2018).

New talent

The Glasgow bid talks of a “city of students” (G4C4, 2018, p. 12) and both bids emphasised the importance of developing deeper links between higher and further education and the

production sector as well as wider creative digital industries. Since the announcement of Leeds as the HQ, the National Film and Television School (NFTS) chose Leeds for its third school and this opened in early 2020 (Ibekwe, 2019). This follows the launch, in 2018, of NFTS Scotland based in Glasgow's Pacific Quay. In February 2020, The UK's first Centre of Screen Excellence launched following an 18-month collaboration between Screen Yorkshire, The National Film and Television School (NFTS), ScreenSkills and the British Film Institute (BFI). The emphasis on the importance of collaboration with education and training providers and can be linked to an underlying narrative around possible talent and skills gaps in the regions. The new satellite PACT office was opened in Leeds in May 2019 with the explicit motivation of addressing such gaps (Franks, 2019). The focus on youth within the Leeds and Glasgow bids is quite striking and links to the explicit aim of Channel 4 to try to develop, retain and attract young audiences. More recently, Channel 4 has announced intends to invest in a new content strand for teenagers to be distributed on YouTube and other social channels such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. The teens strand will be commissioned and run from Channel 4's new National HQ in Leeds (Broadcast, 11th June, 2019).

Hidden aspects of the competition for Channel 4

Alongside these largely promotional narratives emphasising the economic, cultural and social benefits of Channel 4's relocation, other elements around the bid have been largely hidden or marginalised.

Confidentiality and hidden incentives

While much of the promotional material within the bids have been made publicly available – via news stories and online promotional material – the specific detail of the bids has remained confidential, justified on the basis of “commercial sensitivity”. This includes financial and in-kind incentives offered by the “winners” Leeds, Glasgow and Bristol to C4 in terms of reduced rents and business rates. Colourful leaks from the bidding process have raised concerns about the transparency of the process. For example, an investigation by the *I* newspaper revealed that Brighton spent £2200 for “a hundred people to ride the British Airways i360 viewing tower”; that Stoke-on-Trent “paid £1200 to a firm making augmented reality applications, along with £842 for lunch at an apartment hotel and £176 on promotional mugs” and that “Glasgow spent £714 of its successful £50,800 bid on hiring the city's SWG3 nightclub and arts venue, plus £250 on presentation music” (Kirby & Milmo, 2019). Such claims have generated some ill-feeling, particularly within those cities that lost out. The lack of hard detail means that the process is still opaque, which will be little comfort to those cities that spent public money and failed to make the grade.

Concerns about incentives offered to attract inward investment are a long-standing issue. There are rules in place to limit the range and scope of incentives that regions can offer companies to secure inward investment – in the UK these are enacted through State Aid rules, which state that “any advantage granted by public authorities through state resources on a selective basis to any organisations that could potentially distort competition and trade in the European Union” (Sweney, 2018). As *The Guardian*

noted, “Channel 4 will have to tread carefully to make sure any enticements and inducements offered by bidders to try to win the pitch process do not break state aid rules” (Sweney, 2018). However, Leeds has so far managed to keep such details firmly under wraps. For example, an internal report was circulated within Leeds City Council in 2018 following the announcement that Leeds had been successful. It contained two appendices which were redacted from public view on the basis that

“It is considered that the public interest in maintaining the content of appendices as exempt outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information as doing so would prejudice the Council’s commercial position and that of third parties should they be disclosed at this stage. (Leeds City Council, 2018)

While the document does not specify exactly what was contained in these appendices, it is likely that they relate to agreements made with Channel 4 during the decision-making process:

In broad terms, the proposed arrangements are believed to be State aid compliant, but there is a need to ensure that, as the final details of the proposals are developed and agreed, they remain so. To that end, further legal advice will be taken as required as matters progress. (Leeds City Council, 2018)

Such incentives are a key part of regional competition for inward investment whereby regions and cities pitch themselves against competitor actors, promoting their own exceptionalism against other competitors in order to benefit from national and international flows of capital and labour (Jessop, 1998). The competition for inward investment is a structural feature of urban and regional policy, enacted where cities and regions (and their associated public bodies, agencies and institutions) bid for a variety of economic and social “prizes”, such as being the hosts of major cultural events; the preferred location for high growth business investment; the city (or country) that will host a major sporting event such as the Olympics or The World Cup. A range of different incentives may be offered to the company, institution or event making the decision, many of which are shrouded in mystery and kept under wraps through the justification of confidentiality, the legal dynamics of non-disclosure agreements, and in Channel 4’s case a justification to turn down a request for information about the basis of their decision on the rather vague grounds that such information would have a “chilling effect” on ongoing discussions with city region policy-makers, institutions, landlords and businesses (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2018). Questions of trust, transparency and secrecy come to the fore in such processes, and as such, any suggestion that tenderers were influenced by “treats” or incentives during the process becomes highly problematic, as suggested in press coverage following the decision (Kirby & Milmo, 2019).

The lack of transparency around the bids is reflected in the rationale for Channel 4’s location decisions. This applies both to the decision-making process about which cities got chosen and also about the office location decisions within the hub cities, for example, the decision to set up offices apart from the existing creative hubs in the cities of Leeds and Glasgow in favour of access to key transport hubs. This has led to speculation that location decisions have been made more on the basis of links to existing transport hubs (and therefore closer travel proximity to London), rather than on the basis of creating synergies with existing creative clusters in the hub cities (Waterson, 2019).

Cost and critical questions about impact

There has also been a lack of transparency around the cost accrued to public bodies across the country for bidding to be chosen by C4. This again raises fundamental questions about the value of regional bidding competitions such as this for cultural “anchor” brands. Freedom of Information requests by journalists have revealed that the West Midlands Combined Authority spent £282,500 on their bid, with £164,000 of that appearing to be spent on consultants. Cities shortlisted to become the broadcaster’s new regional base are estimated to have spent over £800,000 of public and private money between them (Kirby & Milmo, 2019). Given the context of continued regional austerity and cuts to core public services (not to mention cultural services), these are sizeable sums to devote to this process.

Such claims for economic and social benefits rest on an influential, but disputed, body of research which argues for direct and indirect links between the creative economy, urban regeneration and economic growth (e.g. Florida, 2002; Scott, 2004) within which the creative hub logic discourses can be located. This research makes a number of claims which can be separated out broadly into three categories (Lee, 2014, p. 1): that creative industries in and of themselves are high growth areas; that creative industries attract talented individuals – or “human capital”, who spend money, improve the opportunities and skills in a region and regenerate urban areas; and that creative industries may cause spillover of creative ideas and innovation into other areas of the economy, driving economic growth more broadly. These claims have provided the basis for the justification of investment into the arts, creative industries and creative skills development for well over twenty years. There has, however, been something of a backlash against this dominant but influential discourse in recent years, both academically and also in response to localised initiatives, of which the Channel 4 bidding process is such an example (Mayer, 2017; Oakley, 2014; Peck, 2005). Whilst it has been argued (Virani & Malem, 2015) that more recent articulations of creative hubs have focused on their ability to facilitate important intangible support activities like networking, collaboration opportunities and knowledge exchange more likely to embed benefits, it could be suggested that the bidding process associated with the C4 relocation had more in common with traditional approaches focused on place-based competition.

The negative implications of such competition have, however, been sidelined by those involved in the process, and in the case of the C4 relocation, regional policymakers were largely very keen to promote the benefits of the C4 relocation. For example, Roger Marsh, the chair of Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership said that the relocation of C4’s HQ could help create more than 1200 jobs and generate £1bn of economic growth over a decade, although the basis for this forecast is not clear (Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, 2018). However, there were some concerns about the potential economic wastage of the “winners take all” dynamic at the heart of the C4 bidding process. For example, at the regional level, and in response to the C4 move, several commentators and policymakers have been skeptical about the economic benefits in and of themselves. Paul Swinney, director of policy at the Centre for Cities think-tank, said: “Channel 4 is a recognisable brand, but the economic benefits of winning a bid are often much smaller than hoped, especially when large sums are being spent on the bidding process.” Others have drawn attention to problems with the bidding process itself, for

example, a spokesman for Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham said the process was “flawed”, adding: “It worked well for Channel 4 but nobody else. It was always a wasteful bidding war between cities”. (quoted in Williams, 2018). Enders Analysis questioned relocation as the most appropriate policy for stimulating regional cultural production, arguing that strengthening regional commissioning quotas would have a greater impact (Enders, 2017). The staff costs of the move could also be expected to cost up to £35 million in redundancy and relocation costs. (Enders, 2017)

Supporting a concentration of media activity in particular localities is a divisive strategy. Although the BBC’s partial relocation to Salford in 2011 increased production levels in Greater Manchester, Ofcom’s report noted that it resulted in “large reductions in the Midlands and east of England” and reflected that “there is clearly a trade-off between creating sustainable regional hubs, and ensuring diversity of supply from around England” (Ofcom 2015, p. 19). Challenging the broader social benefits that were promised, Christophers (2008) argues that the BBC relocation plan reproduced a neoliberal development agenda, privileging metropolitan elites rather than benefitting local communities, and questions the premise that the move has created broader regional economic value. Again, local skepticism has also played a part in undermining core tenets of the “cultural regeneration” script: for example, in Glasgow, The Ferret found that Glasgow City Council received less than £35k over 5 years from film companies for numerous street closures and location shooting (Mann, 2018). Such critical voices cast doubt on the notion of cultural investment (and by association regional bidding competitions for creative industries inward investment), especially in the context of public service cuts at the local level (set to intensify following the pandemic). C4’s focus on stimulating hub activity in Leeds, Bristol and Glasgow, which is directed at the regional development of human capital, skills and innovation (rather than the clustering approach focused much more on capital development and hard infrastructure, which typifies the BBC MediaCity move), can be seen partly as a response to the evidence of the failures exemplified above to generate the growth that the cluster policy promised.

Channel 4’s economic precarity

Another issue effaced during the bidding process is C4’s precarious position within the broadcasting economy as a result of the complex array of pressures it faces. Channel 4’s fundamental economic risk is that it is reliant on terrestrial advertising revenues at a time when they are steadily declining (Enders, 2020). Furthermore, this move towards regionalism for Channel 4 is taking place at a time of increased globalisation of screen production, in particular, the rapid audience shift towards subscription video on demand (SVOD) services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime; the increasing importance of international co-funding of content (especially drama); and the relative decline in spending on original content by UK PSBs (Johnson, 2019; Lotz, 2014). In such a context, regional production and regional representation becomes arguably even more important, although the transforming political economy of screen industries globally (and the economies of scale involved in competing globally) make this regional ambition potentially harder to achieve. The recent Ofcom report “Media Nations”, for example, stresses the challenges which PSBs and C4, in particular, face within an increasingly competitive and globalised screen industry’s economy (Ofcom, 2019b). Online content delivery is

transforming viewing habits and behaviour, in particular Netflix, Amazon and YouTube, which is, in turn, transforming industry structure. Broadcast television viewing is declining, to an average of 3 h 12 min of broadcast television in 2018, down 49 min from 2012, and the fall in younger viewers is much higher. Four in ten viewers now say that online video services are their main way of watching television and film (Ofcom, 2019b, 3). Channel 4's publisher business model, based on commissioning content from external providers (often indies) is being undermined by the new opportunities available to large indies such as Endemol Shine from global production companies such as HBO, as well as Netflix and Amazon Prime. C4's historical model, gaining advertising revenues through linear viewing has been disrupted by digitisation and subscription models. While much hope is being placed on the release of BritBox, the British version of Netflix, it is clear that C4 faces severe challenges to its long-term sustainability (Ernst and Young, 2016; Ofcom, 2019b).

Following the pandemic, C4 has been keen to stress its unique ability to adapt in exceptionally challenging circumstances, making a virtue of its innovative reputation and experimental culture, rooted in its own institutional history (Harvey, 1994). For example, interviewed recently for The Royal Television Society's Digital Convention 2020, Alex Mahon acknowledged the challenges facing C4, but also emphasised the ways in which the broadcaster and the indies producing content for it had adapted to continue producing content during lockdown conditions – citing *The Great British Bake Off* as one example of a transformation of production practices. She was also very keen to stress the unique cultural and social roles that C4's public service offer brought to the nation (nation speaking unto nation) in such circumstances, contrasting C4's content which speaks to the pandemic to Netflix's offer of programmes:

It was clear to us that we should be saying something back to Britain about what was happening ... It was the exact opposite of what the SVoDs would be doing. If you were watching Netflix, it's *Tiger King*, which is not saying anything about [being] British or the pandemic. (Clarke, 2020)

However, serious questions remain about C4's ability to survive and thrive in the new ecology of broadcasting. The reliance on advertising has shown it to be dangerously exposed to economic shocks, as the Covid-19 pandemic has shown (Enders, 2020b). Balancing its public service goals with economic survival will be critical for C4 in short to medium-term future. This will involve being able to develop new streams of revenue beyond advertising, possibly such as subscription fees for certain services and through ownership of intellectual property, although these are controversial matters for policy-makers because of the broadcaster's public service remit.

Conclusion

This article has explored the discourses and narratives around Channel 4's move to regional hub cities, as well as a focus on those issues that were not discursively "allowed" into the official conversation and procedure. In so doing, it has encountered wider systemic issues, some of which are specific to Channel 4's position within a transforming screen industries ecology, some of which are pertinent to broader issues of regional governance and competition. As such, C4's move is a useful case study for

exploring tensions and challenges for urban development based on the creative hub “script”; issues that are increasingly relevant in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the requirement of a radical transformation of a cultural policy economy that remains rooted in economic growth and competition. Several thematic conclusions emerge from the article’s analysis, which are summarised below.

The process underlying C4’s relocation demonstrates **the inherent costs of regional competition** that such bidding competitions for inward investment create. It is too soon to make such judgements about the C4 move, and the economic scale of the move is relatively small: it is dwarfed by the scale of the BBC’s move to Manchester in the 2000s, for example. However, the secrecy around the bidding process is reflective of a flawed model of neoliberal regional governance, which creates “winners” and “losers” at the urban and regional scale, and generates bitterness for those who feel that they have failed. The fact that the grounds for C4’s decision is opaque and the sense that there is a lack of transparency, even after two years, has also fuelled regional divisions. Further to this, the dominant focus in the early decision-making process and the pitching process around the rationale of relocation for “spreading jobs and prosperity throughout the UK” (DCMS, 14 September, 2017, p. 4), arguably squeezed out the ability of more nuanced and comprehensive discussion of the mechanisms for achieving greater representation across the UK’s nations and regions.⁵ Despite a discursive connection between the relocation and C4’s original innovative and progressive roots in the 1980s (see, for example, Harvey, 1994) related to the tensions presented by the pursuit of the traditional and hegemonic neoliberal urban development “script”, C4 missed an opportunity to radically rethink what relocation might have meant. For example, why not Channel 4 offices all across the country? Why the need for a physical space at all? This can be seen in comparison, for example, to Scotland’s National Theatre which had such an open discussion with stakeholders in thinking about its future and, at its inception at least, was regarded as marking out a “radical, progressive and inclusive public sphere in Scotland, which sought to express and represent a diversity of identities, national and otherwise” (Robinson, 2012, p. 55).

Whilst arguably more nuanced and progressive than a sole focus on hard infrastructure within decisions around the move, the potential positive impact of embedding the process in discourses associated with a creative hubs logic with their greater emphasis on softer infrastructure remains to be seen. Significant questions remain about who will benefit from the relocation and if/how existing local or regional production as well as, as yet untapped, talent will be engaged with and developed. Both bids emphasised the importance of developing deeper links between higher and further education and the production sector as well as wider creative digital industries. The emphasis on the importance of collaboration with education and training providers and can be linked to an underlying narrative around possible talent and skills gaps in the regions. These impacts will take time to develop, and thus, longitudinal and rigorous research will be required to determine the extent of any democratisation of production as well as how this might impact on-screen representation.

Finally, the move also raises questions about **C4’s future economic sustainability**. The promotional discourses around the move, analysed above, masked the significant structural changes occurring within the screen industries as a result of increased competition and the impact of SVOD. C4 is widely acknowledged to have a precarious financial

model as a PSB with certain public value commitments that are almost completely reliant on advertising revenues and has an operating surplus of near zero (Enders analysis, 2020a). The policy process that essentially imposed the relocation on C4, and led to the departure of a Chief Executive, was undertaken within a Tory media policy context that is predisposed towards media privatisation. Following the decision by DCMS that C4 should relocate, talk of privatisation was replaced by debate about its move beyond London. However, calls for privatisation are resuming in the wake of Covid-19's impact on the broadcasting industry (Enders, 2020a). This raises a disturbing question: is this essentially government-imposed relocation a convoluted way of accelerating C4's privatisation? This question has particular relevance now given the government's ire at Channel 4 in the lead up to the 2020 General Election, following Dorothy Byrne's comments about Boris Johnson being a "liar" (Cocozza, 2019) and the recent launch of an Ofcom consultation which warns of the threats to traditional broadcasting (Ofcom, 8th December, 2020).

Despite the tensions and complexity associated with the bidding process and the move itself, there is clearly a symbolic significance of the physical relocation outside London. In questioning the costs of bidding to the regions, the cost of the move to C4 or indeed the actual economic benefits to the regional "winners", it is important not to lose sight of the importance of the representation of regional voices and having inclusive and sustainable regional screen production. We argue that detailed investigations are needed of the results of these political and pragmatic investment decisions around the Channel 4 relocation to extend empirical knowledge of the economic and cultural impact of the initial stages of the move and whether in the long-term it will improve the vitality of regional production and the representation of regional voices.

Notes

1. The significance of debates around clustering and subsequently hubs can be seen as part of "spatial turn" in British cultural policy (and internationally) and is discussed in some detail in Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015); Lee et al. (2014) and Bell and Oakley (2014). While there are progressive political tendencies within this policy model, with emphases placed on regeneration of deprived areas and other forms of social value, it is clear how economic justifications have dominated spatial thinking in relation to cultural policy; for example, this is most apparent in arguments for urban regeneration.
2. When it became clear, there was little political appetite for pursuing privatisation and the inevitable public controversy that would have ensured, relocation became the preferred option. It is not clear exactly how this shift occurred, although the prevailing UK government logic of addressing regional inequalities and the role of broadcasting within that process is clear within the subsequent policy documentation (DCMS, 2017).
3. These organisations include public sector agencies and bodies, such as Screen Yorkshire, Leeds City Council and Ofcom and skills organisations, such as the National Film and Television School and the sites hosting the new HQ and hub, The Majestic and The Garment Factory.
4. These materials include The G4C4 Bid Prospectus, the Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership website and press releases from Channel 4 itself.
5. Both the response of local authorities to the DCMS consultation and the report by Oliver & Ohlbaum Associates Ltd and Europe Economics commissioned by the DCMS focused on the potential regional economic benefits and costs, in terms of GVA and jobs, of the already limited two policy options of full or partial relocation of C4 under consideration in

its 2017 consultation. The report published prior to the finalization of the decision for C4's partial relocation suggested that full relocation could deliver an economic benefit of around £235m Gross Value Added (GVA) to the target region, including direct, indirect and induced impact and a regional employment impact of around 3400 jobs. Partial relocation was calculated to deliver smaller benefits, of around £170m GVA and up to 2500 jobs (Oliver & Ohlbaum Associates Ltd and Europe Economics, 2017, p. 6).

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