

## A REPORT INTO MEDIA COVERAGE OF ARTS AND CULTURE IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

BY NICOLA SMITH

This project was initiated as the result of an arts and media meeting held on the Isle of Skye in September 2007. The purpose of the project was to investigate the barriers faced by Highlands and Islands arts organisations in gaining media coverage.

### Consulted for this Report:

Pauline Mclean (*BBC Scotland*)  
Kirstin Innes (*The List*)  
Marcus Harben (*The Culture Show*)  
Fiona Leith (*Scotland on Sunday*)  
Andrew Eaton (*The Scotsman*)  
Barry Didcock (*The Sunday Herald*)  
Jan Patience (*freelance writer*)  
Adrian Lear (*An Tobar*)  
Kirstie Anderson (*Pròiseact nan Ealan*)  
Craig Atkins (*An Lanntair*)

### NICOLA SMITH - BIOGRAPHY

Nicola Smith is a freelance audience development expert. She has worked within Scotland's cultural sector for six years and specifically within the Highlands and Islands region for almost two years. Nicola has practical experience working within arts venues box offices and marketing departments. She has worked in a small rural contemporary art gallery and within a large urban multi-arts venue. Nicola is now involved in working with small community projects and larger audience development research projects.

### SUMMARY

This investigation began by talking to arts organisations that are based in the Highlands and Islands (HI) area. It was quickly identified that most organisations are relatively successful in securing local press and media coverage (albeit of a variable quality due to a lack of dedicated arts reporters). Tackling the lack of arts critics in this area is a challenge. Try to seek out local writers with an interest in your event and chat to your local press regarding them submitting a piece.

While our relationships with our local press are relatively good, it has been much more difficult for the arts sector of the HI to forge relationships with the national arts media and to secure significant coverage at this level. This research project has therefore focused on this area and on identifying ways to improve the current situation.

Some examples of pieces of work which have secured significant coverage include; the concert in Smoo Cave, the opening of the Shetland Museum (specifically the row over whether items should be returned to it) and the St Kilda Opera. These stories all have a clear news element attached to them and, in some cases, have used press agencies to help secure the coverage – an expense many organisations cannot afford.

Often news articles which are covered have a controversial view point and it is much more difficult to sell a 'good news story'. Securing critical reviews and working without press agencies has proved far less fruitful. Coverage is becoming even more of an issue now that reporters, writers and broadcasters are restricted in travel and a lot of research is carried out from the office/online.

Following several interviews with key national arts media contacts the following barriers were highlighted as the main areas we need to investigate:

- o Geography
- o Budgets (available to both press and cultural organisations)
- o Awareness
- o The communication flow
- o Knowledge and understanding of media
- o Skills

The key recommendations in response to these barriers are:

- o Change the way we work
- o Press planner download from HI~Arts website
- o Q&A sessions with experienced PR
- o Re-instatement of familiarisation tours
- o Arts organisations showcase in central belt
- o Training for those who work with the media
- o HI relevant contacts on HI~Arts website

What follows is a more in-depth look at what steps we can take to tackle these issues.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND BUDGETS**

While geography is seen as one of the greatest barriers, it is also our USP (unique selling point) and we should shout about the diversity of work going on in rural areas. Nearly every reporter that was spoken to said that it was not always easy for their writers to travel all around Scotland and from our point of view it is not easy for us to get down there. However, with a bit of a planning, plenty of notice and a strong enough story it can be done and done well.

If you have a strong story then preparation and contacts are the key. It may not be easy for you to make it down to the central belt to meet your contact, but where possible this is invaluable as when a reporter can put a name to a face then they are more likely to pick up on your story. At the very least, a phone call to introduce yourself should be made.

The general feedback on budgets was that they are always a consideration. However, with enough preparation and a strong enough story, combined with the media's awareness that they need to get out of the central belt, this can be overcome. Offering expenses was not necessarily seen by the media as an incentive – knowing that it was time well spent is the key issue here.

## AWARENESS

There is a significant lack of awareness of the diversity of work that goes on in the cultural sector of the HI region which is a serious consideration, but one that we can help change. The general view from the central belt media is that most of the work shown here is touring from elsewhere (and therefore the media's focus is to cover the work where it is first shown, usually the central belt) or traditional (which is not as interesting for them to cover as cutting edge new work). We need to shout louder about what we are doing or the different ways we are presenting it. Press releases are often lost in a sea of emails and, once again, if your media contacts don't know who you are then they are unlikely to read them.

In 2003, HI~Arts launched an online Highlands and Islands Arts Journal ([www.hi-arts.co.uk](http://www.hi-arts.co.uk)). Where reporters are aware of this, it is used and perceived as a useful tool. Those who had not used the journal and had their attention brought to it said they would use it in future. With over 3,000 unique visitors to the site every day this is a fantastic tool and we need to keep HI~Arts informed of all that we are doing.

The Journal needs to be more widely promoted as a tool for national arts media to keep up-to-date with key stories from the region.

## THE COMMUNICATION FLOW

In many cases, reporters had been pro-active in identifying stories that were happening in the HI area, but were then met with a wall when trying to follow it up. Finding out who to speak to, being met with suspicion and not having phone calls answered were real problems.

With increased promotion of the HI~Arts Journal, there should also be a contact list of HI arts organisations and their press contacts to help the media identify who they should speak to about what. Having one contact within your own organisation that deals with the media would eliminate confusion and help develop relationships with key journalists.

In addition the following effective communications strategies should be used.

- o Cultivate key journalists/broadcasters
- o Be seen to be helpful, honest, responsible and informative

### *Raising Awareness*

The most effective ways to raise awareness are as follows:

- o Read the papers/magazines and get to know the style and focus of each publication/broadcaster
- o Introduce yourself and your organisation to the relevant arts editors, find out how they work – do they prefer phone calls or emails?
- o Tailor your proposals to target relevant publications/broadcasters
- o Lift the phone or send an informal email before thinking about a press release.
- o Don't bombard editors with every event you have. Identify the strongest stories and focus on these – make sure they have national significance.
- o Through the re-instatement of the familiarisation tours and a showcase event in central belt (more information below)

- o Do your homework
- o Know deadlines and return calls promptly
- o Be available and have relevant knowledge to hand
- o Always go through the arts editor (for arts stories)

The press release is seen as pretty overrated so your organisation should focus on telephoning, meeting or using informal emails – find out what works best for each of your own media contacts. This is not to say we should not use press releases – just make sure your contact is aware of it coming, and is interested in what you have to say and will therefore read it.

Knowing your deadlines is vital. One way to help with this would be a 'press planner' from HI~Arts website. This would involve entering the date of your event/exhibition and the planner would then bring up dates of who you should be contacting when.

## KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF MEDIA

This is the absolute greatest barrier faced by HI arts organisations. It is generally perceived that there is a lack of understanding from arts organisations about what makes a decent arts news story. There is also a lack of knowledge of how the media works.

The desire by all the national arts media for publicity people to have an idea of what they are after and the deadlines they work to is not just to help them, but to save us wasting our time. One suggestion to help overcome this is for one-hour Q&A sessions to be set up with an experienced PR person.

Chatting to your contact about how they work and their deadlines is essential to be sure you are not annoying them or wasting your time.

What makes a good story is not a question that can easily be answered. An arts news story that attracts the most attention is often a controversial one. Perhaps we need to embrace the idea that 'no news is bad news' and be braver as a sector. We need to think about what stories engage best with editors – for example, the stories most focused on in the media centre on crime, love, money, celebrity, disaster, power and football. We need to take more risks and think outside the box.

Sometimes the arts editor may not be the most relevant person for your story – think of tourism editors or current affairs editors. The best way to increase your knowledge and understanding of this issue is to read the papers/magazines and to monitor radio/TV news bulletins. With a lack of trained PR's in the area, training needs to be delivered across the region to help combat this issue.

## SHOWCASE AND FAMILIARISATION TOURS

In the past HI~Arts has organised familiarisation tours which gave key arts journalists an all-expenses paid three-day introductory tour to cultural facilities and events within the HI area. Some of the journalists who were consulted had been on the tours and had found them extremely useful. Those who hadn't thought they sounded like a fantastic idea. Everyone thought they should happen again.

The main problem in organising the tours is finding enough reporters who can take three days out of their schedule at the same time. Again, with preparation and planning this can be overcome. The key issue to ensuring these are a success is in picking the right people – the arts editors for example (freelance writers change often, the editor usually chooses the stories for them and it is more difficult for them to take three days out).

These tours are essential in bringing reporters to the area and getting them as excited as we are about the locations we work in and the relevance of what we do. However, these tours are costly and will be difficult to cover all areas so will take time to roll out across the region. A way to showcase the vibrant and diverse arts and cultural activity of the Highlands and Islands is to take our case to the national media and host a reception within the central belt. A reception will attract the freelancers as well as key national journalists and will help our press officers make the correct contacts while raising awareness of the range of work we do. This idea was met with great excitement from all reporters consulted, but it does need to have a central focus. This was discussed at the initial arts and media meeting which was held at An Tuireann Arts Centre in September 2007. The action agreed at that meeting included:

- o Contact arts and cultural organisation across the HI area to gauge support for these ideas and participation in the proposed actions.
- o Collect information from islands based arts organisations on what the key “message” to the media should be in terms of highlighting key successes, facts and figures, and the “future offer” (i.e. flagship events that your organisations would like to see covered nationally).

## GAELIC ARTS

All of the above issues are equally relevant to the specific issue of the Gaelic arts. When asked if they felt Gaelic arts were relevant to their readers, the answer was broadly 'yes'.

*'If opera in Italian is relevant to our readers, I don't see why Gaelic arts shouldn't be.'*  
Andrew Eaton (Scotsman).

The view was that ultimately it depends on whether there is an interesting story to be told, so once again the emphasis is on finding a strong story that can be sold to the editor. Most editors do not speak Gaelic, so sending a press release in Gaelic would be redundant. An initial phone call or brief, but informative email in English should be the starting point.

Persuading writers to print a bilingual article is quite a battle. There would need to be a clear tie-in with a bigger story (for example when the List did it last year, it tied in with the launch of Highland 2007). Next year (2009) is Homecoming Scotland and there is an opportunity here to tie-in with this year-long celebration of Scottish heritage and culture.

## CONCLUSION

As the number of column inches dedicated to the arts in Scotland becomes reduced, the fight for space from all areas of the country increases. This is not helped by many preconceived ideas of the work going on in the Highlands and Islands not being cutting edge nor being of national significance.

In order to execute a successful PR campaign at least 60% of your time needs to be dedicated to working with the media – and with many of us doing more than just marketing, time is not on our side.

Training on identifying a strong arts news story and how to work with the media is essential. Building contacts and raising awareness of the diversity of work that exists here must happen to help us move forward. By taking more risks and shouting louder about what we do, we can help increase the critical engagement of our audience.

**Nicola Smith (for HI~Arts)**  
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[www.hi-arts.co.uk/audiences](http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/audiences)