

Can You Hear It?

BBC puts Accent on North

A keynote lecture by Peter Salmon Director, BBC North

Good evening.

It is good to be in Sunderland — home to the fastest counters in the country, as we all saw on Election night. All the drama that opening the ballot boxes has resulted in started right here. Amazing to think that 40 million people watched some of that remarkable Election Campaign on the BBC.

I don't think I can beat that drama tonight — nor can I match the excitement of the new Dr Who's appearance here a few weeks ago for an exclusive screening of the first episode of the new series for local children - but I do hope I can give you a sense of some of the change already underway in the BBC that I hope will have a growing impact on your lives over the next few years.

I'd like to thank Graeme and the RTS in the North East for inviting me and providing this chance to talk to you about our big move North next year and the opportunities it can create for programme making here in the Northeast.

I'd ask your forgiveness in advance if I talk about The North as though it were a single place as opposed to a whole series of great cities and towns and regions of England. As I hope to explain today though, I do think there is much that binds us together — not as little northerners, reduced to settling for second best, but citizens of the greater north, unified in ambition and confidence.

I would also like to talk about how the BBC sees its role today in serving those audiences, especially as it relates to how to deliver on its charter promise to reflect the nation back to itself.

Remember the BBC is now halfway through a process of unprecedented editorial devolution — by 2016 we will have moved half of all our network production out of London. That's like turning the corporation on its head.

A key part of this is our new home in the North at MediaCity in Salford Quays, which itself represents something truly significant for the whole BBC, and indeed for the creative industries in the North of England. It is no minor amendment to how we operate but the BBC's biggest single move in our history — adding to what we already make in the North by transferring no less than five departments — Sport, Children's, Learning, Radio Five Live, and parts of Future Media and Technology — from London to Greater Manchester - with all their spending power. Representing an enormous range of television, radio and online content, including some of our most loved shows like Match of The Day and Blue Peter. You could see it as a mighty seismic shift within the Corporation. It is nothing less than a change to the UK broadcasting landscape as we know it, and I believe it will have an enormous impact when we look back at the end of this decade.

This move represents a unique opportunity for creative talent throughout the whole of the North of England, including the Northeast. Moving five additional departments from London to Greater Manchester is not an empty political gesture on the part of the BBC. It is structural and sustainable change which can stimulate generations of new talent and create hundreds of new opportunities for people already living in the North.

We want to encourage new producers, writers, technology companies, games makers, universities, training bodies, and technicians - a whole host of creative people to become involved. And it doesn't stop at Manchester. It starts there. The project's arteries must feed into all corners of the greater north, invigorating the creative industries throughout the region, and channelling new blood back into our output as a whole — or we will fail.

That's why the name of our new base at Salford is not BBC Manchester, as the old regional centre used to be known, but BBC at MediaCity. It will have an annual commissioning and production budget somewhere between four and five hundred million pounds, and it will be part of my job to make sure that it starts to touch lives across the whole of the region.

I've had the post of Director, BBC North, for almost exactly a year, and there is another year to go before the first BBC programme maker moves into their new home.

And, although I am a son of the North coming home, I feel a bit like an explorer in a new land — because the landscape has changed so much in the last couple of decades. The steel mills, shipyards and many factories may have closed, but there are new industries beginning to open up in our sector. The creative sector has a strong role to play and given our current economic plight the new BBC commitment to the North could not be coming at a more significant time.

There is much that is cutting edge here already. Talent crucial to our multiplatform future, breaking new ground in the interactive sector. I've been to see games companies like Sumo in Sheffield - next month we will be launching the interactive *Dr Who* computer episodes they have produced for the BBC - One reason we exterminated a few shocked commuters in Sheffield with the new look Daleks outside the railway station a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile we have had over a hundred applications for the @North initiative this spring, which has been developing digital Media ideas from independent companies across the North to help them share some of the £500,000 on offer to make interactive online content for CBBC and CBeebies.

Fifty companies across the North were short-listed to go through to a detailed development phase. Having reduced the short list further, as we move to the commissioning phase this summer, we are currently working with seven North East based companies, like Enigma and Mere Mortals in Newcastle and Fluid Pixel in Middlesbrough — testament to the skill and quality of talent round here.

Another example of economic benefit for the North came about when *BBC Sports Personality of the Year* went to Sheffield. Five years ago we took the decision to move the show out of London. Cynics told us the stars wouldn't come and the show would decline. What rubbish. On the contrary, the likes of Jensen Button, Ryan Giggs, Fabio Capello, Dame Kelly Holmes and Sir Chris Hoy were all there and Sheffield was delighted because it gave something like a million pound boost to the local economy and acted as a shop window for the City's growing confidence and ambition. The licence fee itself has a role as creative capital pump primer - and research by Deloitte's earlier this year showed that every pound of licence fee spend, generated at least two pounds of economic value. Again, so important in these straitened times.

With BBC Sport at MediaCity, there must be many more opportunities of that sort across The Region. Another new MediaCity resident, Radio 5 Live, is currently planning very extensive live coverage of the 30th anniversary of the Great North Run, that wonderful North East Sporting Institution that is such a big hit with runners and licence fee payers alike. Perhaps we will see Steve Cram make a bid to win it on its 30th anniversary!

Please don't think it is just about those particular departments physically moving to the North. This is about the whole BBC shifting northwards — and we want to be a conduit into this Region for the entire corporation. For instance the BBC4 digital network will run a whole new telly season called *The Great Northern* this autumn including several shows commissioned from independents: including a series about the golden age of civic architecture in our Great Northern cities. One film will be authored by Hartlepool poet and writer Michael Smith about the history and cultural identity of Newcastle. And BBC 3 is currently in the early stages of making a new medical documentary TV series to be filmed on Tyneside over the coming year. I also know there are several other projects in the pipeline with Indies in the North East that are close to being agreed.

So, do accents matter? Does how the BBC sounds give out particular signals in different places? I think so. No real surprises that Ant and Dec's network ITV plays so well up here, and with locals Cheryl Cole and Robson Greene such frequent stars on it too. Or that Big Brother's iconic Geordie narrator brought a fondness for that Channel 4 phenomenon here too. And when Geordie Joe won X Factor that just topped the lot for me. The challenge is clear - we the BBC need more iconic voices and faces on screen, on air and certainly wielding their magic pens from these parts.

I want people all over the UK to be able to turn on their television, or their radio, and hear northern voices and Northern accents - not only in the sense that they have the right vowel sounds - but also in that they describe the world in a way that is authentic, while maintaining their universal network appeal. Writers like Kay Mellor, who recently made *A Passionate Woman* in Leeds, or like Peter Flannery who writes *Inspector George Gently*, which has just been filming close by here in Durham for the first time, thanks to support from the Northern Film and Media Development Fund.

We want people to be able to watch more Northern dramas played out in a recognisably Northern setting. People here are rightly proud of the locality. They want to see their hills, their valleys, their towns and their coastline celebrated.

So that's something we're hoping to make more of in the next series of *Tracy Beaker Returns*, for instance — now made here in the Northeast. The first series here was a brilliant production and a huge success on CBBC and the I player. We want to build on that for the second series by including more of Tyneside in what we see on screen. There are some exciting plans - which even include one episode being set on an outward bound course in the glorious Northumbrian countryside. There are off screen benefits too and we have a great cast and crew who are keen to engage with the community. This summer they are already involved with a BBC Learning project with Darlington schools and on 2nd July they will be at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle for an event attended by secondary school students from across the North East.

It's about location, location, location, — because we are learning that this can be a real positive when wooing and winning audiences all over the UK.

Which brings me to how the BBC can more fully represent the audience in programming — and broadly speaking, how well the BBC is perceived to deliver on its charter promise to reflect the nation back to itself. It's not a matter of cramming the output with Northern accents. I would define it more exactly as being about our *voice*, in its broadest sense: and something which ultimately enables us to separate the authentic from the fake, that tells us immediately that Paul Abbot's *Shameless* is drama that comes from his boots, that Jimmy McGovern's *The Street* tells the stories of real people living in a real place, that even Caroline Aherne's *Royle Family* might have existed.

Reflecting the audience in drama or documentary, in comedy or entertainment, is about truth in casting, location, tone of voice. Where you place your feet affects the way you see things, and it is very difficult to connect in a truthful way with audiences all

over the UK and get it right in the way you represent them on television if your home, your office and most importantly your mindset is located immovably within the orbit of the M25.

I wouldn't want you to take away the impression that up until now the BBC has remained blissfully unconscious of its duties to audiences outside London. My television colleagues have made real strides, and I remember a brilliant BBC One drama initiative about a decade ago that delivered powerful new northern series like *Cutting It*, *Clocking Off* and *Linda Green*. Sadly it wasn't sustainable - It was an Initiative.

Indeed over the years that I have been at the BBC, it's a topic and a challenge that has inspired many a session of head-scratching, bemused many a working party, and launched many a wave of focus groups.

People in Broadcasting House and Television Centre are aware that reflecting the nation back to itself doesn't mean making programmes about people like themselves, or alternatively about flat capped Northerners with whippets or Welshmen who sing in choirs. They genuinely care and worry about how to get it right for a modern UK. But the difference this time is that I really believe what is happening will make a long term difference. It is not an initiative. It is structural. And permanent.

MediaCity is part of the difference too. By moving so many departments north, the BBC is not only demonstrating its commitment to programmes made in the North and reflecting Northern concerns. It is a change that will abide so long as the BBC does and it is evidence of an understanding that the audience has to be viewed as a set of different communities who often come together in shared tastes and enthusiasms, but at the same time may have different needs and different cultural identities.

Broadly speaking, it matters where you place your feet. Knowing a programme is made locally can enhance the audience's appreciation of it, and programmes that also succeed in reflecting the places in which they are made get even more appreciation.

But portrayal is a strong factor in why some areas, including the North, are less happy with what we provide. Employing actors with all purpose Northern accents in drama that is often set in the south, or in a sort of TV 'no-place', is not really enough. People love seeing their own home Region on TV too..

The key point I think is that the more regional, the more authentic the BBC can be, the more successful it can be with audiences.

What's the trick then that will deliver audiences all over the UK? And how can we make more of them?

I grew up in a small town in the Northwest. As a child I watched very few BBC programmes on our television at home, and the reason for that was that ITV, in the shape of Granada, got it right lots of the time. They made programmes in the north for northerners, programmes about the kind of people who lived there, and which spoke to us in the way that the BBC didn't then. They had an ambition that went beyond their base — *Coronation Street*, *What the Papers Say*, *The Army Game*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Krypton Factor* were all programmes that were loved and appreciated and gathered huge audiences right across the UK. An absolute demonstration that if you get it right, being out of London can win you the ratings prize. You could say exactly the same about Tyne Tees, with its much loved adaptations of Catherine Cookson's novels, or for younger, cooler viewers *The Tube*. You found it in Yorkshire Television's output with *A Touch of Frost*, *Emmerdale*, *Jimmy's* and *Heartbeat*.

So the question the BBC has to ask itself is: are we going to end up in a better place to find and keep the next Ant and Dec or Cheryl Cole? I wish I could tell you that it was the BBC who gave their first big break to Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, from Darlington and Middlesbrough respectively, but Channel Four got there first.

We didn't find them because we weren't looking; perhaps because we weren't actually here, or rather we didn't spend enough time here. All that, I hope, is going to change, indeed it is already changing as the BBC pursues its Project North. A small Pioneering example is our North East Comedy Initiative, which we have been developing with Northern Film and Media. We are looking at this as a cross platform idea and involving out Future, Media and Technology people alongside our Comedy North team, to develop talent, be they writers, stand-ups, film makers or animators. We want to put the best ideas in front of the Comedy Commissioner and see if we can win more commissions here and discover new talent.

ITV's virtual collapse as a regional network broadcaster is, sadly, also a BBC challenge. It has left a vacuum that is crying out to be filled by a strong new production base in the North, making a range of programmes that rivals and might even surpass what was once made by those great old former ITV companies. That's why MediaCity at Salford Quays, as the hub of our northern project, can make a real difference in the way the BBC serves people living in the North.

The challenge is to ensure that Salford doesn't simply become a London of the North: It has to be a filter not a fortress and that the benefits flow outwards to reach viewers and listeners and creative people in Leeds, Liverpool, and Bradford; in Stockport and Sunderland, Hartlepool and York; in Northumbria and Cumbria and Humberside. I am keen to encourage partnerships that will help the BBC achieve a real difference in the way Northern audiences perceive our programmes, and that will supply quality output to the whole of the UK.

One of the key partnerships will be with the training sector, to build on the expertise that already exists here, and to develop a strong base of craft skills to service production in the North. At the risk of coming across as a heavy drinker I find myself thinking

of the Strongbow ad. A huge army is gathering on a darkling plain, brandishing all manner of strange weapons, the tools of their trade. So I say to you, step forward sound technicians! Cameramen and women, how could we do this without you? Sparks, we need you to light our dramas! Website designers, come with us! And the prize is not in this instance a tankard of foaming cider — getting thirsty now; it's been a long night - but quality output that will conquer the whole of the UK.

Earlier this year, the BBC held our Connect and Create Conference for the whole of the North at Teesside University. In fact Vic and Bob came back to help us out. Connect and Create is one of those win-win schemes that opens the doors of the BBC to more people - a way for BBC staff to develop new skills of their own while working in partnership with a range of community organisations and charities and helping them develop programme making skills. I invited Mark Thompson - the Director General - to attend and he was on the panel students presented their ideas to. One Sunderland student — Amber Bulloch — impressed the DG and others, including the head of the BBC Philharmonic, Orchestra and she has been invited to do a placement with the development team in Entertainment next month. This is just one small, human example of how we are building links and developing future talent. Another recent example is that 15 Sunderland students came to Manchester for a special World Cup day of workshops around sports coverage. We then ran a World Cup Challenge and two Sunderland students have won placements during the World Cup itself — Nadia Haif is going to the Sports News Team and Kevin Moeliker will be based at Radio Sport on 5 Live. I met them both this afternoon when I spoke to students here — though I did have to tell them the placements are down south - not South Africa! It is really exciting to meet people who are seizing opportunities right now and are at the very start of new careers in our industry.

Let's hope this can be about bringing good news for young people in the North hoping to break into broadcasting, at a point when the UK as a whole is entering a period of troubling austerity. It's not easy getting started on a basic broadcasting salary anyway if you have to move to London because that is where all the jobs are. It's nigh impossible unless you are able to go on living with your parents there, or have a friend's floor to sleep on. That's not good for diversity, because it excludes most young people who don't have connections in London already. As a result, it's the same kind of people getting the jobs as have always done. If we're to inject new blood into the BBC, we have to create opportunities for new starters outside London, where they can afford to live, and my hope is that the BBC's Project North will help do just that.

Of course it is not just about young and up coming talent. We need to make it as easy as possible to find and engage talent from all walks of life. We need many new skills to change the BBC's DNA. It is about enthusiasm and passion and energy — and you can have that if you are 18 or 58!

SO.....The change and the opportunities won't happen overnight, just because a big new workspace is being created in Salford. But the next ten years are going to be among the most exciting in the BBC's history. Particularly here.....

A decade that hopefully will change the look, feel and sound of the BBC

forever. Which will make it more attuned to the psyche of the whole UK. Which will make it a better partner across the creative industries. And which will produce a new army of talented, enthusiastic individuals that will help change the face of media across the UK for the BBC and the rest of the sector. We can and are shifting the centre of UK broadcasting gravity over the next ten years. It will hopefully leave BBC audiences — wherever they live — enjoying more programmes that reflect the unique identity of the places in which they are forged, but at the same time speak beyond the local, with voices that are recognisably regional and also universal. That didn't stop American hit *The Wire* - rooted very firmly in Baltimore - did it?

SO....Can you hear it? It's just a murmur on the wind, but growing louder. If we join our Northern voices to it, we can do nothing less than reshape the creative landscape of our Nation.