

London's loss is the north-west's gain

The BBC's move to MediaCityUK in Salford is expected to have a galvanising effect on the region's TV industry. Will Strauss reports on the issues raised at *Broadcast's* roundtable of northern indies

With a CV that includes standout current affairs shows such as *World In Action* and pivotal dramas such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *Hillsborough*, the north-west of England has a television legacy that belies the pejorative things that have been written about it in recent times by the national press.

The BBC's decision to move thousands of jobs, five departments, two channels and two radio stations to the area may not be popular in London, but those who make the journey to MediaCityUK in Salford when it opens next year certainly won't find a cultural wasteland.

What they will find is £150m worth of TV productions, including two major soaps, more than 4,000 staff and freelancers, and more animated children's series than you can shake a *Bob The Builder* lunchbox at. And, as *Broadcast* found out earlier this month during a roundtable discussion at The Lowry in Salford, there are plenty of opinions on offer too.

BBC NORTH

The answer to exactly what impact the arrival of BBC North will have on the north-west and the indigenous production community varies wildly, but everyone sees room for

optimism. "It can't be a bad thing that large departments are coming up from the BBC in London," says Ian Bradshaw of Title Role, a Manchester indie that produces factual and entertainment programming such as *How Britain Bridges The World* for the History Channel.

"For ourselves, initially, it won't have any effect," he adds. "That's not to say that it won't in five years' time. We're doing heavy factual stuff at the moment because that's where the money is. The BBC's arrival has felt like a slow process, but the buildings are nearly finished. If they keep their promises, people will get work out of it."

Documentary, factual entertainment and drama producer Glasshead set up offices in Altrincham last year, helped by Vision+Media's Regional Attraction Fund, with a view to taking advantage of the BBC's move north.

"In the short term, the immediate problem for the BBC is going to be the number of staff who will redeploy up here," says head of interactive and multiplatform Ian Tonge. "Anecdotally, we're hearing that only half of the staff will move up. That could have an impact in two ways: either it means there is going to be a big draw on the independent talent base to fill those roles; or it could be a huge opportunity for independents to fill the gaps. I can imagine that *Five Live* or *Breakfast* could put out strands to indies."

John Matthews of Bigger Picture, the maker of the Grierson Award-nominated BBC documentary *Deadliest Crash*, says the arrival of BBC North "will help" – but freelancers will benefit more than indies. "This in turn will help us indirectly," he says. "It's bigger for the BBC than it is for us."

Cat Lewis, managing director at Nine Lives Media, the Manchester-

Left to right: Ian Tonge; Matt Tiller; Katherine Beacon; Mark Robinson; Andy Waters; Lisa Hill; Ian Bradshaw; Maureen Walker; Greg Lynn; Cat Lewis; Andy Sumner; Laura Duncalf; Chris Bowden; Louise Lynch; Richard Macer



based factual indie behind *Small Teen Big World* for BBC3 and *The Man With Half A Body* for Channel 5's *Extraordinary People* strand, agrees, pinpointing the BBC's publicly stated desire to adopt a freelance mentality. "That will certainly benefit us," she says. "It means that when people come to the end of a contract with us, they can go there too."

'The immediate problem for the BBC is going to be the number of staff who will redeploy up here'

Ian Tonge, Glasshead

At the same time, Vision+Media, as the north-west's regional champion, points to the good work that has already been done prior to the BBC's arrival, such as the @North interactive initiative, which has just had its first raft of multiplatform children's commissions.

"It's fair to say that the BBC isn't waiting until it arrives here before getting to know the talent," says Maureen Walker, Vision+Media's sector lead for the broadcast industry. "Now we want to be working with and talking to the BBC about the lessons learned and the opportunities in other genres such as sport and learning."

SKILLS BASE

One of the many accusations aimed at the north-west is that the skills base isn't there to support the BBC's move or the planned media growth. And while that may be the case in a couple of areas – journalism has been mentioned in despatches – it is often a lack of scale that is mistaken for a lack of competency. In short, there are talented people in the North, there are just fewer of them.

Andy Waters, MediaCityUK's head of studios, says the only reason the huge volume of skills exists in London is because of the sheer number of shows being made there.

"They get their experience quickly and are capable of housing themselves down there," he argues. "I'm hoping MediaCityUK will change all that. We'll have the facilities for shows to start coming out of London so you'll see more people with boom skills, sound-mixing skills and directing skills who will start working in the region because the facilities are here. Eventually, people will get bored of getting on the train from London and will set up homes here."

"Most of them are already here," argues Matt Tiller, director of programming at Manchester-based Channel K, the indie behind BBC3 sitcom *Lunch Monkeys*. "We never have problems finding great sound recordists or production designers or what-have-you. In terms of a talent base, the arrival of BBC North should help people to stay here. What is lacking is some of the key roles. It's such a small pool of people who are perceived to be able to direct a comedy, for example. There aren't that many in London, and there are even fewer outside."

Retaining talent in the region is certainly as important as attracting it, as the BBC, and in particular BBC North director Peter Salmon, have publicly acknowledged.

"There has been a tradition for years of making good TV and radio in the North, and that has led to a solid base of craft skills from make-up artists to DoPs," he says. "But we have to be careful to make sure that the ability to have that continues and we do not take it for granted."

"People move here to do a certain line of work and then

£5m

The value of the BBC's Learning Fund, due to be launched in 2011

The poor guy was shaking, but as I gently explained, the show did have to be finished
Ben Rigden, *Behind The Scenes*, page 34

WHAT ABOUT OTHER GENRES?

While BBC North's move to MediaCityUK will directly benefit children's programme producers – and those working in the fields of learning and sport – some indies worry about being sidelined.

Former BBC Manchester executive Richard Macer set up factual producer Platform Productions, which made *Behind The Scenes At The Museum* for BBC4. "No one really knows what the impact of MediaCityUK will be," he says. "One of the few things I remember from geography at school is that where you have a big city such as London, it tends to suck the lifeblood out of towns around it. I hope that doesn't prove to be the case here."

"Ultimately, it's got to be good for the region. It will make the north-west the creative hub that it wants to be and a lot of people will thrive. At the same time, you don't know if that geographical example might be borne out. In the short term, the impact will be that all the work will rush to the centre and small operations such as mine, which aren't in the key genres, will suffer."

Children's and sport are add-ons to the region, says Andy Sumner, owner and managing director of Sumners. "The nice thing about children's is it's not just animation, it's also children's drama."

Cat Lewis, managing director at Nine Lives Media, thinks children's is a good place to start. "They have a multi-genre mentality," she says. "Once the BBC has got the buildings here, they'll find they have to fill them and it might well be that other genres end up moving here too."

While BBC Children's and BBC Sport are the headline-making departments that will arrive next year, there are other opportunities. One example is the BBC's £5m

Learning Fund. Launching in 2011, it is designed to supplement existing programmes with elements such as events, tours or online learning. "That's automatically an opportunity for those companies that wouldn't necessarily work in learning but might have expertise around drama or sitcoms," says Louise Lynch, managing director of Manchester's Libra Television, an

'It's good for the region and will make the north-west the creative hub it wants to be'

Richard Macer, Platform

indie that specialises in education programming and, to a lesser extent, children's series.

She has a hunch that the North was at the forefront of the BBC's mind when that decision was made. "I suspect they asked: 'OK, we're going to be in the North, what can we do that doesn't alienate companies that are already there that aren't specialists in learning?'"

The lack of factual programming spend in the North is something many north-west indies hope will be redressed, not least as just 5% of the hours produced on the BBC's PSB channels come from the area, compared with more than 80% from London and the south-east.

"We may not have massive factual companies here, but we have a wealth of factual talent," says Maureen Walker, Vision+Media's sector lead for the broadcast sector.

Sumner, who looks after sales at the Pie Factory within MediaCityUK, is more belligerent. "As a region, we have to make this work. There's no point saying: 'My genre's not coming up, I'm pigged off about it.' We have to grasp this opportunity."



CBeebies: BBC Children's is the first department to move

NORTHERN BIAS?

Chris Bowden, an executive producer at Altrincham-based animation company Mackinnon and Saunders, is convinced that, despite the BBC's push to the north-west, producers shouldn't expect favours just because they're based there.

"The BBC isn't going to take a second-best idea just because it's been proposed by a Manchester production company," he says. "We're still going to have to fight just as hard as everybody else to get the good ideas in there. I do sense a bit of groundswell that, because the BBC is coming here, it's a panacea for the children's industry in the north-west and we're all going to get loads of work. That isn't necessarily so. Our ideas have to compete in just the same way as they did before."

Greg Lynn, managing director of animated kids' series production company Chapman

Entertainment, is more circumspect. "There will be a physiological willingness in their hearts and minds to do more here, though," he says. "They won't take a B-rated idea, but this will be their new home and the relationships they have with people that are based here will get better. I think they will look to make new relationships with people that they haven't worked with before. I can't see any negatives."

Although Chapman is based in London, it makes its shows in Altrincham, alongside Mackinnon and Saunders. *Fifi And The Flowertots* and *Roary The Racing Car*, made for Channel 5 and Nick Jr, are now licensed to 160 territories.

Bigger Picture's Matthews says: "If we come up with great ideas in our lovely open spaces, this move will help change the culture and eat into the north-south divide."

Fifi And The Flowertots: Chapman show

