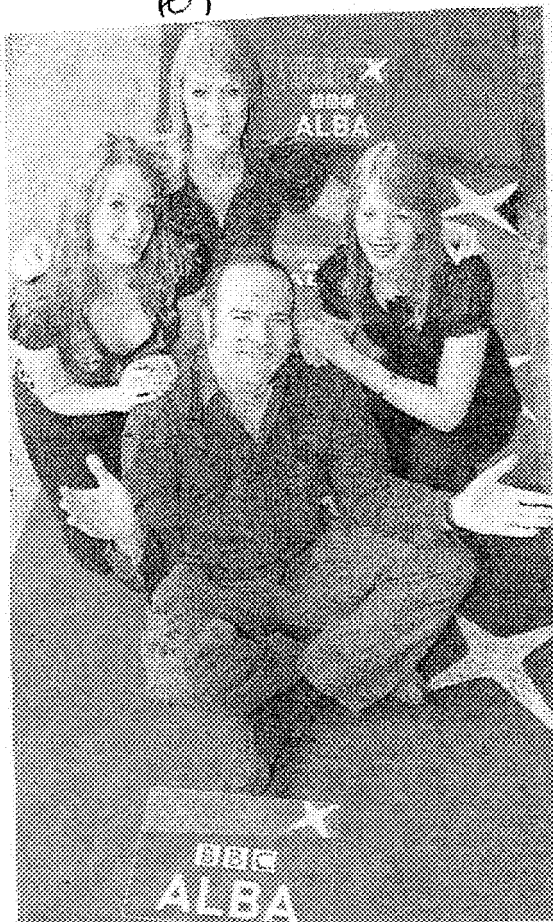


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(6)



Greg Hemphill has a starring role in a drama series on BBC Alba

Question in Gaelic BBC can't answer

By David Scott

BBC bosses have spent £30million of public money on their Gaelic language channel, without knowing exactly how many people are watching.

The money was handed to BBC Alba while independent auditors were told not to count its viewers.

The only figures available come from the BBC themselves who claim 600,000 people watched in launch week, but admit only 200,000 viewers now tune in every week.

This means that spending works out at about £150 per viewer.

BBC management denies it is dominated by a so-called Gaelic Mafia who are determined to promote the language at all costs.

One insider said that, despite money being tight nowadays, it seems to be freely available to Alba.

Documents revealed that the channel is part funded by £10.1million from MG Alba, formerly the Gaelic Media Service, which is Scottish Government-funded, and £10.7million from BBC Scotland.

A further £9.8million has been spent commissioning, producing and archiving a library of Gaelic programmes in the last two years.

Most TV channels monitor audi-

ence figures through the Independent Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB), but BBC Alba uses polling through TNS System Three.

A BARB spokeswoman said: "Channels are only reported by BARB on request. The BBC does not want BBC Alba reported."

Broadcasting expert Dr Dec Amy-Chinn from Stirling University said it seemed the usual rules didn't apply to the Gaelic language channel, which carries dramas such as Eailbheas starring Greg Hemphill.

She said: "It is unusual not to have viewer audience figures collated by BARB but Alba is an unusual channel. The same rules don't seem to apply."

Media expert Professor Sarah Oates from Glasgow University, added: "Scottish people need to make the decision whether this channel is worth it, not the BBC or ministers."

But BBC Scotland's head of public policy and corporate affairs, Ian Small, said: "BBC Alba has been able to establish itself as a firm viewing favourite among Gaelic and non-Gaelic audiences."

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