

Comms Review Series: Wales Wants PSB & Local Content, but not Regulatory Devolution



Huw David Jones of the Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Glamorgan and the Centre for the Study of Media and Culture in Small Nations explains that Welsh submissions to the Comms Review reflect a desire to preserve Welsh content and a need to match Wales' increased political life with adequate media coverage.

The UK Government's Communication Review comes at a critical time for the media in Wales. Last October, **BBC Wales announced 100 job losses** in a bid to save £10.7m over the next five years. This followed the DCMS's controversial decision to **slash Welsh-language broadcaster S4C's £102m budget** by 24.4% over the period 2011 to 2015, with funds coming largely from the BBC licence fee after 2013.

Add to this the paucity of the press in Wales, the absence of Welsh politics in UK newspapers and TV networks, and the decline of ITV Wales' regional output, and we are left with a strange paradox in Wales: just as devolution has brought greater political power to Wales, our ability to scrutinise politicians and reflect Welsh cultural life has diminished with the decline of the Welsh media.

Given this situation, it's sad to report that only four Welsh stakeholders – the **Welsh Government**; **S4C**; **Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymru (TAC)**, which represents Welsh independent producers; and **Bethan Jenkins AM**, Plaid Cymru's media spokesperson – responded to Jeremy Hunt's **open letter**, out of a total 168 submissions.

This may reflect the fact that communications policy is decided by Westminster, not Cardiff Bay. Even so, there was no input from Welsh universities, while the submission from the BBC barely mentions Wales at all. We may have to look to the National Assembly and Wales' current inquiry on the **future outlook of the media in Wales**, which is expected to report early this year, for a more comprehensive picture of what Wales wants from the forthcoming Communications Bill.

Public service broadcasting

The key issue for all four Welsh respondents is the future of public service broadcasting in Wales. TAC states that the new Communications Bill 'needs to reflect the continued importance of public service content, and ensure that short-term financial concerns are not allowed to dictate long-term policy regarding our cultural and creative future', while the Welsh Government wants 'a long-term guarantee of PSB broadcasting for Wales'.

Particular concerns are expressed about proposed cuts to BBC Wales' English language broadcasting, especially in news. Because of the weakness of the indigenous press and the decline of ITV Wales' output, this is often the only source of information for many on politics and current affairs in Wales. Any further reduction in news output would therefore have a detrimental effect on Welsh democracy and civic life.

Much emphasis is also placed on the economic importance of PSB in Wales. As such, the Welsh Government, which recently identified the creative industries as a priority sector in its plans for economic renewal, demands that 'all public service broadcasters should be required, as a minimum,

to produce at least a population share of TV, radio, interactive and other content commissions in the nations and regions which they serve', which would represent about 5% in Wales' case.

The future of S4C

Another key issue for Wales is the future of S4C, which 18 months ago was rocked by the sudden departure of its chairman, chief executive and head of programmes, followed by the UK Government's snap decision to effectively merge the channel with the BBC, without much consultation with Welsh stakeholders.

Both TAC and the Welsh Government stress that the channel's editorial and operational independence must be maintained in its new partnership with the BBC, and call for a wide-ranging review of the station to be commissioned jointly by the Welsh and UK Governments.

Since these submissions were made last May, there have been significant developments on this front. In October 2011, the **BBC Trust reached an agreement with S4C** over the channel's future funding and governance until 2017, providing some degree of certainty over finance and editorial independence.

Yet it remains to be seen where this deal will be included in the new Communications Bill. Meanwhile, S4C itself wants a new multimedia remit with a 'stronger digital element' and the ability to 'create digital content beyond that which is merely ancillary to TV content'.

Devolution

All four Welsh stakeholders broadly agree with the Coalition Government's focus on growth and innovation. There is also consensus about the need for regulatory convergence across platforms.

However, where Wales and the UK Government part company is over the issue of deregulation. Although S4C welcomes some relaxation of commercial constraints, the Welsh Government warns: 'Any move towards deregulation must be taken with caution and handled with extreme care to ensure that the UK Government does not act in haste and leave the people of Wales to repent at their leisure'.

This reflects Wales' very different political culture to Westminster. Like other small European nations, Welsh politics tends towards democratic corporatism, infused with the strong legacy of socialism from the old industrial Welsh Valleys – quite at odds with the neo-liberal stance of the Coalition Government.

That said, unlike the **SNP administration in Scotland**, the Labour government in Wales shows no real interest in pushing for more power over broadcasting, believing instead it can work in partnership with the DCMS. Only the nationalist Plaid Cymru, its former coalition partners, wants full devolution of broadcasting policy.

The Welsh Government does call for Wales for to be represented on the UK Ofcom Board and for the Ofcom's Wales Advisory Committee to become a subcommittee of the main Ofcom Board. Yet whether this will satisfy demands for a stronger and more accountable media in Wales is something that will certainly be debated as more details about the new Communications Bill emerge over the next year or two.

