

A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a Digital World

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Introduction

The School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University welcomes this inquiry into the future of public service broadcasting in the UK. Changes to industry structures, audience behaviour, media provision and political devolution make this a crucial moment to reflect on both the television we have and the television we want in the future. We hope that these recommendations go some way to creating a culturally rich and economically sustainable television sector in the UK and here in Wales.

Our research and our engagement with the local television sector tells us there is certainly evidence of success and a well-placed sense of optimism in Wales at the moment. The international visibility of the Welsh-language drama *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (S4C 2013-) and investments in the new BBC drama studios in Roath Lock and by Pinewood Studios are testament to the growing confidence and capacity of the television production sector, much of which began with the reimagining of *Dr Who* in 2005.

However, mixed with that renewed confidence is an awareness that further interventions, resources and accountability are needed if these successes are to be fully leveraged by local industry and audiences. A number of public debates have taken place over the past few months along with the production of formal reports, all of which discussed the specific characteristics and conditions of Welsh broadcasting (e.g. IWA Media Audit (2015)). Many of those involved in these

debates have offered their own submissions to this inquiry and so we don't wish to repeat all of those here.

However, a number of key issues are worth highlighting including:

1. The specific role of PSB in Wales
2. The sustainability of S4C and Welsh-language provision
3. The future of Channel 4 and its duties to out-of-London production
4. The governance and accountability structures of the BBC.

1. The Crucial Role of Public Service Broadcasting and its Broadcasters in Wales

Public Service Broadcasting plays a crucial role in enhancing citizen's understanding of their culture, history and political system. The process of political devolution in the UK has made this event more important but also more complex. For instance the King Report (2007) informed by research conducted by the School, found that UK news outlets did not regularly include stories about Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and when they did devolved areas of responsibility, such as health and education, were not always communicated clearly. While a 2009 follow up study found coverage had improved, the question of a democratic deficit regarding the UK nations remains.

In Wales particularly there is a limited range of news sources about devolved politics. So, for example, a 2016 survey in Wales found that many readers relied on news produced in England, or UK-wide news, which has limited information about Welsh affairs (Cushion et al 2016). Following the 2014 Scottish Referendum further power transfer to the National Assembly for Wales is being discussed and so consideration should be made to the way in which our media portrays the differences between the nations of the UK (Powell 2016). Therefore, while the provision of an effective PSB service is crucial throughout the UK, we believe that it

central to the future of a well-informed citizenry and publicly accountable government in Wales.

One of the biggest changes in television provision in Wales relates to English-language programming. There has been a significant decrease within both the BBC and ITV in terms of both output and spend (IWA 2015). The consequence of this has been a narrowing of programmes and genres in Wales. For instance there is little content produced specifically for Welsh audiences in the genres of arts, children's, and comedy.

While drama production has been a beacon of success in Wales, this drama rarely reflects life in Wales and Wales is solely a location for filming rather than part of the narrative setting. This is a major disappointment to both audiences and local industry who believe that Wales and Welsh life deserves/needs to be represented both to itself in its opt-out service and to the wider UK audience on network television (McElroy and Noonan 2016). Without such representation it is difficult to see how the BBC can fulfill at least one of its public purposes 'to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK' (BBC 2016). Successful content like *Happy Valley* (BBC 2014 -) and *Last Tango in Halifax* (BBC 2013 -) demonstrate that there is an appetite amongst audiences for content which is specific to a locale and based outside of London.

In order to achieve the kind of content which represents local communities we would like to see a sustainable change within the BBC which encourages network commissioners to engage more proactively with the nations, along with a commitment to Welsh-specific content especially on network news and drama. Research by Noonan (2012) suggests that in order for decentralisation of broadcasting services to be successful three ingredients are necessary: financial resources, local decision-making and cultural commitment to change. We are

confident that the provision of each of these in Wales will enhance the creative resources of the BBC going forward.

2. The future of S4C and Welsh-language provision

S4C's contribution to the continuation and survival of the Welsh language has been well documented. With so much choice in terms of English language television channels, the importance of the one and only Welsh language television channel, S4C, should be highlighted at every possible opportunity. The role of broadcasting is to reflect audiences and their communities, and in Wales this means both in Welsh and English. Therefore it is vitally important that the Welsh language is a visible and vibrant part of the television system in the UK. Welsh language broadcasting offers Welsh speakers and learners the opportunity to hear Welsh being spoken both formally and informally within a range of contexts and on a day to day basis.

As discussed, any efficiency savings regarding PSB should acknowledge the wider significance of broadcasting in Wales. The ongoing cultural and social impact of S4C is often overlooked when metrics concentrate exclusively on economic value. That is not to say that S4C does not offer value for money or economic support to the Welsh creative economy. Indeed its economic significance is evidenced by the diverse and highly skilled jobs it supports directly (129 according to S4C, 2015) and through the independent Television companies and external partners it works with closely. It is impossible to compare the funding of S4C with other media organisations; S4C doesn't exist within a multi channel context, it is the only Welsh language channel, and therefore its unique contribution to the UK's creative and social identity must be taken into account.

Given the challenging financial decisions which will need to be made over the coming years, we would recommend that S4C's budget is frozen (which is in itself a reduction) to allow the broadcaster to plan and continue commissioning and

producing original content. In order to appeal to a wide audience it is essential that investment should be made to ensure that Welsh language television services are available in all formats and platforms. It is especially important that young viewers are able to engage with services in the same way they would expect of other broadcast services.

We also strongly recommend that S4C's editorial and operational independence be safeguarded within any further agreements. In order to ensure creative autonomy and responsiveness to the specific demands of its audience (both in Welsh and English) we would reiterate the evidence submitted by other Welsh stakeholders including the trade union TAC that any licence fee funding is not administered by the Corporation; the governance and regulation of S4C should not be under the control of the BBC in any way.

3. The future of Channel 4

We would like to see the inquiry argue strongly for the continuation of Channel 4 as a publicly owned broadcaster. We believe that this status matters not only in terms of creative content but also as part of the system of support for a vibrant independent production sector (one of its founding aims). We acknowledge the often-paradoxical remit which conditions Channel 4's output (i.e. the need to produce content which is attractive to audiences and thus advertisers, while at the same time able to take creative risks). We also recognise the cultural value of its output including its distinct news service.

However, Channel 4 also plays a vital role in sustaining the independent production sector. Its publishing model, coupled with regulatory quotas, has been crucial to the building of production capacity out of London, including in Wales. Any changes to the ownership of Channel 4 could substantially erode this commitment to local

production capacity and have a detrimental knock-on effect on the wider creative economy, not only in Wales.

In sum, Channel 4 is an important resource for both audiences and industry and we would caution against any radical change to its ownership structure at the current time.

That said, there are areas where we would welcome a more responsive Channel 4 including:

- The presentation of Wales and coverage of Welsh issues on its nightly news service
- The visibility of public service genres on its peak time schedules (especially arts which has experienced a major decline in the last few years).

4. Governance and Accountability at the BBC

It seems increasingly likely that a new system of governance will replace the BBC Trust. A number of models have been put forward and we welcome some creative thinking in this domain. Any changes should be with the interests of audiences in mind as they are often the forgotten 'P' in PSB. In designing this revised system we would strongly argue that government appointments are minimal to avoid undue political interference. Political independence has been one of the strengths of the BBC and we feel that principle is worth preserving irrespective of the form that subsequent governance systems will take.

Furthermore any change in the governance and regulatory structures of the BBC should have adequate and robust representation from each of the devolved nations of the UK. Given the changes to the political landscape in the UK we would also like to see a BBC which is accountable to the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly.

About JOMECE

The School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies (JOMECE) at Cardiff University is one of the oldest departments for the study and research of media in the UK. It was founded as the Cardiff Journalism School in 1970 by Sir Tom Hopkinson. Our reputation for quality research was recently recognised in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework where we were ranked 2nd for the quality of our journalism, media and communications research. When compared with 66 other institutions in the UK, 89% of our research was classed as either 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent', with both our research environment and the impact of our research receiving a score of 100%.

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