



**Welsh Liberal Democrats  
Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru**

# **Broadcasting in the digital age**

**The Welsh Liberal Democrat submission to  
Phase 2 of Ofcom's Second Public Service  
Broadcasting Review**

## **1. Introduction**

**1.1. Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that high quality television and radio news and current affairs are essential components of an inclusive democracy. A functioning political system works best if its citizens are informed and knowledgeable on its work. One of the primary ways in which many citizens receive the news is through public service broadcast media. As a result, Wales needs to ensure that all its citizens have access to as wide a range of news sources as possible.**

**1.2. Welsh Liberal Democrats want to ensure that there is a significant plurality of broadcasting Wales available to people in Wales. This includes ensuring there is a variety of media in both the English and Welsh languages which carries factually accurate and analytical information on Welsh politics, Welsh culture and Welsh programming, as well as ensuring that all the people of Wales have access to this programming.**

**1.3. A serious and sustained cause for concern for Welsh Liberal Democrats is the neglect by UK-wide News programmes to cover devolved issues or acknowledge that a policy issues in Wales differ from those in England. This is something that we would like to tackle by greater collaboration with the TV providers.**

**1.4. The switch to digital reception of television will enhance the ability of people to watch a greater range of television programming and is to be welcomed. However, Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that it is imperative that people do not miss out due to financial, technological or geographical reasons.**

**1.5. Community media can provide an alternative to the current public service provision and its development is to be encouraged. The Welsh Assembly needs to look at ways in which it can free up community media from the current bureaucratic and financial restrictions to encourage this unique form of broadcasting.**

**1.6. Finally, the Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that Wales has a fine heritage of providing entertainment and drama and we believe that this is a fine example of Wales' culture at its best. We believe that we can work with BBC, ITV can produce and work with independent television to produce a wider range of quality programming.**

## **2. Availability of public-service broadcasting**

**2.1. The widest range of news provision enables the widest range of people to inform themselves on the Welsh political sphere. As a result, the Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that it is important to ensure that the people of Wales have access to as many broadcast news sources as possible. This is particularly important due to the low percentage of people who read Wales-specific journals and newspapers such as the *Western Mail*.**

- 2.2. That is why we want to see the Welsh Assembly Government work with all News providers to retain dedicated provision of news, sport and cultural programming that is both from Wales and about Wales. We believe that UK news coverage should cover all parts of the UK, and that English news should be marked and promoted as that.
- 2.3. We remain supportive of the new arrangements between the BBC Wales and S4C with regards news provision. We believe that it will help provide higher-quality news provision in both languages.
- 2.4. However, we believe that it is necessary to provide a plurality of news services. We believe that Ofcom's decision to drastically reduce the number of hours that ITV Wales is required to dedicate to Wales-specific programming will lead to a detrimental impact on both the availability of a wide range of varied news provision and ensuring a plurality of analyses of Welsh public life. We would urge the reversal of this decision or that Ofcom urgently look at ways of ensuring that ITV Wales continues to play a role in Welsh public life.
- 2.5. In 2002, around 2.5%<sup>1</sup> of the Welsh population could not receive Welsh television, and more chose to watch English regional television due to the higher picture quality they received. The advent of digital television has partly rectified this problem, with most digital set-top boxes able to offer a greater range of programming from the nations and regions of the UK. With this in mind, it is imperative that the Welsh Assembly Government ensures that everyone in Wales has access to Welsh television.
- 2.6. As well as television, there is a need to ensure that the provision of public-service broadcasting exists on the radio as well. Currently, we are not satisfied that developments in radio provision in Wales have kept pace with those in England, either in terms of diversity or in terms of reception quality. There is a need to investigate what we can do to achieve greater access to public-service radio in Wales.
- 2.7. This inquiry should take account of the imbalance of provision for Welsh and English language services. Whereas people who choose to watch Welsh public-service television through the medium of English currently have the choice between BBC Wales and a limited amount of ITV Wales provision, those who choose to watch through the medium of Welsh are restricted to S4C. In order to ensure that there is editorial neutrality, we would encourage S4C to commission a greater range of independent programming. We would also encourage the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport to devolve regulatory responsibility for S4C to the Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Our Cultural Future: Welsh Liberal Democrat proposals for Arts, Culture and Sport*, (Welsh Liberal Democrats, 2002)

2.8. Of the four funding models suggested by Phase 2 of Ofcom's Second Review into Public Sector Broadcasting<sup>2</sup>, we believe that the enhanced evolution model is the best basis for a new funding model. We recognise that an increase in funding for all public-sector broadcasters is likely to be unsustainable in the future, due to the financial demands that this would place on the Treasury. As a result, we believe that there needs to be a new set of obligations on providers other than the BBC and S4C, strengthening the regulatory powers of Ofcom so that if necessary they can require all broadcasters to provide an element of high quality news and current affairs programming in their output.

### 3. UK coverage of Welsh issues

3.1. It is a matter of concern to Welsh Liberal Democrats that UK-wide channels currently provide little reporting of devolved issues, and regularly neglect to note the difference in public policy between England and Wales, or present issues only relevant to England as if they apply to all of the UK. This has been particularly true in relation to large news stories on matter such a health and education, where the broadcasters do not mention that policies may be different in Wales. There is, simply, a lack of acknowledgement of devolution by all of the major UK-wide news providers.

3.2. Two recent examples from the BBC's flagship *Question Time* programme back this up. The first is the 'London special' of *Question Time* during the mayoral election in 2008. There is no inherent problem in broadcasting such a debate, whether restricted to London regional programming or broadcast UK-wide. However, it is frustrating that no such specials were aired on a UK-wide basis for the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament elections in 2007. It is probably accurate to suggest that the Crewe and Nantwich by-election will have had more media coverage on a UK-wide basis than the elections to the National Assembly for Wales last year.

3.3. Secondly, on a recent edition filmed in Cardiff, the BBC's *Question Time* refused to address Welsh political issues when an audience member raised one, with the host remarking "I don't want to go into Welsh Assembly issues."<sup>3</sup> This is marked contrast to the same edition of *Question Time* discussing schools testing, an issue which was only relevant to English viewers.

3.4. The result of this is to make Welsh programming on UK-wide networks appear second class, at best, or a distraction, at worst. It also has the effect of making the BBC's UK programming appear as if it is England-only, and to reduce the relevance of the programming to viewers in Wales.

3.5. We believe that these findings have been backed up by report by Professor Anthony King into the state of network news and current affairs coverage in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Second Review Into Public Service Broadcasting – Phase Two: preparing for the digital future* (Ofcom, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Edition broadcast 15<sup>th</sup> February 2008

nations of the UK. We agree with his conclusion that “that the BBC’s UK-wide network has not on the whole kept pace with the changes taking place in the new UK<sup>4</sup>,” but also with his conclusion that it will be possible for the BBC to adapt to the changing cultural, social, economic and political make-up of the United Kingdom. We believe that this report has been useful in both underlining the previous failures of the BBC in reporting Welsh issues and also in acting as a stimulus for change. We would recommend that Ofcom act to require Channel 4 and ITV to commission similar reviews.

3.6. There is, of course, no immediate answer to the problem of the under-reporting of Welsh issues, and it is most likely to be remedied by long and regular discussions between the National Assembly, Welsh media organisations and the relevant TV producers. However, the Welsh Liberal Democrats repeat their calls for influential and powerful voice for Wales within Ofcom.

3.7. However, much of the solution to this needs to come from the UK media themselves. It is the view of Welsh Liberal Democrats that if the licence fee is collected from all of the UK, then all people in the UK should expect the news to reflect what is happening in their lives. This cannot be said to happen at the moment. Viewers in Wales, and viewers across the UK with an interest in Wales (including the Welsh Diaspora), are being let down.

#### 4. The digital revolution

4.1. The digital switchover presents a huge opportunity to public service broadcasting in Wales. It provides the opportunity for a much greater plurality of public service broadcasting. However, it will become necessary to ensure that the benefits provided by digital television in general and the digital switchover in particular are available to all.

4.2. The task of the Welsh Assembly Government must be to ensure that digital television is accessible by all when the analogue signal is turned off in 2009 and 2010. A strategy needs to be established in order to ensure that all of Wales has access to the full range of digital channels, in English and in Welsh. This will include working with the UK government to ensure that there is an easily available supply of low-cost digital set-top boxes. Equally, there will need to be an awareness campaign to ensure that people who are less technologically aware are able to use the new technology.

4.3. Likewise a number of other digital changes need to be monitored to ensure that everyone has access to the public service broadcasting that they are entitled to. The move towards provision of services on the internet and ‘through the red button’ is to be welcomed as it allows a greater number of people to , but we need to ensure that this is accessible to people who have not traditionally used

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<sup>4</sup> King, Anthony “BBC Network News and Current Affairs Coverage of the Four UK Nations” in BBC Trust *The BBC Trust Impartiality Report* (BBC Trust, 2008) p.89

television or radio in this manner. As with all of the technological advances in this sector, we need to ensure that we are not leaving people behind.

4.4. A further benefit, which we believe could have an impact on the availability of digital television, is the recent announcement of the freesat service by ITV and BBC. This has the potential to increase the plurality of channels available, as well as ensuring that areas which are outside of the current digital reception area are able to receive television services after the digital switchover. The advent of freesat is to be welcomed as an alternative method for allowing people to access public service broadcasting.

4.5. A final benefit of increased digitisation of television is the possibility of using public service broadcasting to generate new, private-sector enterprises. We believe that a number of projects commissioned by S4C as a result of television programming has helped to spread public service broadcasting into the private sector. For example, we believe that projects such as *ffermio.tv* and *bandit247.com* make public-service media available to a wider audience.

## 5. Community media

5.1. Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that one of the advantages of the digital switchover is the potential to allocate more of the broadcast spectrum for community and regional television stations within Wales. We believe that community radio and television can provide a unique broadcasting service, which offers variety and choice. It is also an excellent opportunity to develop greater Welsh-language radio provision. The development of such channels is something that we would encourage.

5.2. However, we believe that there is a need for the relevant government departments to look at ways in which they can assist communities through the often complicated process of applying for, and securing, licences. This will also include using the Assembly's powers to break down the barriers that such media face.

5.3. We believe that this would include permitting community radio and television stations to draw down increased funding from one source, as well as permitting community radio and television stations more freedom in developing advertising and sponsorship revenue and opportunities.

5.4. We would also like to encourage greater use of Restricted Service Licence broadcasts. This would include expanding the amount of time for which broadcasting is allowed and looking at ways in which community media can overcome topographical barriers to ensure that they are able to broadcast across all of the community that they represent, but without infringing Ofcom rules. We would also like to see the length of time that RSL broadcasters can broadcast on the public airwaves extended, perhaps to eight or twelve weeks. We believe that there is little saturation in the market, and that doing so will allow both a greater plurality of programming and the ability for community

radio stations to develop the skills needed to provide higher-quality programming.

5.5. Part of the Welsh Liberal Democrat philosophy is to empower communities. This will include allowing communities to set up media themselves. As well as providing specific, local programming, it could lead to better quality scrutiny of local government.

## 6. Wide-ranging television production

6.1. Welsh television has a strong heritage of producing high-quality entertainment and drama programming. The obvious, and often-cited, examples are *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*, but a whole range of other high-quality production is available.

6.2. There is, however, the need to ensure that high-quality entertainment programmes continue to be broadcast on public-service television channels. This would include working with BBC Wales and ITV Wales to ensure that they continue to produce a wide range of entertainment programming. We are concerned that the recent job losses at ITV Wales make this an unlikely prospect for the future and are also concerned about the likely reduction in the levels of BBC in-house commissioning that will occur in Wales in the future.

6.3. As a result of this, in order to ensure that there is a plurality of producers and choice of programming we should look at ways in which we can encourage a higher number of programmes to be commissioned by the major channels from Independent television producers in Wales, although we acknowledge that this is not an issue for S4C.

6.4. The Welsh Liberal Democrats are particularly concerned about the level of production commissioned in Wales by Channel 4, who has left a large amount of this to S4C. With the increasing adoption of digital television in Wales, and therefore the increasing access to Channel 4 as well as S4C, we believe Channel 4 ought to be commissioning a greater range of programming from within Wales.

6.5. The same however, is true of ITV and the BBC. Whereas we have seen a wide-range of commissions from these channels from within Wales, not all of these have promoted Wales. There is a marked contrast between the conscious promotion of Cardiff presented by *Torchwood* and *Life on Mars*, also made by BBC Wales that did little to promote Wales, or television from Wales, to a wider audience.