

## OFCOM PSB Review – A Welsh Perspective

Of the devolved Nations and UK TV Regions Wales is unique in so far as the majority of its residents probably may not watch television from within that area. This is of serious concern as we have the National Assembly which now has some law making powers in a number of areas such health, education and the environment.

Under the all-Wales Agreement there is likely to be a Referendum on full law making powers similar to Scotland. Democracy dictates that there is a campaign by opposing sides of the argument and their statements get full publicity. The same applies to Assembly elections.

It is also in the interest of democracy that what the parties in the Assembly campaign on and what their spokesmen say is publicised. Leaving it to local newspapers, which are being cut back, is not the answer. In Denbighshire three Trinity Mirror local papers have been reduced to one County paper drastically reducing local news.

Television is the main answer. So how many political and current affairs programmes can we in Wales watch? For week commencing 22 November:

BBC 1 Wales other than News it produced 1½ hours of political and current affairs programmes being Dragon's Eye ½ hour with a 20-minute slot in Sunday's Politics Show and X-Ray.

BBC2 Wales broadcasts 2¾ hours of am/pm during the day although ½ hour is PMQ's. Part of Wednesday's coverage is a discussion on PMQ's.

ITV 1 Wales broadcasts 1½ hours of politics and current affairs being Wales This Week, Sharp End and The Ferret. The rest of its programming is a variety of entertainment programmes and sport.

A Report in the Western Mail 1 October stated "Last week Ofcom stated that ITV Wales will have to produce just 4 hours a of news a week down from 5 hours 20 minutes." The same edition reported Michael Grade saying he was going to cut £40m out of the news obligation of ITV.

There are reports that ITV intends cutting Sharp End and The Ferret as part of its reduction of local programming. If Sharp End is cut then political coverage will be left to the BBC.

The way ITV is going there is a possibility that it will pull out of broadcasting news and political programmes in Wales for Wales. We know that Network News is English News although the BBC has recently recognised this are there to be improvements. If so Welsh news and political programming will be left to the BBC which is also making cuts. A Report, just released, on the future of broadcasting in Wales has called for a new publicly funded English language

channel for Wales funded by the UK Government. This has my wholehearted support.

So how many people watch Welsh programmes?

There is anecdotal evidence that suggests as many as 85% of Welsh TV viewers get their programmes from English transmitters. I can see the Moel Y Parc transmitter from my home yet between 80 and 90 percent of TV aerials around me and in Rhyl point to Winter Hill. This is partly historical as it was there first and has the North Wales coastal area as part of its area. It does report some North Wales news and stages events in coastal Towns. I have received a leaflet on the Digital Switchover, it is from Granada not ITV Wales.

On a recent train journey to Cardiff I looked at the direction of TV aerials on houses in the following Towns and Cities: Flint, Shotton, Wrexham, Newport and Cardiff. The percentage facing England was about 80 to 85.

A new block of flats/apartments near Cardiff Central Station had an aerial pointing to England, although a neighbouring block had two aerials. Around 5% had two aerials thereby picking up programmes from both countries. Probably around 30% were new digital aerials.

Because of our geography there are reception black spots in North Wales such as Llandudno, Prestatyn and Holywell/Flint. There is an estimate that 7,700 homes cannot receive Welsh TV. I spoke to someone from Wrexham who said his choice was between Granada and Central.

More anecdotal evidence

A spin off programme from Z Cars broadcast in the early 70's had the theme of a group of extreme nationalists planning to blow up a water pipeline to England. BBC Wales did not want to broadcast it, as it was a sensitive issue. The response was that about 70% of Welsh viewers received their programmes from English transmitters.

In 1984 following a survey on HTV about political attitudes in Anglesey I asked myself the question 'how many people there watch HTV?' I asked a number of Newsagents how many HTV TV Times they sold. The answer was about 20% compared with 80% for the Granada edition. ASDA in Kinnel Bay near Rhyl only sold the Granada edition.

A more reliable confirmation is a report from Cardiff University which revealed that 85% of morning newspapers sold in Wales were English editions. It appears that the reverse is the case in Scotland and probably Northern Ireland Perhaps the people watch English television.

The startling reality could be that only about 20% of the people of Wales watch Welsh TV programmes or read Welsh newspapers. The challenge has to be getting the people of Wales watching Welsh TV following the digital

switchover. Those who have invested in a new digital aerial are not going to buy another one. However I have digital and can pick up North West England programmes.

Could satellite TV be our saviour?

There is however some hope. A report, Western Mail 24 May, refers to a newly published survey by Ofcom, which finds “Welsh people watch more satellite TV than the rest of the UK with 79% taking a satellite service”.

The report means that a year before the switchover about 80% of viewers are able receive the Welsh channels. This is the audience that has to be persuaded to change their viewing habits.

Satellite viewers can pick up all the national and regional channels. However I raised TV reception at a meeting and a member in England, who had just turned to satellite, said he watched news and current affairs programmes from where he came, not from where he lived.

This certainly applies in Rhyl hence the aerials pointing to Winter Hill. In a recent letter in a local paper someone complained that they would lose Granada on the switch over. I quote “we will be forced to endure news from 200 miles away that bears no relevance to us what so ever.”

This is not unique in Rhyl as it is likely that the majority of the population are English or if born here have English parents. The percentage of Welsh born people in the three Coastal Counties is as follows: Conwy 54%, Denbighshire 57.9% and Flintshire 51.1%. In South Wales many non-Welsh speakers have tuned their aerials to England so that they can pick up Channel 4 which is not transmitted in Wales.

As both BBC Wales and BBC North West and ITV Wales and Granada are owned by the same organisation and broadcast counterpart political programmes why can't they say to their viewers living in Wales that their sister programme Dragons Eye or Sharp End contains a report of a debate in the Assembly regarding e.g. the abolition of Prescription Charges or extending Free Bus Passes. As the issues discussed by the Assembly affects people living in Wales they could suggest that they tune into that programme. Also they have a vote in Assembly elections and will have a vote in the Referendum.

It is in the interests of Assembly Members that what they do, and campaign on, is brought to the attention of the people of Wales. They need to be made aware of the situation and encouraged to persuade people to watch Welsh TV programmes and buy Welsh based newspapers, although these are under threat.

## S4C

S4C is the fourth channel for Wales and is our Welsh language channel as all Welsh programmes appear on it. Just how Welsh is S4C? This week it will broadcast 156 hours 35 minutes, an average of about 22 hours a day. Of these 58.35 hours were in Welsh, an average of 8.33 hours a day just over a third of the total. Therefore nearly two-thirds of the programmes were in English from Channel 4.

The programmes vary, on Saturday 5 hours 10 minutes was Sport including the Rugby International. The Evening programmes were a mere 3¼ hours ending at 10.40 p.m. On Sunday there was a ½ hour news review for learners at lunchtime, 1 hour children's programme in the afternoon with 5¾ hours in the Evening ending at 11.15.

During Weekdays there is an hour young children's programme at Lunchtime, between 2 and 2 hours 40 minutes children's programmes in the afternoon to 5.00 p.m. then programmes from 6.00 until about 10.00 or 10.30.

Wales is bi-lingual country and both languages have equal status but not in broadcasting. Welsh is one of the oldest living languages in Europe and one of the indigenous Celtic languages. It was spoken in England before it existed.

There are those who look upon the use of Welsh as a cultural issue and the language should be treated in the same way as the dozens of minority languages spoken by UK Citizens whose parents are immigrants. As the National language Welsh is a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum in Wales. Children need to be able to watch a wide variety of programmes in Welsh to practice and widen their knowledge. As do non-Welsh speaking parents with children at school.

At present with terrestrial TV Welsh speakers receive 4 or 5 channels, one of them is S4C. After the switchover they will receive dozens of channels on Free View, about 80 on Free Sat and considerably more on Sky. S4C must become a Welsh language channel broadcasting in Welsh for 22 hours a day. Funding must come from Central Government as does funding for English language channels broadcast by the BBC.

### Summary and Recommendations.

- Increase news and political coverage on Welsh Channels so that reports of what the National Assembly is doing is available to viewers. Reports of Westminster are quite extensive.
- Support the recommendation that there be a publicly new funded English language channel for Wales.

- Persuade the people of Wales to watch the Welsh news and political so that they can take part in the democratic process by voting in the Referendum and Assembly elections.
- Persuade those who have come from England and still watch Granada and Central and those in South Wales who tuned to Channel 4 that through their Digital and Satellite receivers they should be able to pick up Welsh Channels and for the reasons above watch the Welsh Channels.
- Persuade the BBC and ITV Channels neighbouring Wales to advertise Welsh political and current affairs programmes and suggest that their viewers in Wales watch them because the issues to be discussed will affect them and they vote in Wales.
- Make S4C a truly Welsh Channel funded by Central Government, broadcasting is not devolved. As Channel 4 will be available in Wales after the Switchover there should be no need to broadcast Channel 4 programmes on S4c. There are suggestions that the present time used for English programmes be retained. There may be calls for this 'available facility' to be used for English language Welsh programmes. This should be rigorously opposed.

Neil Taylor 3 December 2008