

Broadcasting Committee

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Evidence from Professor Justin Lewis, University of Cardiff

Submission by Professor Justin Lewis, Head of the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, 19th May 2008.

Background

Knowledge and understanding of Welsh politics in general and the Welsh Assembly Government in particular remains alarmingly low. A recent poll, for example, suggested that only 39% of people in Wales were aware the Assembly was governed by a Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition.

This is, in part, because many people in Wales receive most of their information from UK network media, which spends little time on Welsh politics. Any strategy for improving public service broadcasting in Wales must therefore seek not only to work within Wales, but to influence broadcasting at the UK level.

Thus far, UK policy has focused on the opportunities provided by digital multi-channel broadcasting, but has tended to ignore the risks. The move to multi-channel digital broadcasting has also been accompanied by a shift in philosophy, away from a public service ethos - in which the system as a whole was required to fulfil public service principles - towards a market oriented philosophy in which public service principles are seen as an increasingly small part of a system dominated by lightly regulated commercial channels.

It is important to stress that this ideological shift was not inevitable. The arguments for a tighter regulatory framework are just as pertinent to a multi-channel system, even if such a system does pose a number of policy challenges.

The move to lightly regulated multi-channel system has had - or will have - a number of negative consequences, notably:

1. The increase in channels has dispersed advertising revenue. Consequently the resources available for quality programmes in the UK are spread much more thinly. As the example of the US demonstrates, this means that the volume of high quality, domestically produced programming may actually decline, as income levels push commercial channels towards cheap programming, repeats and imports. Indeed, the evidence suggests that this is already happening in the UK.
2. The proliferation of 'easy viewing' light entertainment has meant that people in multi-channel homes consume less news (and other forms of public service broadcasting), exacerbating the decline in political participation. Public service programming is increasingly marginalised (on channels like BBC4) rather than being part of a mainstream mix. The current proposals to 'topslice' the BBC's funding will do little to address this.
3. As a result of both these factors, audiences for S4C have declined significantly. This is a consequence of the decoupling with Ch4 (which 'mainstreamed' S4C programming) and the dispersal of viewers to other UK or global channels.
4. The use of 'light touch' regulation has meant that the cost to viewers of certain kinds of programming - notably sport - has increased rather than decreased as a result of competition. So, for example, Welsh viewers saw a recent round of football internationals removed from free channels onto costly subscription channels.
5. While the multi-channel era has seen a marked rise in the number of cheap imports and repeats, perhaps the most significant rise is in the proportion and volume of advertising across the system. There are five problems with this:

Advertising messages may have a number of negative social consequences (on diet, health, the rise of hyper-consumerism in children etc.);

Audiences prefer less advertising, not more;

Advertising is, in many ways, the antithesis of public service broadcasting. It is driven by narrow commercial interests and promotes a view of the world that suggests - wrongly, according to the evidence - that satisfaction and happiness derive only from consumption. Given the problems we face in the 21st century (eg: climate change), these messages are not politically innocent.

A lightly regulated system based on advertising prioritises the needs of advertisers rather than audiences (it is often overlooked that the 'market' for commercial broadcasting is not audiences but advertisers), and programme-making must thereby be designed to meet their needs rather than a broader public interest.

6. The environmental costs of the move to digital are rarely considered. So, for example, digital radio requires far more power, while any phase-out of analogue will result in a vast mountain of e-waste as millions of radios become obsolete.

Summary/Recommendations

If power over broadcasting were devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government, some action might be taken on these issues. Such power would, of course, be limited, since most of the significant decisions impacting Welsh broadcasting are taken at the UK level. It may, however, give Welsh government a greater say in the formation of UK policy.

With or without devolution in this area, it makes political sense for governments in Wales and Scotland to work together to explore common interests.

Even in a devolved climate, improving the climate for public service broadcasting in Wales would require a great deal of imagination and political will. There are, however a number of policy areas worth exploring: notably;

The use of regulation to promote public service principles. This might, for example, involve the re-introduction of more rigorous public service criteria in the award and renewal of licences.

More creative ways of generating income for public service broadcasting, such as cross-subsidy, ring-fenced taxation etc.

Maximising Welsh public service interests at the UK regulatory level (e.g. the BBC Trust).