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National Assembly for Wales: Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee, Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

Submission by the Welsh Executive Council of the National Union of Journalists

Introduction

The Welsh Media is in severe crisis. The NUJ has been able to identify more than 2,000 job losses among major media organisations in Wales during the past two decades.

New jobs have been created during that time, admittedly, but they have often tended to be short-term contracts rather than staff positions.

It is often hard to quantify the job losses because company accounts do not fully reveal the scale of cutbacks. Media organisations use commercial in confidence and other mechanisms available to curtail the amount of information available to the workforce and public meaning it can be difficult to fully analyse the changing patterns of employment and conditions in the media sector in Wales. One thing is certain: the company accounts do not show the deterioration in news provision to which these cutbacks have led.

The NUJ believes that this Welsh media crisis is not one primarily made in Wales.

Overwhelmingly, decisions about the future of Welsh media - whether a local weekly paper or the fate of S4C and BBC - are being made by chief executives based outside of Wales and Government ministers in Westminster.

The NUJ believes that these individuals need to be called to the Assembly Task and Finish Group inquiry to account for their decisions which are fundamentally destroying media provision for people in Wales.

However, the NUJ also believes that the Assembly and Welsh Government can do much that can help the continuation of a strong, pluralistic media in Wales providing quality news and programming which better reflects the day-to-day life of people in Wales.

Our submission to the Assembly Task and Finish Group inquiry aims to show the scale of the media crisis in Wales and the effects it is having on news provision and programming; we also intend to show that there are options available that can reverse the process of media decline.

Newspapers in Wales

The crisis facing newspapers in Wales threatens their survival. Large numbers of jobs have already been lost and offices and titles have closed.

It seems inevitable that further losses – of jobs, offices and titles – will occur. We believe this is a serious threat to Welsh democracy. Without a vigorous press, based in the communities they serve, fulfilling its essential role of holding the powerful to account, the functioning of that democracy will be seriously compromised.

The internet has been hailed as an enabling tool that has vastly extended the ability of ordinary people to express themselves and participate in debate about important issues. Yet we hold strongly to the view that a functioning democracy cannot do without trained journalists to report facts, not just opinion. Journalists provide a unique service to the public by providing accurate and reliable information and analysis.

It is especially unfortunate that, as the National Assembly and Welsh Government accrue more powers, the future prospects for Welsh newspapers appear so bleak. There have been significant job losses at the four major companies where the NUJ has significant membership – Media Wales, the South Wales Argus, the South Wales Evening Post and Trinity Mirror North Wales.

At all four centres there are concerns among our members as to what the future holds. A separate submission from the NUJ's Cardiff and South East Wales branch sets out the position at the first two centres.

In South West Wales, there have been at least 20 editorial jobs lost from redundancies and non-replacements at the South Wales Evening Post and related titles since 2009.

Most other papers in the South and West Wales area are now operating on skeleton staffing levels – the South Wales Guardian has only three editorial staff, according to recent information.

Even where there haven't been redundancies, there has been a shrinking of staff through non-replacement or not covering maternity leave, such as at the Western Telegraph and Cambrian News.

The Northcliffe/DMGT group, which owns the South Wales Evening Post, has dismantled its regional structures and is now one UK-wide structure. This could mean that decisions taken about the future of the South Wales Evening Post, Llanelli Star and Carmarthen Journal will be made far away from readers and be taken in London instead. Given that three Northcliffe regional dailies in England have gone weekly in the past year, it is not unimaginable that we could see the South Wales Evening Post going weekly, and/or a merger of the Llanelli Star and Carmarthen Journal.

At the moment, we believe these titles are all marginally in profit but only at the expense of cutting staff numbers – most of the advertising and other functions in Northcliffe are now centralised. Much of the South Wales Evening Post's advertisement planning, for example, is being done in Plymouth, and the Llanelli Star and Carmarthen Journal are printed in Didcot, while the Post is printed at the Trinity Mirror press in Cardiff.

The only area where there has been a slight growth has been in "lifestyle" magazines run by Northcliffe - one has been taken over (Swansea Life) and another created from scratch (County Life in Carmarthenshire). Both are aimed at attracting high-end advertising, but they don't cover hard news.

North Wales

In the past five years at least 10 editorial roles have disappeared in Trinity Mirror North Wales, either as a result of redundancy or non-replacement. The majority of those roles

concerned page production and the redundancies resulted in the loss of a number of experienced sub-editors and page designers.

The editorial workforce is now down to approximately 52 staff.

The remaining workforce produces the Daily Post (two editions), North Wales Weekly News (three editions), Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald (two editions), Bangor and Anglesey Mail, Holyhead and Anglesey Mail, the various companion websites and the tourism website northwales.co.uk

In terms of newspaper closures, the Denbighshire Visitor was scrapped around a year ago. That paper had itself replaced the previously closed Rhyl and Prestatyn Visitor, Abergele Visitor and Vale Advertiser (Vale of Clwyd) newspapers.

The group made a commitment at the time of the Denbighshire Visitor closure to produce two editions of the Daily Post (covering North East Wales and North West Wales) to make up for the loss of coverage in North East Wales as a result of those closures. Those two editions continue to be published.

The Welsh language paper Yr Herald Cymraeg closed about five years ago and was replaced with a smaller weekly supplement inside the Daily Post.

In the past five years district offices have closed at Porthmadog, Pwllheli, Holyhead, Bangor, Denbigh, Rhyl and Colwyn Bay.

Even the independent companies haven't avoided cuts. North Wales Newspapers has recently cut 12 jobs, and in the past has made editorial redundancies.

The Denbighshire Free Press is now produced entirely in Mold; the Leader is no longer an evening paper, and several editions have been cut.

Tindle Newspapers, whose titles are spread across Wales, have remained relatively untouched, although the company has a policy of non-replacement of staff where a title isn't making a profit.

This we believe has led to a situation where the remaining staff has unmanageable workloads and is exposed to unhealthy workplaces/culture. In these circumstances managements have devised strategies to make a little go a long way - but increasingly they are left with papers short on stories and a difficulty in producing items of interest to a general readership.

Typically a title will provide several pages of genuinely local news and sport and be padded out with stories from nearby communities and features on issues that can be printed in all their titles in the group.

These are usually put together in one office by a couple of journalists and sub edited centrally. The closure of offices has made titles more remote from communities they purport to serve.

Circulation decline

There are, in fact, several reasons why newspaper circulations have been in decline over a long period, and the trend has been ably documented by many academics. But it is our view that the crisis has been exacerbated as a result of serious strategic mistakes made by the groups that own newspapers published in Wales. These groups have applied the same policies in Wales as in the rest of the UK. At a time when high levels of profit were being made, investments should have been made in journalism and jobs. Instead, damaging cuts were made so profits would rise even higher. The NUJ believes the cuts-for-profits model of media ownership can be associated with endless attacks on workers' living standards and is the price paid by media workers who produce the company profits. Many companies lack the vision to seize opportunities for growth and fail to recognise hard-working staff are the

business' best assets.

Many companies took the decision to put the entire news content of newspapers online free of charge on the assumption that digital advertising revenue would match that from print. This has encouraged people to believe that information should be readily available free of charge. One consequence of such a policy has been the acceleration of newspaper circulation decline, and with it the decline in the number of workers employed in the industry. Companies should have invested in innovation on the web to increase readership and advertising revenues. The same mistake, incidentally, was not made in other European countries.

An indication of the scale of the decline emerged at the opening seminar of the Leveson inquiry into the phone hacking scandal in London on October 6 this year, when media analyst Claire Enders estimated that 40% of jobs in the UK regional press have gone over the last five years.

It is often implied that the decline in newspapers is being offset by an upsurge in news content available online. We argue there is little evidence that this is happening in Wales. Jobs lost at newspapers are not being replaced by online providers.

In our experience there are no stand-alone news websites anywhere in the world that provide more than a comparatively small number of jobs for journalists: the advertising revenue simply isn't available.

Instead news "not spots" are developing, where newspaper coverage has ceased and no alternative has filled the vacuum.

Media Wales

Cuts that have already been made mean there will be significantly fewer career opportunities for journalists in Wales. The summer cuts this year at Media Wales involved a cull of recently trained reporters, most of whom are likely to be lost to the industry.

This new development is bad news also for the talented young students who pay high fees to do the postgraduate course in newspaper journalism at Cardiff University, regarded for decades as one of the premier courses of its kind in the UK and beyond.

A fuller report of recent developments at Media Wales titles in South Wales is covered in the submission to the Assembly Task and Finish Group inquiry by Cardiff and South-East Wales NUJ branch.

The role of the National Assembly and Welsh Government

Given the threat to the survival of newspapers in Wales, we believe the National Assembly and Welsh Government should do what they can to protect them. Recognising the important role that newspapers play in Welsh democracy, we believe the Welsh media and its journalists should be seen as community and national assets. Their fate should be seen as too important to be left solely to the whim of media groups and chief executives from outside of Wales.

Clearly neither the National Assembly nor the Welsh Government has formal regulatory roles so far as the Press is concerned. But the fact that this inquiry is taking place is itself a reflection of the importance accorded to the future of the Welsh media by AMs – for which we are grateful.

The National Assembly and the Welsh Government have a democratic mandate to support local jobs and industry in Wales and are stakeholders in local newspapers by virtue of their (still) large advertising spend.

We believe the National Assembly and the Welsh Government could assist Welsh

newspapers' chances of survival by declaring them community and national assets, and by opening a dialogue with the groups that currently own them.

The NUJ believes that Welsh politicians could ask media groups to inform their workers, the public and politicians at any stage about proposals to close newspapers. For example, if newspaper groups intend to turn a daily paper into a weekly, they should consult with those affected and be prepared to offer to sell the titles to third parties who would be prepared to carry on publishing them. At such a point the National Assembly and the Welsh Government could act as honest brokers with a view to ensuring the survival of the threatened paper or papers. This could entail the injection of public money on the proviso that any trading surplus was reinvested in quality journalism and that editorial independence was maintained.

Traditionally, there has been an aversion from proprietors to any kind of interference from third parties, be it workers, politicians or the public. At a time when the future of newspapers is threatened, we would favour the involvement of a broader section of society to ensure a viable future for the newspaper industry.

The NUJ has been campaigning for a number of years for an economic stimulus plan for the media and has made the following suggestions:

- A levy introduced on commercial operators who benefit from quality public service content - including local news - but do not contribute to its production
- Tax breaks for local media who meet clearly defined public purposes
- Tax credits for individuals who buy quality media
- Direct support to help establish new genuinely local media organisations
- Strategic use of central and local government advertising
- Support for training opportunities that open access to journalism.

Broadcasting

Recent headlines about broadcasting in Wales have been dominated by the BBC licence fee settlement which included the imposition of a range of new funding commitments - including the funding of S4C. This issue, along with the management crisis at S4C, adds to the continuing erosion of Welsh broadcast media.

A wide range of inquiries over several years has concluded that there is a growing democratic deficit and cultural under-representation by the UK broadcast media and by Welsh broadcast media.

The current intentions of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport regarding S4C will result in the total destabilisation of an already weakened Welsh media.

Following the launch of S4C in 1982, Wales was equipped with three major broadcasting institutions – over the ensuing decades government policy and market pressures have massively undermined these institutions.

ITV Wales – formerly HTV Wales and the West, an independent part of a federated ITV - is a shadow of its former self following successive rounds of redundancies and cutbacks to programming.

BBC Wales – has reduced in status and resource allocation within the BBC structure as the nations and regions have lost influence and funding has been cut which has contributed towards an increasing obsession in producing network output rather than the representation of Wales on screen, air and the web in a bid for cash and kudos within the corporation.

Now S4C's editorial and financial independence is to be axed by the DCMS. The plan for the BBC to take control over the finances of S4C and also to occupy seats on its authority makes the channel a wholly owned subsidiary of the Corporation – whether in London or Cardiff.

Three proud, high achieving and autonomous (if not independent) broadcasters have been reduced to shadows of their former selves.

Ironically, this has happened during the years in which Wales as a nation has seen its political autonomy gradually expand as its media presence sharply contracts.

Shotgun wedding

A shotgun wedding between the BBC and S4C was proposed by the Secretary of State for the DCMS. And the bridegroom, in the shape of BBC management and trustees, bowed to the enormous threat posed to their finances by agreeing to the match.

The changes are a direct result of the licence fee settlement clinched behind closed doors last autumn between the Coalition Government and BBC management. The deal froze the licence fee until 2017 and introduced new funding responsibilities for the BBC including S4C. In addition S4C has also been weakened by internal crisis and digital switchover.

However, neither Welsh civic society nor political representatives were consulted about the changes.

Output threatened

Currently proposals are being floated that would further undermine BBC Wales and ITV Wales' output.

At the BBC, round after round of cuts and redundancies have undermined the broadcaster: BBC management have said that the BBC provides "the best journalism in the world" but the cuts outlined as part of the Delivering Quality First announcement risk irreparable damage to the BBC.

The full details of the cuts – which include slashing 2,000 jobs across the BBC - are still emerging but the proposals represents a 20% cut over 5 years – this is in addition to the 7,000 jobs already lost at the BBC since 2004. A figure of 100 job losses at BBC Wales is currently being mooted.

Documentaries in Welsh (O Flaen Dy Lygaid) or Current Affairs (Taro Naw) have been or are likely to be for the chop. Political programmes, such as Dragons' Eye in English, may also be axed.

At ITV Wales new proposals being considered would see the effective disappearance of factual programming outside a watered down news service – as famous Welsh current affairs and documentary strands are likely to be subsumed into a general UK/regional news hour.

S4C's output will be attacked not only by the centrally imposed cuts in financing from the DCMS but by the hacking away at the staff and budgets of BBC Wales' weekly ten-hourly contribution to the Welsh language channel's output.

After 2015 unspecified BBC bosses would decide what monies would go to the Welsh TV broadcaster – garnered from whatever sources.

One public service broadcaster having been pressured into taking over its sister body it would then have to decide how to apportion the cuts within its own services to pay for the deed.

Independent Radio

In independent radio, OFCOM has recently stated to the relevant Welsh Government minister that they are unable to intervene on the question of content on these stations in the case of mergers or matters of output - further demonstrating the lack of control that the people of Wales have over their own media. What about BBC radio?

Freelance

All the above cutbacks in broadcasting and print media have meant that the freelance sector of the media in Wales has grown considerably - yet this is in the context of the industry itself shrinking. Large sections of the freelance sector are now effectively under-employed if not unemployed for considerable periods.

Training

Hundreds of media graduates from Welsh higher education establishments enter the jobs market each year. In the light of the shrinkage and convergence in the media training becomes ever more important as an issue for the beleaguered workforce.

NUJ Training Wales has funding until March 2014 to enhance skills development of media workers in Wales during the recession.

The programme will offer one and two-day courses including new media skills training to reflect the evolving industry, courses aimed at workers who have been made redundant, a mentoring scheme and self-directed online courses. It is designed to equip workers with a wide range of skills that will improve their chances of gaining work and staying in work.

Courses will start at the subsidised rate of £25 per day so that they are accessible to all members.

We can also offer careers support and advice. From January we will be rolling out one-to-one CV surgeries with a career advisor, as well as workshops on CVs, cover letter writing and interviewing techniques.

We are presently building an infrastructure to ensure that our student members are well supported and advised during the time they are at university, and that they receive careers advice at the end of their course, and throughout their career in journalism.

Governance and scrutiny

Drastic decisions relating to the future of the media in Wales have taken place recently without any consultation or consent among the Welsh people.

How and by whom can the Welsh media be called to account? Issues of governance and scrutiny must be addressed as a matter of extreme urgency in order to protect the Welsh economy, Welsh livelihoods, cultural identity and to address the worsening democratic deficit in the country's media.

Conclusion

General to all these scenarios of media decline - whether in broadcasting or print - is a relentless deterioration in quality despite the best efforts of staff. Convergence has only worsened the situation as journalists attempt to produce material for more outlets and platforms with less and less resources.

New media provision - digital and online - is too often being produced on a shoestring, and is in reality dependant on the core radio/television/print services consistently under attack. And now in time of crisis, private media companies are seeking a relaxation in media regulation – despite their record of running down their services.

Consequently, the democratic deficit facing the Welsh public, through lack of media scrutiny and accountability, becomes broader and deeper. The NUJ wants the media to provide decent employment and reflect the communities it serves.

The UK media shockingly shows scant interest in the political, social and cultural affairs of the Welsh people.

Again, it has been difficult to fully quantify the full scale of job losses and cuts because of lack of company information in the public domain, low levels of democratic oversight and scrutiny and the privatisation of jobs. Already, the turmoil surrounding the future of S4C has seen independent production companies make cuts - such as Boomerang, which is planning to get rid of 20 roles. We believe this could be just the start of a flood of redundancies stemming from the S4C budget cut.

The impact is not limited to journalists – the creative industries and many small independent companies face an uncertain future as a result of the changes to the media landscape we have identified. Actors, musicians and writers will also be victims as the reverberations are felt amongst the creative and media industries as a whole.

We feel the Assembly and Welsh Government must seriously address these issues. They must pull together an accurate picture of the state of the Welsh media and ensure that appropriate actions to address its decline are urgently found.

Below are a series of recommendations from the NUJ that the Welsh Government and Assembly could pursue to begin the process of establishing a healthier, more vibrant and pluralistic broadcasting and print media in Wales:

- Ensure continuing scrutiny of print and broadcasting media by the Westminster Welsh Affairs Committee and a standing Assembly committee - and to explore the possibility of joint sessions where the managements of Welsh newspapers in particular can be called to democratic account.
- Call for the UK management responsible for Welsh media outlets to appear before and be accountable to these committees.
- Overhaul governance bodies for Public-Service Broadcasters to ensure their independence from management.
- Make Welsh independent radio accountable for its content.
- Call for the removal of S4C from the Public Bodies Bill and for the creation of an inquiry to look at ways to ensure the continuing financial and editorial independence of the channel.
- Urgently begin the process of looking at how to support new models of media ownership in Wales, such as co-operatives and charitable bodies, that can be quickly established in the event of titles being closed down by UK and international conglomerates.
- Welsh representation on the Ofcom board.
- Ensure S4C concentrates on provision of Welsh language broadcasting.
- Ensure plurality of news provision for Wales on TV, and ensure that sharing of news facilities does not lead to an erosion of editorial independence.
- Lobby and campaign for the UK media to accurately represent Welsh political institutions and life.
- Argue for increased independence, openness and accountability of broadcasting authorities at BBC and S4C.
- Arrange for accurate statistical data to be assembled on the current state of the Welsh media.
- Defend the concept of plurality in the Welsh media.
- Engage in the Leveson Inquiry and work with the NUJ on proposals for media regulation.
- Push for retention of skilled staff pools and training at BBC/ITV/Media Wales and other media outlets in Wales.
- Make media organisations in Wales outline their commitment to long-term investment for

their Welsh titles and outlets.

We believe Assembly members appreciate the need for a strong, independent and representative media in Wales to ensure the wellbeing of a truly democratic society. However, we must change our approach to the Welsh media if we are to avoid a situation in 2012 where there are fewer Welsh daily papers, under-resourced weeklies and a broadcasting sector that, at best, is a very minor regional adjunct of the UK organisation it represents.

S4C was won for Wales because of a public campaign that forced a U-turn upon the Thatcher Government. Such a campaign, we believe, may once again be needed to secure a Welsh media worthy of the people of Wales.

***National Union of Journalists Wales Executive Council
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