

Broadcasting Committee

"BCC(3)-07-08 (p3)"



National Union of Journalists' submission to the National Assembly for Wales' Broadcasting Committee Inquiry into Public Service Broadcasting

The National Union of Journalists represents media workers living and working in Wales.

Wales currently benefits from a range of free-to-air PSB providers, BBC One and Two, ITV Wales and S4C, Channel Four and Channel Five. Some provide more distinctive Welsh content than others.

The challenge for Wales is to maintain and strengthen this plurality going forward without weakening the foundations and existing services.

Rapid growth of digital channels gives the viewer more choice but not in terms of quality PSB provision. All those responsible must play their part in ensuring the survival of the main PSB providers.

A "let the market decide" approach would not serve the best interests of audiences in Wales and would put at risk the great history of broadcasting enjoyed here and across the UK. The nations and regions risk becoming increasingly invisible under such an approach.

The threat to ITV is clear. Management have been unable to halt the decline in advertising revenues. Ofcom's newly published review of public service broadcasting makes it very clear that it believes ITV Wales news and non-news programming - and its competitive challenge to the BBC - may disappear completely in the medium term if new funding models are not found.

The NUJ supports the use of regulatory measures such as gifted allocation of digital spectrum to secure sufficient guarantees from ITV in return for strong enforceable obligations over PSB content, in line with submissions to Ofcom by the National Union of Journalists (see submission on New News, Future News), BECTU and Unite.

International models, such as those proposed in France and operating in Canada, creating levies from non-public service broadcasters and telecommunications companies are worthy of further exploration. This would provide additional funding, to broadcasters other than the BBC, in return for a strong PSB commitment.

There is also potential to support a slight increase in advertising minutes -- ring-fenced to fund PSB programming in the nations and regions.

Ofcom should fulfil its statutory duty in terms of ITV by ensuring that ITV continues with, and expands upon, its local and regional news and non-news commitments including Children's TV production.

A reduction in the number of hours on ITV Wales' non-news programming should also be rejected.

The BBC is the cornerstone of the media industry. The NUJ is opposed to any form of 'top-slicing' the BBC licence fee, or any re-allocation of BBC income, commercial or otherwise.

Massive budget cuts imposed on BBC Wales from the corporate centre in London, are impacting on programme quality and staff moral. More than four hundreds jobs have gone from Wales as a result of cuts introduced by the current Director General. Radio, television and online journalists are working harder than ever to provide quality services with reduced resources.

The NUJ welcomes and supports the BBC's response to public demands for more localised news, via its current proposals for the internet-based BBC Local. But this service must be properly funded and without detriment to the budgets of BBC Nations and Regions, or jobs, terms and conditions.

The NUJ is opposed to the privatisation of Channel Four. Digital switchover sees the channel becoming free to air across Wales and we would hope it uses this opportunity to improve its Welsh content and coverage of Wales.

S4C must maintain its autonomy, though accountable to and funded by the DCMS, and continue to develop as a Welsh-language channel. However, any expansion of content should be carefully balanced with resource availability to avoid a reduction of quality due to reduced spend on programmes.

Internet TV and online sites have an important role to play but cannot be the entire focus of the future. They are not free to air and are

still unavailable in parts of Wales because of shortfalls in broadband provision. Crucially, they lack the prominence, visibility and universal availability of programming on the main PSB channels.

Online news sites are reliant on host newsrooms. As previously stated, these are under increasing pressure from budget cuts and an increasing desire by corporations to do more with less. Rather than increasing the richness and diversity of content, this leads to the same content repeated across different platforms. Welsh-language services should also be given greater parity with English-language provision in terms of resources.

The NUJ welcomes the growth in the number of radio stations serving Wales. But that growth must involve professional journalistic input from within Wales if they are to reflect the nation's cultural identity.

Much has already been said about the democratic deficit in Wales. Devolution has been with us for a decade and yet the media outside Wales does little to reflect this. This makes it even more important that we have strong indigenous media organisations. The committee should consider 'Wales only' or 'devolved nations only' solutions to the problems identified in this inquiry if it seems likely that there is not sufficient support or funding to address those issues on an all UK basis.

The NUJ would urge all those involved to consider how they may contribute to the preservation of PSB provision.

The National Assembly for Wales has powers of scrutiny over broadcasting and may consider a closer relationship with Westminster, possibly through a joint committee to ensure those holding the purse-strings give proper attention to the needs of Wales.

The committee should also consider the broadcasting commission in Scotland and press commission in Northern Ireland, with a view to establishing a body in Wales with a media industry-wide remit.

There is a real opportunity to build on the cultural identity of Wales both at home and internationally but much work needs to be done. Wales must not be allowed to become invisible to those outside it or insular to those within.

ENDS