

A Press under Pressure?

A submission by Dalen Newydd Ltd. to the Welsh Assembly Committee on the Media in Wales.

- 1 The initial aim of Dalen Newydd Ltd., registered in January 2006, was to publish free Welsh-medium regional newspapers. As this has proved very difficult in the present circumstances, the company has made a start with the publication of books, concentrating so far on the series 'Cyfrolau Cenedl'. Four volumes were published during 2010-2011, with many more being planned. 'This will be an important series,' commented *Llafar Gwlad*. *Y Casglwr* commented: 'Here is a publisher who reaches parts where others do not reach'.
- 2 Three members of Dalen Newydd are also shareholders in Dyddiol Ltd. The Government's announcement regarding *Y Byd*, February 2008, remains a disappointment and a mystery. Circumstances and developments in the meantime prompt new questions about the decision taken. With the present decline in advertising, its effects world-wide and here in Wales as well, the question must be posed, would *Y Byd* have survived if it had been launched in 2008? And would our own scheme, for two give-away local papers, have proved feasible? Was it not a correct decision to support instead Golwg 360? Of this website, avoiding all comment on its strengths and weaknesses, we can say with confidence that it has met a need; that it succeeds for the first time ever in providing a Welsh-language daily written news-service; and that the opportunity to comment on stories encourages the writing of Welsh as well as having the value of public debate. Could it be that the ministers, nearly four years ago, were right after all? What still inhibits us from saying 'yes' is their reluctance, then or since, to give any reasons, or to explain, or to hold any discussion with supporters of *Y Byd* or of any other development in the Welsh-medium printed press.
- 3 The fact remains, a newspaper – a real newspaper, made of paper – is something solid. A language community of half a million should be able to support three or four daily papers. But what is to be done when two English papers in Wales, the *Western Mail* and the *Daily Post*, are facing difficulties, the result partly of an economic recession and partly of a serious fall in circulation coupled with the challenge of another technology? In our own locality the *Bangor Mail*, which appeared to be a flourishing paper four years ago, is apparently unable to rely on its advertising and has had to charge a cover price.
- 4 Allowing that the difficulties of the English-language press were what prompted the establishment of the committee, we would hope that the Welsh-language press will not be overlooked, and that it too may stand to gain if a practical solution is found. In January 2010 Dalen Newydd presented a document to the WAG Welsh Language Unit in response to the open invitation 'A New Strategy for the Welsh Language: have your say'. We believed at the time that the document was relevant to these 'Key Concerns' listed in part 2 of the invitation: '*ensuring the continuance of Welsh as a community language, which people can use as part of their everyday lives; the promotion of Welsh in the private sector; the maintenance and development of Welsh-medium publishing.*' These considerations remain relevant.
- 5 In fostering a sense of 'possessing' a language, and thus stabilising the language as part of everyday life, no factor can be more important than literacy and regular reading. This is why, over a large area of Wales, the contribution of *papurau bro* (community newspapers) since the early 1970s has been crucial. These, without any doubt, have been Wales's great cultural success in the latter years of the 20th century; they have been an anchor to the Welsh language in the face of many destabilizing influences.

- 6 The aim of Dalen Newydd was to publish two local weekly commercial papers, *Tarian Arfon* and *Tarian Môn*. We would emphasize that these would be *local* newspapers, not *papurau bro*; they would be on a par with the *Holyhead & Anglesey Mail* or the *Caernarfon Herald*, not with *Llais Ogwan* or *Papur Menai*. 32-page pilot copies were produced, for use in a survey of advertising sources in both areas. Distribution would be free, through contract, aiming at a circulation of 30,000 (17,500, Arfon; 12,500 Môn). *Tarian Arfon* would serve the old county of Caernarfon, being parts of the present counties of Gwynedd and Conwy; *Tarian Môn* the whole of Anglesey.
- 7 When the pilot copies were printed in 2007 we assumed that publications of this nature would take up some of the middle ground between the monthly *papurau bro* and the projected daily *Y Byd*. The principle stands: *we must aim at a large-circulation regular Welsh-language press*.
- 8 ‘The Bianchi Report’ (2008) concluded: ‘The Welsh printed news sector is fragmentary, poor and too incomplete to satisfy even the most basic demands of the modern reader for information about the society in which he lives. ... There is no Welsh-language print medium for news properly so called.’ The indications being so obvious, it is hard to disagree. The years which saw the success of *papurau bro* were also years of sad decline for the traditional weekly, commercial Welsh-language press. In Gwynedd, the clear sign of this was the demise of *Yr Herald*.
- 9 We also recall the Assembly’s debate on the future of the Welsh-language press, 5 February 2008, immediately after the announcement concerning *Y Byd*, when one theme came strongly to the fore: ‘It will be essential that any development in the field . should lead to an increase in the number of Welsh readers.’ And further: ‘that any developments in this field must open the door to new audiences – to people who at present read nothing in Welsh.’ Our foundation would be the readership of *papurau bro*. We would build on this foundation, working towards what would be, to all intents, a weekly national Welsh-language press with a large audience, existing in the form of a series of local versions.
- 10 For some years, and until very recently, it appeared that the best hope of the printed press lay with the ‘free newspaper’, sustained by advertisements. But with today’s economic recession, as well as other factors, this vision is somewhat dimmed.
- 11 With the exception of public notices, there is no Welsh fund of advertising. WAG notices, with those of local authorities and some other public bodies, are essential to the survival of the daily and weekly English-language press in Wales today. This was clearly demonstrated in the valuable report of the Cardiff School of Journalism, *The Regional and Local Media in Wales* (2006).
- 12 The other choice would be a direct grant, as is made available to some Welsh-language publications through the Welsh Books Council, but on a much bigger scale. The committee will be aware of the difficulties involved. In Dalen Newydd we have consistently stressed that we did not wish to depend on grants, something different in principle from accepting public notices as custom. The Welsh-language papers, exactly like the English papers, would need to offer a circulation giving value for money to all advertisers, private and public alike. Dalen Newydd would turn every stone to obtain commercial advertising, and we have pioneered by visiting some 500 leading businesses in Anglesey and Caernarfonshire.
- 13 We should like to think that *Tarian Môn* and *Tarian Arfon* could initiate a chain of weekly Welsh-language papers covering the greater part of Wales and offering a large circulation

(100,000 as a possible target). Looking forward, one possibility might be twice-weekly publication (perhaps once for sale and once free), and who knows but that a way might lead from there towards the aim of a daily press – an aim which, willy-nilly, sooner or later, must be achieved.

- 14 It may be asked, why not entrust the work to *papurau bro*, as they are so well established? What do we hope to do differently? Despite their resilience and their invaluable contribution over the last 40 years, there are limits to what the monthly *papurau bro* can achieve. They rarely have the resources to ‘get behind’ the news. Because they are familiar and ‘user-friendly’, they tend to avoid controversy, and thus to avoid the much-needed ‘national debate’.
- 15 We would not discount the possibility of an understanding with another group or company if that were seen to be a way of building a large circulation *either* for general advertising *or* (more appropriately perhaps) for national public notices only. (As for *local* commercial advertising and public notices, the two groups would operate independently, and would be editorially quite independent.) One option would be co-operation between (a) *Tariannau Môn-Arfon*, with more intense coverage within a limited area, and (b) another free paper with a ‘thinner’ all-Wales coverage. But owing to the factor already mentioned, the lack of a Welsh national pool of commercial advertising, it appears that (b) also would need some sort of local focus – the capital city, perhaps? The *strategy* – as that seems to be our keyword – would be to start at the two poles, Gwynedd-Glamorgan, and work in due course towards an all-Wales coverage. (Cardiff itself, being the capital, should have at least one Welsh-language daily. But that is another story.)
- 16 If the committee, at the end of its deliberation, can see a way forward for the press in Wales, we should like to believe that there will be a place for the Welsh-medium press within the strategy. We would be interested to hear of any scheme making possible a substantial increase in the number of Welsh readers, and would be glad to participate in any discussion to this end.

New Year’s Day, 2012.