

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee
Newyddiaduraeth Newyddion yng Nghymru / News Journalism in Wales
CWLC(5) NJW04
Ymateb gan Neil Taylor / Evidence from Neil Taylor

I have met journalists from the Western Mail and Daily Post, the BBC and ITV in Wales and local papers. I found them hard working and eager to gather information. That said news about what is happening at all levels in Wales has been continually decreasing for some time.

Local and regional papers. I often discuss news items with journalists and they are still as keen as before. 10 years ago Rhyl had two local papers delivered free to most households. They were The Journal and The Visitor. Now there is only the Rhyl Prestatyn and Abergele Journal. I was involved in a campaign to keep maternity services at Ysbyty Glan Clwyd. I attended a public meeting in Rhyl Town Hall which is in the west ward. It is one of the most socially deprived wards in Wales and the UK. There were no residents from the ward at the meeting.

The issue had received much publicity including in the Journal. I made enquiries as to the free delivery and found that it was not delivered in west Rhyl. As the people of west Rhyl didn't know about the meeting they certainly will not about the assembly and what its members are doing. This is an important issue in many parts of Wales where people who have moved here get their local news from where they came from. A fifth of Wales' residents were born in England, as I was.

Two items are prominent. Firstly I talk to people involved in the voluntary and charity sectors. A concern they have is that the press no longer turn up to AGMs, special events or report their activities. As I see it newspaper proprietors do not send journalists to 'outside' events. They are all office based. If organisations want their activities reported they have to do it themselves. This also applies to supplying photographs.

Secondly it is council election time. In the seventies and eighties I was a member of three councils in Clwyd including the district and town. All their meeting had a number of journalists and items discussed and comments made were regularly reported. I now hardly see any reports of what the county and town councils are discussing.

Regional papers. The sales of both Wales based dailies have reduced considerably. I checked on line and found a report in the Western Mail dated 28 August 2010 entitled "Concern over newspapers' decline in Wales". It quotes James Stewart a

senior lecturer in journalism. He said “It emerged 90% of people in Wales read a paper that doesn’t contain Welsh news.”

As this survey is being undertaken by the assembly which now has law making powers what it does and what its members say is important to every one in Wales. As 90% of news paper readers don’t read Welsh news its vital how political issues are reported.

Here is an item I have noted read by 90% of daily newspaper readers in Wales. In 2013 an announcement about free school meals for the under 8’s in England was reported. Here are 3 headlines from popular newspapers – Daily Mail “Every child up to seven”, The Independent “free school meals” and The Telegraph “Free school meals for all under eights.”

On the question of Welsh laws here is a report from the Daily Post 29 April 2013 regarding an English resident with a business in Wales. “Sunbed boss is first to be fined under new regulations in Wales” The operator of a sunbed salon has ended up with a £3,700 court bill in the first prosecution under tough new regulations introduced in Wales. Defendant David Kirkham, of Bradford Wood Cottages in Grange Lane, Winsford, Cheshire, said through his barrister that while he accepted full responsibility for the offences, he ran two other similar outlets in England where the regulations did not apply, and he had not been aware of the correspondence or the improvement notice.

I have three further important observations on how little the people of Wales know about what the Assembly does.

Firstly the first minister before the 2010 assembly election met many who were not aware of what the Welsh government had achieved. He said: “They can identify things like free prescriptions, bus passes and so on. But so many of the things we’ve done people weren’t aware of.”

Secondly an amazing fact. In the 2016 BBC Wales St David’s Day survey, 29% of those polled didn’t know that health was devolved. Health is one of the main topics of political debate in the UK and government ministers often refer to the NHS in Wales. If nearly a third of the population doesn’t know that health is run by the assembly it has a lot of work to do.

Thirdly when lobbying an AM he mentioned that quite often letters from constituents were about issues being debated in parliament as opposed to devolved issues before the Assembly.

Local TV. As a regular news watcher I have heard of local TV stations for Cardiff and Swansea. I recently heard that a new station had opened at Mold. I have not seen or heard of how people tune into these channels. I went on line to enquire about local TV stations and saw that they were on freeview channels 7 and 8. I re-tuned my freeview and channel 7 was again channel 4 and there was no channel 8. I went back on line and on one sight the Mold station was listed at Moel Y Parc. On another sight the channels listed on channel 8 did not include Mold. I have no idea how to receive the local TV station at Mold.

Conclusions. What the Assembly should do to improve news journalism.

- Welsh newspaper readership is at a record low but on the positive side the two dailies and most of the locals have free online versions. The Assembly must encourage their proprietors to promote this and those with computers to read the online editions so that they know what the Assembly and its members are doing.
- As the Assembly has law making powers and further powers are being, and will be, devolved it should take control of the media and broadcasting in Wales. Here is a reason. Since devolution decisions by the devolved governments are, unless major ones, are only reported in the devolved areas. On UK wide news programmes political matters mentioned usually only apply to England. They are often reported as UK news. To be fair the BBC does often report that changes only apply to England. In the election campaign on 1 May, a party was to make an announcement about rented accommodation in the private sector. Before the announcement at 09.30 on the BBC news channel the on screen moving headlines contained the words "for renters in England". On Sky news the words included "for all rented homes". On news items before the announcement the BBC mentioned England, Sky didn't neither did ITV. On 3 May the same applied to a policy on hospitals. For people in Wales who do not watch Welsh news it could be very confusing. The news programmes are UK wide so the Assembly must ensure that political news is properly reported with it being made clear which matters are England only. This is a news journalism problem that must be solved.

- As there are different parties in power at Westminster and Cardiff Bay it is essential the Welsh government, and opposition parties, inform the public of their Welsh policies. They should not be judged by the actions of MPs at Westminster under another governing party.
- The Assembly must persuade the news outlets to publicise far more information about what the Assembly is doing. That is ensure that there are more political programmes on TV and they are well publicised and their contents fully described.
- Probably the majority of TV viewers in Wales watch local news and political programmes from England from the north west, midlands and west. The Assembly must persuade the people of Wales to watch Welsh news and political programmes. It could try to ensure that TV channels in England, prior to political programmes, say that the programme on their sister channel in Wales contains matters that affect everyone who lives in Wales.
- Local TV stations are an excellent improvement but far more publicity is needed to persuade the public to watch them. Also they must include local political news and details of what local and regional AMs are doing.
- Persuade news paper proprietors to send journalists out to cover meetings, local councils, charities and community groups helping vulnerable people.