

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) NJW16
Ymateb gan Thomas Sinclair, Pembrokeshire Herald / Evidence from Thomas Sinclair, Pembrokeshire Herald

The issue of news provision in Wales is a complex one.

In my view there are several problems that have affected the news market in Wales, but for the purposes of this response I have concentrated on three I believe are important and have dealt with a further key issue distinct from those.

Firstly:

Few 'local' newspapers are locally-owned: across Wales, the local newspaper scene is dominated by large businesses who lack an immediate connection to the areas in which they sell newspapers. The brands are local brands, the companies behind them are seldom – if ever – based in the areas they serve. We are wholly owned and based in south West Wales. None of our print media competitors are.

Newspapers have, therefore, become a homogenised product, carefully packaged, vehicles for advertising and not news. Look at one newspaper website from a newspaper group and you have seen them all – no matter how many titles they publish and where they publish them.

Even their most determined booster knows that it is very seldom that one of the papurau bro has the resources or reach to break a major story with ramifications beyond the comparatively small circulation areas they cover. In addition, when we reached out to the papurau bro in an effort to create a mutually beneficial arrangement by sharing our news stories with them in exchange for local Welsh language content, we were rebuffed.

The market needs to be encouraged to become more diverse and more locally responsive – and also less insular.

This can be done by direct intervention by the Welsh Government by:

- (a) Funding or providing training opportunities for small local news organisations. Multi-nationally owned or UK-owned newspaper groups can well afford to fend for themselves. Smaller news organisations find the cost prohibitive and access difficult. We have found that people are desperate for something other than 'soft' stories or uncritical voices. As I

have found to my personal cost, working in media has plenty of pitfalls and access to training and to support is essential

- (b) Targeting support at start-ups – whether digital media, print, or radio – or businesses with a turnover under a certain amount per year and making the process of applying for support smoother. How can it be right that something as relatively straightforward as asking for assistance lands a business with a consultant's bill because the process of application is so complex and time consuming: it's like trying to copy out Shakespeare using only contents of a tin of alphabet spaghetti;
- (c) Legislative change – as in my second point below.

Secondly:

The institutional interests of what is sometimes called 'Welsh News Media' often seems to me to be little more than a self-perpetuating racket which encourages local news monopolies at the cost of diversity.

You do not have to look far to see that disincentives for reporting 'hard news' are significant. Many local newspapers are – if not dependent upon local authority advertising – commercially sensitive to any change in the way councils and other local authorities place public notices. It is my view that the requirement on authorities to publish public notices in print publications is a nonsense in the age of digital media. It is further my view that the commercial sensitivity of some local newspapers to local authority revenue both infantilises their news coverage and prevents proper exposure of news stories that would and should be published in the public interest.

It cannot possibly be right that a local authority can attempt to bring a newspaper to heel by withdrawing its advertising – as happened to both the Carmarthen Journal and South Wales Guardian in the past. I have often said that it beggars belief that large news organisations with significantly greater resources than our titles have apparently not noticed or at least been aware of stories which Herald newspaper titles have broken or propelled into the public eye. There is no doubt in my mind that this has been a case of who has paid the piper has called the tune – and in some cases dictated the dance steps.

We offered – when we launched the Pembrokeshire Herald in 2013 – to carry Pembrokeshire County Council public notices free of charge as a public service. Our offer was refused/ignored.

In response, my Chief Writer found and published a list of all the consultations Pembrokeshire County Council was then undertaking on a full page in our newspaper and pointed out that some of them had been launched just before the Christmas holidays. At least one of those consultations was extended as a result and it contributed to a greater interest in the authority's public consultations both then and in the future.

That, in my view, is what local newspapers should be trying to do – to engage people with what is happening in their local communities and in issues in which they have a direct stake.

It is nonsense that Pembrokeshire County Council preferred to continue to spend tens of thousands of pounds, of public money on paid advertising. We subsequently established that one newspaper group had received over £130K in one year from the authority. I am not saying that the newspaper group concerned soft-pedalled on stories in order to preserve its relationship with the Council, but if I were cynical I would suggest that sort of money can buy a certain lack of urgency in reporting 'bad' news.

As long as the unhealthy relationship between public body advertising and news media exists in Wales – and I include the Welsh Government in this – then there will remain an imbalance between commercial considerations and news reporting.

As pressures increase on local authority budgets, it is surely time to change the public notice rules to shake out, modernise, and democratise the ways in which local authorities spend increasingly scarce public resources. There are 22 local authorities in Wales: if they are spending – for example only – an average of £70K a year on press advertising, not only are they being ripped off but that is £1.5m of public money that could be spent on public services.

I would also curb councils publishing their own magazines carrying advertising. That is not only anti-competitive but – again – a fundamental misuse of public resources. Spending money telling those who receive such magazines and newsletters that everything in the garden is rosy when it is anything but, is both

self-indulgent and ethically questionable. Councils and other public authorities have press offices and communication teams – some of them very well-funded.

Those press and communication operations must not compete for advertising with local media companies: that leads to all sorts of questions about transparency and ethics. It is not a huge step to take to see why some businesses might be persuaded that sticking an advert on a local authority's website or in a local authority produced newsletter or magazine might be in its interest. It is the appearance of fair dealing that matters, as well as its reality.

Thirdly

I have touched upon the cookie-cutter nature of some news websites. I believe that traditional mainstream media have missed an online trick. Not only are their websites overburdened with intrusive advertising – particularly video and audio pop ups – but they offer no rich content to website readers.

We have found that video news reports, sometimes short, sometimes longer, have attracted a significant number of views to our websites. They are one of the most popular things we offer online. Those videos are produced in-house by our own team. There is more than one way to market and I do not understand why there is a reluctance to exploit the opportunities digital media represents.

We have interviewed most of West Wales' leading politicians and business leaders on camera and our website response is excellent both to those pieces and to responsive reporting of local news events and stories using video. Again, it seems to me that large corporations are simply content to plough the same furrow and concentrate on clicks from Google on listicles than on reporting issues or topics of interest.

If news media is to survive and thrive in Wales it needs to remember that it is NEWS which is its primary delivery function. People don't like being told what to think and how to think it any more than they are prepared to put up with lazy and samey news coverage. . I appreciate the news business is a business, but it is the business of news – not the business of 'top ten cat names in Treorchy'.

Welsh language

I am not a Welsh-speaker. I do not read Welsh or write it. I am, however, very firmly of the belief that part of the role of the news media in Wales is to carry Welsh language content.

I have employed and continue to employ Welsh language first speakers, people who get by with conversational Welsh, and those who can read basic Welsh and get by with it. I have also employed people with qualification at A Level with Welsh as a second language. I do not know how that course is taught or at what level it is pitched, but for all the use that qualification is in compiling or writing Welsh news they may as well not have bothered with it. That is outside this committee's scope, but it is an active concern to me as an employer.

Herald Newspapers have carried Welsh content since our first edition in Pembrokeshire over four years ago. We did so because – as it was put very strongly to me – ‘you cannot be a Welsh newspaper and not have Welsh language content’. It has been a difficult process for us, but we have carried unique Welsh language content in the terms of news reports and interviews in Welsh.

If the Welsh Government is serious about promoting the Welsh language then it is my view that it should help and encourage small and local English-medium newspapers who carry Welsh language content. The Welsh Government cannot rely on small insular Welsh-medium publications to achieve its aims of promoting language learning – and increasing daily Welsh language use – by concentrating resources on websites and publications that reach out only to those who are already fluent in Welsh. Across our four titles, we carry around six pages of Welsh in three titles and two in another one. We do that largely because of the beliefs of a senior member of our staff on the issue and because it has helped create a distinctive presence for us in the market.

One of the results has been that some of our competitors have upped their own game in that regard. That has to be a good thing and it is a good thing the Welsh Government should be encouraging, whether by direct support for small titles or websites to carry news or by providing targeted training in writing and compiling Welsh language news for English first language news staff.