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“Public Service Content in a Connected Society”

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Peter Edwards

Response to Ofcom Consultation: "*Public Service Content in a Connected Society*"

Introduction and Context

I am concerned that Welsh media professionals have little time to address the wide-ranging changes which are affecting the continuance of a healthy media landscape in Wales and in the UK. It is significant that, in relation to broadcasting, which has a particularly central place in the cultural life of Wales, it could be argued that 17 years of devolution has not provided leadership in this field and that, as practitioners and viewers in Wales, we are all complicit in the maintenance of the status quo whilst the next generation of viewers walk away. Our society has changed linguistically as well as socially and technology is driving change exponentially in our industry, these changes are having a more marked effect in Wales because we are small and poor and therefore have few resources to react creatively to these changes. Of course the PSBs are not delivering as they used to because the landscape has changed. My questions are therefore aimed at asking whether the present form of the PSBs are what we need now. Maintaining the status quo is not an option-if the PSBs are to fulfil the role required by our changing democracy then they need to be properly funded, their pact with the audience needs to be clear and they must be the champions of plurality, cultural excellence and a vital dynamic society.

"...thousands of young people in South Wales, who have been through the Welsh language education system and yet haven't been given the opportunity to fully explore their identity or see their lives reflected in modern culture. On the rare occasions that these themes are explored in the media, they tend to be through the medium of Welsh only but they need to be a topic for discussion through the medium of English too." *Catrin Dafydd; Western Mail 14/02/2015*

All around us in Wales questions such as these go unanswered and lives go unexplored as cultural and political responsibilities are shifted from pillar to post. The result is that the people of Wales are forced to live in a cultural and democratic vacuum with few opportunities to scrutinize political decisions not to mention the opportunity to explore our existence in creative spaces.

As our stories go undocumented, a lack of ambition and a deep-rooted acceptance of regionalism leads us to embrace re-hashes of Dylan Thomas' tales and be thankful for the economic benefits brought to us by Doctor Who. But where are the ambitious plans to celebrate and explore what it is to be a citizen in Wales today? And where can we go to hear the stories of post-industrial communities suffering in the climate of austerity?

Just as people in Guatemala talk of their 'cosmovision', we in Wales have a cosmovision of our own. Like any other country in the world, it involves our relationship with land, culture and language – all of the components needed to create a unique outlook on life. A life currently banished to the shadows". *Catrin Dafydd; Western Mail 14/02/2015*

This is an eloquent critique of the failure of the traditional PSBs to face the challenges of the changing nature of society in Wales. The challenges that S4C face in losing audience doesn't seem to be addressed at all in this document. The medium (i.e. the way the Welsh language is used) is a large part of the problem. Holding on to what we have and therefore excluding those who are not a part of the "Welsh speaking community" is a perception of the Welsh Speakers who are never S4C viewers (there is some dispute about these figures ranging in some calculations up to 70%). BBC Wales fail in the delivery of programmes which are not "innovative, original nor challenging". They have bought into the regionalist mind-set and which requires them to make programmes which BBC London would not make i.e. local programming which may be of interest to the traditional viewer in Wales but not of interest to the younger viewer nor of interest elsewhere in the world. It is clear from this document that young people in particular are interested in programmes "which help me understand what is going on in the world today". They want programmes that are innovative, original and challenging". BBC Wales' non sport News and Current Affairs budget is extremely challenging and this must have some effect upon the range and adventurousness of that commissioning but is it also part of a mind-set which is not reactive to the present challenges?

Question 1: Do you agree with our assessment of the context in which the PSB system operates, and how the trends identified might affect the PSB system? In particular, do you agree with our analysis of the independent production sector?

PSB providers are required to provide a wide range of programmes. The relationship between the main PSB providers has changed markedly and this is bound to have a major influence on the provision of a range of programming.

A central question for broadcasting in Wales is whether the new relationship between S4C and BBC Wales has increased diversity of programming or diminished it?

There is anecdotal evidence that it has had a stifling effect. Although both sides declare editorial independence, in reality ideas coming from the independent sector are stopped by the casual response at first base i.e. "No, they will want to do that themselves" (i.e. about the BBC). One Member of the Policy Group, an independent producer, has experienced this type of response in relation to three recent programme proposals for drama covering the First World War, , the Scottish Referendum, and the 40th anniversary of Pobol Y Cwm , the BBC's Welsh language soap drama, produced for S4C.

Above and beyond this, the commissioning opportunities are so limited in Wales, that the independent sector will be fearful of breaking *ranks*, fearing that by offending S4C and or BBC Wales that their business will not in future be commissioned.

The Independent sector in Wales is very fragile, being confined to two broadcasters particularly as this year ITV Wales will use up the majority of its minutage on transmission of rugby during the World Cup. This is the continuation of a trend at ITV Wales who have been encouraged to make more programming internally with their News division, rather than

commission from independent companies. Previously there was an opportunity to make programmes for ITV Wales at very low tariffs, but with the upside of retaining rights-this no longer exists. Management at ITV Wales openly acknowledge that they have had to follow this strategy in order to make the service for Wales sustainable.

Question 3: Do you agree with our assessment that the PSB system remains strong overall?

As a legacy television service it appears to be strong but underlying this confidence there are challenges, which threaten their purpose. Do the two main PSBs in Wales know what they are for? As Welsh media professionals we have a natural response to hold on to what we know, which justifies our existence and the status quo... The power to maintain the structures that exist remain, but there are signs that they may not last. Looking at the weakest element, S4C, which has faced budget cuts of 36% in real terms, imposed with very little complaint, shows how vulnerable it is to political pressure and how the Welsh speaking audience fails to understand its very purpose. If a large part of the core audience are not watching the channel then this PSB is not strong. BBC Wales has embraced the "regionalist" banner which immediately justifies its existence as a part of the structure of the BBC but it is not surprising that it has suffered cuts greater than those suffered by Scotland or Northern Ireland. It cannot be said that BBC Wales is strong –it is ultimately vulnerable to further cuts.

By buying in to the major investment of the Drama Village and its warehousing culture the PSBs in Wales have agreed to the pact that we should be grateful for what we have and not expect investment in our own cultural development. This was illustrated to me by a senior employee at the BBC who suggested that I was being 'mealy mouthed' when I suggested that is a pity that there are no indigenous companies in Wales that can produce some of the output of Porth Teigr. (the site of the BBC's Drama Village in Cardiff Bay.)

In a speech given in Cardiff last year, Tony Hall himself pointed to the lack of Welsh representation within the BBC's own output, to Wales itself, to the UK and to the wider world. There is no evidence that this issue is being addressed nor do I believe that the BBC is best placed to fulfil this role. The BBC in Wales knows what it is for- fulfilling the agenda of survival and by bringing people and programmes from elsewhere and building costly iconic buildings to make it difficult to remove. But this is not the same thing as being culturally restive, disruptive and challenging.

Question 4: Given the resources available, to what extent is the system meeting the needs of as wide a range of audiences as practicable?

Question 5: Given the resources available, does the PSB system deliver the right balance of spend and output on programming specifically for audiences in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and programmes reflecting those nations to a UK-wide audience?

I note that in 3.68 of the consultation document, in relation to the research carried out by Ipsos MORI regarding the fourth purpose of PSB that, “people struggled to think of programmes that represented diversity and alternative viewpoints.”

Given the inevitable restrictions of commissioning opportunities, it is not surprising that the overall programme output begins to look conservative and stale. S4C has traditionally been outward looking and adventurous in its desire to coproduce internationally and has a strong history of making adventurous and challenging programmes. The hope was that given BBC Wales’ opportunities to coproduce with S4C and pay for an international English language version – the future looked bright.

However, in reality BBC Wales is essentially a regional TV organisation with little interest in challenging or alternative viewpoints. This in turn has stifled S4C’s natural commissioning instincts. In terms of challenging drama, all the efforts and resources currently are focused on *Hinterland/ Y Gwyll*, a drama series produced back to back in English and in Welsh, which has been screened in Wales and on BBC 4 and has been acquired by several European broadcasters. However, with the exception of this production, there seems to be no development plan for development of talent, writers, directors and producers.

The evidence seems to suggest that there is concern in Wales about the lack of challenging and diverse programmes from Wales. The cuts to the Welsh budget of BBC Wales and the 36% cut to S4C’s budget might suggest that we are close to the point where variety of programming and representation of a plurality of viewpoints are under threat. BBC Wales and S4C are having to constantly look at the viewing figures as a justification for their existence –always concerned about that Daily Mail moment when their very existence is challenged. This inevitably leads to dull and safe programming, which certainly does not encourage new talent nor a new and exciting point of view.

Question 6: Is declining investment affecting the quality of PSB and is it a cause for concern?

Both S4C and BBC Wales are clearly facing challenges. S4C is facing challenges to its core audience and in its failure to find a new audience. Its cuts to the *Pobol Y Cwm* output have hardly revolutionised the perception of the channel. Four times a week S4C broadcasts one and a half hours of soap a night, *Pobol y Cwm*, a repeat of the previous day’s broadcast and *Rownd a Rownd*. This is an effect of the cuts and it is causing serious harm to the next generation. The factual element is holding up but the time scale of commissioning is undermining businesses, particularly due to the current uncertainty regarding the DCMS’ continuing contribution to S4C post 2015/16

BBC Wales has recently centred its drama investment on the Dylan Thomas seasons and the Y Gwyll/ Hinterland series. The change in direction with such a small budget means that any future drama development is put in peril. The development of talent in this area cannot merely be turned on and off. There has to be some sense of continuity and an understanding that these elements are important to us as a society

Question 8: To what extent do you agree with our assessment of the degree to which the non-PSB services play a role in helping to deliver the public service objectives? In doing so please set out your views on the delivery by the PSB portfolio channels, other non-PSB channels, on-demand and internet services and also radio services separately.

Following the establishment of the current arrangement between S4C and BBC Wales – in the minds of many BBC Wales appears to be the senior partner in the relationship...All news, in both languages is controlled by the BBC with very little oversight from ITV Wales. In a small, poor country like Wales guarding plurality of information and opinion, cultural variety and economic viability falls more heavily on the shoulders of the regulator. Currently both regulatory organisations BBC Trust and the S4C Authority are opaque in their activities- the brief in Wales needs to be stronger to demand that oversight and monitoring of the PSBs is much more hands-on than it is in England . We have no effective, widely read press nor commercial media organisations which will challenge the BBC or S4C in effect we have no organisations to “guard the Guardians”. The appearance of the relationship with the BBC seems uneasy as S4C has a larger budget but the BBC gives everyone the impression that it is the BBC’s money. These inevitable tensions switch the focus on to the mechanics of the relationship and away from the main responsibilities of providing a first class service for the audience and a challenge to each other to ensure constant vigilance... as I write this I feel that the idea that one broadcaster in Wales might challenge another feels like such an outlandish idea –however that should be the norm. How can transparent plurality be achieved if News in both languages is provided by the BBC with one set of journalist working to two masters.

Question 15: Have we identified the right options when considering potential new sources of funding, are there other sources of funding which should be considered, and which are most preferable?

The review of PSB is also looking at the wider context of a connected society. It is my concern that the PSBs are primarily concerned about their own survival and therefore find it difficult to work with other organisations. The BBC in particular needs to control all elements and S4C seems to be frozen at times not knowing what to do. S4C always needs to cover its back –double checking that it has covered every potential public concern-thus freezing its ability to act.

We are approaching a “tipping point” moment in terms of technology, delivery and culture. As a small, poor country Wales has less options and less flexibility. We need to combine our

financial and cultural resources so that we understand what part our media will have to play in the cultural, democratic and economic developments in the future.

We need to understand better how we can use the resources and skills of organisations such as Ffilm Cymru alongside the needs of the PSBs. The training organisations in Wales such as Creative Skillset (with financial support from S4C) have a good record of working across the sector and the Welsh Government have played a valuable role in targeting economic support. The PSBs are focussed on their own needs and as corporations have to put their own interests first. It is now time to use the resources that we have to work together to create an industry and a modern culture, which serves the people culturally and economically.

Post devolution the Welsh government have designated the Creative Industries as a sector priority in Wales and have a policy of funding certain elements of development, promotion and production. The Welsh Government is therefore a part of the process of programme development, cultural diversity and plurality and its role and contribution has to be carefully monitored . Currently there is a scrutiny deficit because the various regulators do not cross the whole field.

As we run up to Charter renewal and in 2017 the end of the first period of the S4C /BBC Wales arrangement, this period provides an opportunity to consider the role of the PSBs and the role of public funding in our particular circumstances here in Wales. We have a developing democracy and at the same time an apparently disengaged population. We have a minority language, which is facing huge challenges from a culturally dynamic neighbour and unstoppable worldwide English language focussed technology

. What are the cultural roles of our PSBs as we face these changes, how should the public money be spent, what are the relationships which work, how do we remain vigilant in a complex world? How do we flourish?

Peter Edwards
February 2015