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Evidence to the National Assembly's Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

from John Geraint, Creative Director, Green Bay Media

1. Why it matters

1.1 The mass media form a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. They are a reflection of - and stimulus to - a self-confident national culture. The way in which Wales and Welsh communities are represented in the media is a critical element in building a just and thriving society here.

1.2 Richard Dyer, a leading thinker about representation and the media, puts it this way: *'How a group is represented... how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not)... these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens....How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.'*

1.3 Wales and its communities have been historically *under*-represented in the dominant media which Welsh people themselves 'consume'. And often, even such representation as we have had has been from the perspective of the outsider rather our own. This lack of adequate, rounded representation has been a negative for us.

1.4 Even when it has been represented, Wales has struggled to ensure that its stories enjoy parity of esteem with the stories of the more powerful and privileged; and that is not only unfair in its own right, but it further entrenches inequality, injustice and lack of true respect and self-respect.

1.5 This paper argues that if media representation of Wales is to become more representative, it will require effective action in the market-place *and* in the political arena.

1.6 The arguments are focused on television. That is not to say that other media – and especially 'new media' – aren't important; but that, despite forecasts of its imminent demise, television remains dominant and robust, an immensely powerful cultural force and one where, economically, content is still 'easiest to monetise'. It is also, of course, the medium where Green Bay's expertise is located.

2. Company Background

2.1 Green Bay Media Limited was established in Cardiff in 2001, when John Geraint and Phil George left senior executive positions at the BBC to return to hands-on programme-making.

2.2 Green Bay's very first production, 'Do Not Go Gentle', a celebration of Dylan Thomas's great poem, directed by John Geraint, reached the 'Olympics of television', nominated alongside blue-chip series 'The West Wing', 'Band of Brothers' and 'Blue Planet' for the Banff 'Rockies', one of the world's foremost media prizes.

2.3 Green Bay has continued to seek to produce, from a Welsh base, world-class film and television in drama, documentary and the arts.

2.4 In 2004, facing intensified competition as a change in the 'terms-of-trade' between independents and broadcasters drove structural consolidation in the sector, Green Bay strengthened its commercial position by successfully negotiating a £300,000 equity investment from Finance Wales.

2.5 Using this capital in programme development, Green Bay trebled its turnover and posted record profits in 2006, and was recognised as the fastest-growing creative business in Wales at the 2007 'Fast Growth 50' awards.

2.6 To capitalise on this success, Finance Wales invested a further £500,000 in Green Bay in September 2007, and this has been used to drive further growth.

2.7 Green Bay's current production slate includes projects for BBC Wales, S4C, BBC network television, Channel 4 and Five and international broadcasters National Geographic and France 5.

2.8 Recently Green Bay won, in open competition with other independents and the BBC in-house department, the commission to produce the BBC's authoritative and comprehensive History of Wales, which will be on air in January as BBC Wales television's number one marketing priority for 2012.

2.9 As executive producer, John Geraint has been responsible for Green Bay productions which have won a number of BAFTA awards and the Gold Torc at the Celtic Media Festival. John is a recipient of a Royal Television Society award for his outstanding contribution to television.

2.10 John chairs the Skillset Cymru National Board.

2.11 John is Chair of Zoom Cymru, a charity which offers media training and opportunities to young people, particularly in our former coalfield communities, and which is newly in receipt of a 'People and Places' grant from the Big Lottery Fund to develop further our annual Zoom Festival, based in valleys, and our year-round skills building activities.

3. The Current State of the Media in Wales

3.1 In the early years of the new millennium, the prospects for Wales in television looked relatively promising: we enjoyed increasing network and national output on a well-funded BBC; some years of plenty on S4C; a still-substantial body of output for Wales on ITV; and even a nascent English-language channel, BBC 2W.

3.2 The English-speaking audience has been used to a wide range of public service television programmes for Wales from plural sources. Historically, this extended well beyond news and current affairs, to quality documentary, arts, entertainment and drama programming which reflected the lives and concerns of the audience in a rounded way.

3.3 Welsh-language producers have enjoyed the security of a fully-funded and comprehensive pattern of commission at adequate (some might say relatively generous) tariffs.

3.4 All of the above is now under threat or already gone.

3.5 Urgent thought and action is needed if Welsh experience is to be adequately and properly represented in the media of our future.

3.6 BBC Network television has begun to commission a more balanced slate of output from Wales, but questions remain about the way in which Wales is (or isn't!) represented in these programmes, and about the split between in-house production and commissioning from the independent sector in Wales.

3.7 Channel 4 continues its positive dialogue with Welsh producers and commissions are starting to flow, although we are starting from a pitifully low base; but Channel 4 seems to find it difficult to engage in a straightforward way with the media agencies in Wales and some opportunities have been lost as a result.

We deal further with these questions of network television in section 4

3.8 S4C's investment in international programming has been crucial in opening doors for producers in Wales to the lucrative and creatively demanding international market.

3.9 For example, S4C has been a major funder of three ambitious high-definition series produced by Green Bay for the international market: 'Rivers and Life', 'Islands' and 'Deserts'. These series show how iconic landscapes - *the Amazon, the Ganges, Fiji, Cuba, the Sahara, the Atacama etc. etc.* - shape the cultures of the people who live there. Without S4C's involvement, these projects simply could not have happened.

3.10 All of these series have attracted further production funding internationally from broadcaster France 5 and all have been acquired by National Geographic. The Wales Creative IP Fund, distributors and others

(including Green Bay itself) have invested on the basis of the series' potential to make strong returns in international sales.

3.11 More series are planned on the same funding model which brings substantial foreign investment to Wales and has helped cement Green Bay's position as a player in the global market.

3.12 It is crucial to ensure that S4C continues to have the resources, scope and freedom to work with producers in the international marketplace. It is encouraging in this regard to hear of the appointment of Ian Jones as chief executive; he brings vast experience of international co-production to S4C (and indeed, whilst he was at National Geographic, it was he who opened doors for Green Bay, enabling us to work directly for them on prestigious documentaries about the Egyptian pyramids and the London 2012 Olympic Stadium). Attracting significant international funding is one way in which S4C might be able to square the circle of sustaining quality that punches through at a time of diminishing public funding.

3.13 S4C's commitment to skills and training has been exemplary. It has shouldered the burden of training the freelance and independent media workforce in Wales. S4C's ring-fenced funding has been the foundation upon which organisations like Skillset have been able to leverage substantial match funding from Europe, as well as commitments from production businesses – and, on the basis of all of this, has begun to pioneer a new, innovative partnership with the Higher Education Institutions in Wales. It's crucial to ensure that S4C's commitment to training remains strong as the financial pressures bite.

4. A Priority for Wales – A Fair Share of Network Business

4.1 The UK's network television market is large, well-funded, enjoys huge international prestige, and attracts top talent and big audiences.

4.2 As PACT has identified and highlighted, the amount of network output which the UK's terrestrial channels choose to commission from producers in Wales is small.

4.3 Building sustainable production businesses in Wales which can deliver world-class public service content without winning a larger share of this market is possible, but self-evidently much more difficult.

4.4 The problem is not only the lack of an overall strategy to deal with the almost complete absence of Welsh prime-time production from networks other than the BBC, but also a failure to recognise that this dimension of the issue even exists.

4.5 But the failure of Welsh producers to make a real mark in network programming cannot be simply blamed on others.

4.6 First, producers in Wales – and, of course, Green Bay is one – must accept responsibility for failing to penetrate these markets which mean so much to the Welsh audience. We must ask ourselves tough questions. Have we failed to organise ourselves properly? Have we failed to be demanding enough of our own talent? And failed to attract talent which could really give us breakthroughs? Have we been sufficiently ambitious? Have we been merely inward-looking? When we have looked to London and been frustrated, have we allowed ourselves to believe we can reach nirvana instead in producing for a Europe of the regions?

4.7 But asserting that it is right for us to address these issues is not to say that the structural frustrations we face in doing so aren't real. The dearth of commissions coming to Wales suggests that this is something more than a supply-side failure.

4.8 Green Bay is convinced that the BBC is genuinely committed to developing a fruitful partnership with Welsh independents (for instance, in talent recruitment and talent-sharing) and wishes to see independents playing a full part in an increased presence for Wales on the networks.

4.9 Trust could be further built by a public commitment from the BBC to commission 25% of qualifying network output from Wales from the independent sector, with a further 25% open as a 'Window of Creative Competition' – in other words, to match in network output from Wales the BBC's overall promises about the proportion of independent commissions.

4.10 In the short term, the BBC could be encouraged to increase its development funding to independents in Wales who have the potential to become key network suppliers.

4.11 The encouraging noises emerging from Channel 4 need to be met with a more enthusiastic reception from agencies in Wales and from the Welsh Government itself. And close attention should be paid to the Channel's undertakings to commission a fairer proportion of its output from the Nations.

5. Building Sustainable Production Businesses

5.1 In building robust businesses, producers in Wales have enjoyed some significant advantages – the historical stability at S4C, the plurality of commissioning in Wales and – since the advent of devolution – the material backing of the Assembly and its government in prioritising the creative industries as one of the key sector of the Welsh economy.

5.2 One of tangible manifestations of government support was the Wales Creative IP Fund – a gap funding mechanism which invested in projects which could demonstrate a strong business case for commercial return.

5.3 The Fund has now ceased to operate and we await confirmation of any successor fund.

5.4 Green Bay would like to see the establishment of an Independent Production Fund to support the production of Content for and from Wales.

5.5 Models for such a fund are to be found working in other countries.

5.6 Canada, like Wales, is a bilingual nation which borders – and receives television overspill pictures from - a much bigger Anglophone neighbour. The Canadian government regards public service content as a bulwark for Canadian culture and it has developed more than a dozen production funds designed to promote quality Canadian content. The funds have commercial and cultural remits, and contribute up to 75% of the costs of selected projects.

5.7 In Wales, the Independent Production Fund could, initially, be focused on the television market, giving producers a base funding level which they could use to attract other third-party investments, from broadcasters, distributors and private equity. From the beginning, and with an increasing importance as time passes, the content could also be distributed on other digital platforms, and might take forms other than ‘traditional’ linear television programmes.

6. Implementing ‘Hargreaves’

6.1 In his report, ‘The Heart of Digital Wales’, Ian Hargreaves reminded us that media production is a cultural as well as economic activity:

‘Because creative industries policy operates in a space which involves the pursuit of cultural as well as economic goals, a strong creative industries policy also requires a highly effective partnership with public service broadcasters and arts institutions, along with the bodies that fund them. That in turn calls for sharply improved working across departmental boundaries at all levels within the Assembly Government and for a new compact between the Arts Council of Wales and the Creative Industries Strategic Hub proposed in this review.’

6.2 The Task and Finish Group may wish to consider whether this balanced approach – recognising the synergies that operate and the connection between cultural and economic well-being – is continuing to guide the work of the Creative Industries Panel which has been established.

6.4 Green Bay sees itself as a business which operates in a cultural space, and believes that the work that we – and producers like us – do has a greater significance than can be calculated within the parameters of simple economic functions.

6.5 Put simply, the Creative Industries have the potential to ‘make the weather for Wales’ – they can help determine both how we see ourselves in the world and how the world sees us. Regarding them simply in economic terms underplays their importance and is likely to lead to missed opportunities.