

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
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Tackling the ‘democratic deficit’ in Wales is essential if our devolved institutions are to continue to thrive. We only need to look at Brexit to see what can happen when electors do not receive a regular diet of factual, high quality information about a political institution – they become estranged from it, and are ready to see it abolished when an anti-establishment mood takes hold. Unfortunately, Wales will not have a thriving commercial press soon. A commercial press is dependent on advertising, and within the context of the UK, Wales has a comparatively poor and small population that is not as attractive to them. Furthermore, the UK remains a very centralised state, and the press will continue to favour London over Cardiff because that is where the largest and most influential political institutions are located,

Since devolution, an already fragmented Welsh media has continued to weaken and retrench, with ownership and editorial decisions centralising outside of Wales’ borders. The Western Mail has seen its circulation fall from above 55,000 in 1999 to 16,754 in 2016. The Daily Post, the Wales-based newspaper with the highest sales figures at 23,645, decided in 2016 to no longer send a reporter to the National Assembly cover devolved matters. A survey conducted in 2016 by Cushion & Scully found that the people of Wales were not regularly exposed to news about the Welsh Assembly, with only 4% reading the Western Mail, and 2.5% the Daily Post. In comparison, 16% read the Daily Mail. A survey by the BBC/ICM in 2014 found that there was widespread confusion about what powers were devolved to the Welsh Assembly, with only 48% correctly identifying that health was a devolved matter, and 42% wrongly believing they had control over policing.

There are two alternatives to a weak commercial press. The first is a voluntary press run by those who have a passionate interest in Welsh current events. The Nation.Cymru project is an example. However, a voluntary project will never have the resources to provide a daily stream of current events and in-depth investigative reporting that is required in order that Wales has its own public sphere. There is also little incentive for volunteers to provide politically neutral reporting.

The second option is a media that receives a public subsidy from the Welsh Government or Welsh Assembly. My research over this last year has been into publicly funded online Welsh-language journalism in Wales. This research included in-depth interviews with journalists and a statistical analysis of a website user data. Welsh-language digital news media is particularly well-developed, with two publicly funded news organisations, Golwg 360 and BBC Cymru Fyw, offering daily online news coverage. There are three other sites, O'r Pedwar Gwynt, Y Cymro and Barn, which offer a steady supply on original content. My research suggests that publicly funded Welsh-language media does go some way mitigate the 'democratic deficit' in Wales.

Because of public funding, Welsh-language journalism is enjoying something of a golden age. BBC Cymru Fyw and Golwg360 attract over 57,000 unique weekly visitors between them. Around half this audience is below 40 years of age. They have been effective in using social media as a means of attracting a new, and younger, audience that would not traditionally have turned to Welsh-language print publications such as Golwg or TV and radio programmes such as Newyddion 9 and Taro'r Post.

An analysis of Golwg 360's website data suggested that news about Welsh politics and Welsh political institutions is very popular amongst its users. Of the 200 most accessed stories on the website over a year-long period, 37 were about politics at the Welsh Assembly or the Welsh Assembly Government. Most of the stories had some link to the Welsh Assembly's devolved responsibilities – 82 directly concerned the survival of the Welsh language, 44 were about the Welsh arts, and 30 concerned the Welsh media.

It is perhaps too simplistic to suggest that a publicly funded English language media in Wales would lead to an upsurge in interest in these topics. The research found that the audience for these Welsh-language online news sites also made good use of BBC's English-language services, The Guardian, Wales Online, and The Daily Post. They tended to turn to English-language news sites for news about British politics, international news and sport, and accessed BBC Cymru Fyw, Golwg 360 and other Welsh-language sites in search of topics that are little discussed, or often discussed with limited understanding, in the English-language media. So, while the huge interest in these topics on Welsh-language news sites may not be indicative of a wider public appetite for news about Wales, it does suggest that

there is an appetite that is not now being sated by English-language media in Wales.

The success of these publicly-funded Welsh-language news sites suggest that there is little reason why publicly-funded English-language news sites would not also be a viable option. Journalists confirmed in interviews that they had never felt under pressure to censor their work or write favourable content about any party or political institution because of their dependence on public funding.

Resource limitations within Welsh-language media

However, perceived resource limitations mean that Welsh-language journalists are sceptical of their effectiveness as a means of holding a nascent Welsh democracy to account. Interviews with journalists at Golwg 360, Barn and O'r Pedwar Gwynt revealed that they struggled to find the time and resources to carry out in-depth, investigatory journalism. This problem was exacerbated by an increasing demand for resource intensive multimedia news, such as video interviews, which many Welsh-language journalists did not feel they had the time, the resources or the technological capability to deliver. This suggests that while the number of sources for Welsh-language news online is impressive, there may in fact be a lack of plurality, as news sites cover much the same topics, without the resources to investigate in more depth. These media organisations also lacked the time and resources to attract advertisers, which created something of a vicious circle of dependency on meagre resources. An inability to focus on attracting advertisers is particularly concerning as companies such as Facebook and Google become more adept at targeting Welsh-speaking audiences.

A related problem is that many of the publications funded by the Welsh Book Council do not have any online presence and have a limited understanding of how to promote themselves on social media. Their success is still measured by the Welsh Assembly Government on their ability to sell copies of print publications rather than to reach as wide an audience as possible.

The solution to both problems is that sites outside the BBC work together, pooling online content on one central news hub rather than spending money maintaining separate news sites. *Y Cymro*, *Barn* and *O'r Pedwar Gwynt's* websites are secondary to their print publications, and many other publications have no web presence at all. Publishing most or all of the content financed by the Welsh Book Council on a single Welsh-language news hub, such as the already popular *Golwg 360*, could

attract a larger (and younger) audience for these magazines' and newspapers' content while also strengthening and diversifying *Golwg360's* output. It would also ensure that all the magazines funded by the Welsh books council had a strong social media presence through which they could attract a new, younger audience ignorant of their print publications. Freeing up editor's time spent on producing online content and grappling with social media would also give them more time to pursue advertisers and grow their media organisations beyond what public funding allows.