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A TELEVISION SERVICE FOR SMALL LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES: THE WELSH EXPERIENCE*

I will begin with a fable; a fable of our times. It is set in a small village nestling in a valley in North Wales. The Second World War is over and the village has lost four of its sons. But its youthful population has increased and the school is bubbling and thriving with an influx of evacuees from Liverpool. Aggressive young children, confused and homeless, temporarily orphaned. Children who were sucked into a rural community where Welsh was the language of existence and survival as well as leisure and culture. It was a village of quarrymen and farmers, shopkeepers and merchants, six teachers, two non-conformist ministers, a doctor and a vicar. Life was structured and ordered. Socially it centred around the chapels and school. There you found culture. And on the football field over the river you'd find recreation on Saturdays. It was tight, oppressive and self-sufficient. Transport was three buses a day, morning, noon and evening, and a taxi run by the garage. The village of 500 people had twenty cars to be used sparingly for keeping in touch with the outside world. And there were eighteen telephones spread around.

But the seeds of a new community had been sown before the war and the six years of darkness from 1939 to 1945 had nurtured the seeds of change. The quarrying of slate was no longer viable even where the slate itself could be moved quickly to the point of sale. The green hillsides had become a darker shade after the planting of conifers by the Forestry Commission. The aspirations of parents had become an avaricious greed for their children's education. The beast of rural depopulation was about to go on the rampage. Because implicit in the desire for a better education was a belief that the children would get a better education was a belief that the children would get a better life outside the village. There was no expectation that children who would go all the way to college would ever return to enrich the village life. The village was making the supreme sacrifice to the gods of progress and sending its young talent to feed the demand for education and care in Liverpool, Birmingham and London.

It is against this background that three boys grew up to adolescence. They were called Elwyn, Gareth and Tom. Up to the age of ten, life outside the village had not existed for them. Without electricity, other than that which was generated by machinery owned by two eccentric sisters who went to bed at eight and who didn't believe in machines on Sunday, the village street lighting obeyed blackout instructions for eight years after the end of the war. Not, of course, intentionally. The intensity and

* Original: English

activity which are necessary for progress had disappeared from village life and getting a reliable electricity supply just didn't seem to be worth the effort. There were a few wet-battery driven radios (or wireless sets, then) that kept the news and Radio Luxembourg beaming in, but it all seemed so very distant, so very far away. Elwyn, in fact, was taken by his mother and father to his cousin in Chester to see the coronation on television in 1952. That was the first time he'd seen it and he had amazing tales to tell his friends about this wondrous machine that people had at home in the cities.

The development of the three boys from children to adulthood is interesting but, regrettably, not relevant to the fable we have to tell. We need now to move thirty years on and see the three boys as men before we return to that village and see the process of change that took place - the process which is fundamental to our attitudes as broadcasters and educationalists during the 1980s if we have a concern for the quality of life in sparsely populated areas.

Our fable moves to the present. Elwyn is a producer of programmes in the Welsh language which are transmitted on S4C. He is based in the suburbia of Cardiff, part of an elite band of University graduates who create and plan a television service for those sparsely populated areas that sent them away to be educated. He now lives in an active hard-working community that is as competitive as it is creative.

Tom lives outside London. His inclination and education were fulfilled when he developed an outstanding career in the high technology of engineering. He has developed equipment which has made it possible to transmit and receive television pictures at the same instant throughout Europe. And he's not finished yet. His command of digital technology is such that the quality of picture and sound that can be distributed to communities all over Europe, including the small village of his childhood, will reach unimaginable heights of sophistication just as the hardware gets cheaper and cheaper. The totality of the new leisure available to the unemployed television viewer is the high technology revolution which is now contracting this small world and Tom is one of its leaders.

Gareth stayed at home. He, too, is a leader. But in the small community which nurtured him. He failed to reach the educational heights of his two friends and took over his father's business. He now runs the only shop in the village. There isn't any other work there. Apart from looking after the cottages now owned by city dwellers and used as bolt-holes for weekends and summer holidays. Most of the native community is unemployed. They speak Welsh together and have a television service to educate, inform and entertain them. They have a radio service which does the same and both together span the whole day from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. They have the world at their fingertips through the instant media in their first language. But their second language is English and their favourite newspaper is the Sun. Gareth is a leader in that community but finds that when he watches television Dallas and Dynasty are infinitely more exciting than programmes in Welsh. In fact, on S4C, he hasn't seen any of his friend Elwyn's programmes. There was one series, however, that really grabbed

him - "Minafon" - a tough realistic portrait of a little village just like his own. In fact his village is a familiar location for film-makers for the channel and one drama shot there has been sold to six European countries by S4C. But these are incidental to the bubbling cauldron of this small village in a sparsely populated corner of North Wales.

Under its sad decrepit veneer which romantic poets, folk singers and politicians have bemoaned in their songs, poems and speeches, the village lives again. Rejection had become a way of life for them. They had turned too many cheeks. So much of what was pumped through the media was patronising, an educational elite was speaking from ivory towers. A community needs a morality, needs a structure, needs a culture. But this must grow from the guts of that community and blossom through its talents.

The garden of the fifties was left without the gardener. Nature in the wild took over carefully manicured lawns and a jungle of weeds was a new environment. Weeds are more robust, more able to adapt to the chill winds of the economic climate. The traditional culture was not sturdy enough without the tender care of the gardeners. A new sub-culture is being born. The chapels are silent. The reality of music is in the carburetor of a jalopy racer, painstakingly tuned in the long leisure hours of unemployment. The exhausts blow raspberries around narrow roads and farm fields, where traditional moralities cannot withstand the destructive pleasures of alcohol and hard drugs.

In his study in Cardiff suburbia Elwyn ponders the problem. How does he create better programmes for sparsely populated areas - like the village of his birth. In his workshop in London's suburbia Tom is feeding the computer with more information which will develop the technology still further to bring more choice and better pictures to those communities that moulded his youth.

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There ends the fable of our times. Come with me now to examine some of the truths that were contained in it. Let's begin with Tom's Truth. The revolution which we are all involved in is technology-led. The consumer has never demanded the sort of sophistication that fibre optic cable and Direct Broadcasting by satellite can bring. And yet for sparsely populated areas the DBS technology could bring television services to enhance the quality of life. Technology is simplistic in that sense. It travels in straight lines. It equates improvement and enrichment with proliferation. It moves on the basis that progress with technology equals civilisation. Often that is the case but it is not necessarily so. It was that particular equation which started depopulating rural areas in the first place. It is that equation which is now de-humanising the industrial valleys of South Wales. If you actually believe that the grass is greener on the other side of the hill because they have found a new fertilizer then you will never find the way to making the green green grass of home even greener.

There is a sense in which DBS is the answer to the problem. There needs to be a positive discrimination to restore confidence in rural areas. It was seeing other places with better amenities

that sucked the life-blood of rural areas in the first place and the footprint of the monster in the sky goes some way to restoring the balance. DBS does not differentiate between one community and another on any grounds. But therein lies the problem. It is the most potent destroyer of culture and individuality since the Roman Empire. American culture and the English language dominate the programming. The economics of television and film production make it a commercial necessity to seek large markets and DBS transmission has that power. So does Fibre Optic Cable, but the installation costs would be prohibitive for sparsely populated areas, and the proliferation of choice offered would need to be counterbalanced by enough funding to allow native cultures, particularly where they are based on lesser-known languages, to be carefully developed to be competitive with the main languages that have a better economic base in the market-place.

In many ways the British broadcasting structure is to be admired and perhaps in this particular respect to be emulated by other countries. This brings me to S4C. Whilst its autonomy to provide a television service is guaranteed by Act of Parliament its programmes are funded from the two sources of revenue in the British system. The BBC, funded by licence, provides ten hours of programming per week from its resources in Wales, including a comprehensive international news service. The other 13 1/4 hours per week are produced by the ITV company for Wales (HTV) and Independent Producers - small companies situated in all parts of the country (particularly in North Wales). These programmes and the running of the service are funded by a subscription made on the profitable ITV system (as is Channel 4 outside Wales). This is a civilised way of dealing with minorities that cannot find a high enough budget to compete with the popular networks with large audiences. Once the present balance is disturbed it is this service, and any other minority service, which will be destroyed. There is a debate at the moment centred on the notion that the BBC should take advertising. Whatever benefits might ensue (and no-one is clear whether there would be) the destruction of S4C would certainly be an undesirable consequence. Broadcast television in Wales is a four-channel system - three channels in English and a Fourth Channel with its peaktime programmes in Welsh for 23 1/4 hours per week and the other fifty hours are the programmes of Channel 4. This subscription, which reduces the taxable profits of ITV companies, is in fact based on their profitability, and although they do not like to part with 32 million pounds annually there is a sense in which this makes ITV a true public service. Is it worth the money? In truth it cannot be done for less. You cannot provide a service under 22 hours per week and it must contain music, drama, animation, sport and all the other expensive ingredients which have made the English-language services so popular. With S4C now selling its programmes to over sixty countries throughout the world I think we can say that the talent exists in Wales among Welsh speakers to create programmes that have universal as well as particular appeal.

But the programme maker's first role is to create material that will appeal to the immediate constituency - the Welsh speakers living in Wales. If the quality of the product has a wider appeal, then that is a bonus. It is now becoming clearer that the future will need a greater pooling of resources on a European

scale so that quality can be maintained and enhanced without the escalating cost of production. S4C must prepare its Welsh speaking viewers for a direct link-up with mainland Europe in drama, documentary and light entertainment so that co-productions can be developed which will enrich the language and the communities where it is spoken. The technology that makes this possible is infinite in its possibilities.

The problem is that educational systems have tended to separate the arts and sciences over many generations and the philosopher, theologian and poet have a deep ignorance of technology, and vice versa. As a result of this division there is a chasm between the concepts and demands of different kinds of society on the one hand, and the natural development of technology on the other. It is my view in the communication field (at the moment) every problem is surmountable. If the problems aren't set by the philosopher and poet then technology will run wild and instead of realising its potential as the ultimate civilising force of the twentieth century it could end up destroying the society which gave birth to it.

There is a vortex on the horizon of our awareness. A black hole for society where the raw materials of civilisation - the relationships of people in a community - will run dry and not be replaced because a new breed of man, a creative elite, will produce all entertainment, education and information, and the technologist will communicate this so effectively that no-one will see the need to replenish the raw materials. It's a bit like planting a forest and not phasing and replanting. Elwyn and Tom in our fable share this problem, but, unfortunately, they will never understand it without Gareth. Gareth, who stayed at home.

No matter how sophisticated our measuring techniques become for gauging audience size and audience appreciation they do not help us to understand the undercurrents of what is happening in sparsely populated areas. Any measuring technique needs centres of population; small villages in rural areas can have behavioural patterns which are quite different from the urban conurbations which control the responses to a television service. The responses may or may not be the same but it needs an understanding of the psychological and emotional state of a community to be able to break through any barriers which build up when a group feels deprived of certain things. And these areas have been made to feel deprived. The older generation already had its base when the technological revolution started but the younger generation living and growing in these areas today has been made to feel second class as the harsh economics of the last twenty years has demanded larger, more centralised units. It is to this generation, the age group between 16 and 30 that programmers need to turn their attention and to attract them to the channel and work with them to improve the quality of life in the community. To do this we must accept that there has been too much patronising, too much romanticising and a lack of positive attitudes from programme makers in the past.

The positive, indeed aggressive marketing of the language in the anglicised communities of South East Wales during the same period has had good effect on attitudes to the Welsh language and increased its usage. The Welsh learners are committed ambassadors

on the frontiers of two cultures. But the rural communities have seen a lack of awareness of the state of the language. And political activity connected with its protection has tended to be negative and narrow. The majority of people under 35 have been alienated by this approach. It lacks the charisma of the language movement of the sixties and early seventies and has a certain Puritan seriousness which is not appealing to the mass.

The fact is that it can also be counter-productive. By associating the language with intense commitment a large proportion of young people have escaped to other forms of entertainment which are not language-based. The proportion who have followed a more formal higher education will still retain the commitment to the language whilst enjoying themselves but even Welsh rock music is not as powerful as it was in providing the identity which the others need. Alcoholism is increasing in these areas as is, tragically, the use and abuse of hard drugs. The trafficking of drugs through the North Wales corridor is a horrific phenomenon of the eighties which we have featured in current affairs programmes.

How does the programme maker, educated and alienated from this background, communicate effectively? I believe that, of the three aims of broadcasting - to educate, inform and entertain - there is now a clear priority for our times. We must, above all else, entertain. That is the base line. We are well able to educate and inform - after all that is how our education moulded us. But there is a distinct lack of style and lack of pizzazz in our approach to entertainment. When people are being entertained they are responsive to the other elements. With a proliferation of choice they will not wait to be educated. If they are not captivated by what they see those who do not have the commitment will not wait. Although you may believe that this is a Welsh issue, I can assure you from viewing many, many hours of European programmes geared towards small communities and minorities, that the problem is universal and is certainly of immediate concern.

The long-term problem is this: if broadcast television ceases to be the medium of the people and a unifying force which develops the civilisation of communities; if it ceases to attract this generation to view, then by the turn of the century it cannot be used to create a climate for peace and understanding or any other laudable reason to the future. In the U.K. there has been a rapid increase in the use of video cassette recorders; nearly two in every five households have one. And in the village of our fable a van comes around once a week to replenish the viewing. The tapes represent the talents of film-makers, many of them, significantly, expressing themselves in the nastiest kind of horror film. This may well be a passing phase, but it shows a lack of rapport with the needs of the audience at this particular moment in history. The strains and stresses of our changing world have made monsters and perverts more attractive than reality. The consequence, some believe, is a destruction of society. No-one is denying that it is a factor in changing the traditional attitudes and morality.

We are beginning to understand the problem. As yet we have no answers, but as time passes the programme makers will reconnect to their roots. They will cease to believe that people have a

duty to understand them and begin to take literally the meaning of public service television. Returning to the fable for a moment, Elwyn and Tom have to take on the attitude of the servant before they can once again communicate with Gareth. They must accept that their education does not given them a right to patronise those who did not move to the centre of influence. There is an institutional arrogance about broadcasters which has created a gulf with the viewer. When imported American material is more effective than home-produced, we must take notice. If we are talking about Upstairs/Downstairs in society, the broadcaster must go down below very soon before he can function properly and use the privileged position to the benefit of society.

So there we are. A television service for sparsely populated areas is no longer a problem for technology. It is an exercise in understanding the nature of the communities that are to be served. An exercise which will have the profoundest effect on the future of language throughout Europe. An exercise which makes the S4C experience in the early eighties significant. Technology can take us one of two ways - centralised and standardised or to service individuality and differences. But either way it must be guided. This guidance is beyond the scope of political dogma. but it is a problem that will not go away and is common to all the communities of Europe. No-one should see themselves exempt from playing a part in the debate about and the consideration of the fundamentals of the future of civilisation. We need, over the next five years, to arrive at a vision of society which can provide a framework for technology in communications before "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." But it should not be faced timidly or negatively. It is our privilege to be part of the revolution that is taking place. As Wordsworth said of the French Revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven."