

## **CLAIMING THE NATIONAL: THE WELSH MEDIA AND DEVOLUTION**

*Kevin Williams*

While the outcome of the referendum for the Scottish parliament represented the 'settled will' of the Scottish people, the legitimacy of the National Assembly of Wales has been challenged by the outcome of the 1997 referendum. The people of Wales voted 'yes' to a limited devolution of power by the narrowest of margins. In a night of political drama almost unparalleled in recent British political history, the outcome of the referendum went to the declaration of the last count. An overwhelming vote in favour from the people of Camarthen meant a wafer thin majority of 6,721 votes for the setting up of the Assembly. The turnout was 50.1%, nearly 10% lower than the 1979 devolution vote. This meant that only one in four Welsh people bothered enough to cast their votes in favour of devolution. The lack of public support for devolution was further underlined by the poor turnout at the 1999 National Assembly elections when only 46% of those eligible to vote did so. In the post mortem into why devolution has not attracted support from the people of Wales explanations have centred on two broad areas - the failure of political communication and the weakness of national identity in Wales.

The outcome of the 1997 referendum is attributed by Ron Davies, the former Secretary of State for Wales, to a 'failure of political education'. He argues that this failure occurred at two levels: the refusal of the Labour Party in Wales 'to involve other political parties and wider civil society in the formation of its devolution policy' and the British Labour Party's 'reluctance to campaign on the issue' (Taylor and Thomson 1997). This resulted in an inability 'to develop a coherent intellectual case for devolution' which undermined 'a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the people of Wales'.

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Similarly a lacklustre election campaign has been seen as a reason for the poor showing at the ballot box in 1999. Others see the public's response as having a more deep-seated explanation. They argue that the narrow and half-hearted mandate for Welsh devolution is a reflection of the weakness of Welsh identity. Curtice (1999, p.142) concludes that 'Scots are indeed more likely to think of themselves as a nation that is distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom' while Bogdanor (1999) draws attention to the fact that national aspirations in Wales have always proven 'divisive' rather than 'integrative' as in Scotland.

This article examines the role of the media in the process of devolution which has been neglected in the recent analysis of constitutional change in Wales<sup>1</sup>. This neglect is strange given the importance attached to the mass media in the process of political communication and nation building. Broadcasting, in particular, is seen as central to the recent development of Welsh national consciousness. The official historian of the BBC in Wales states that 'contemporary Wales could be defined as an artefact produced by broadcasting' (Davies 1994). HTV, the independent television contractor in Wales, and BBC Wales increasingly stress that their role is not only to provide information and entertainment but also to play a significant part in the development of Welsh national identity. BBC Wales made the firm commitment that their programme agenda 'should be dominated by that which is significant to the lives of the people of Wales' while HTV has spoken of its mission 'to unify Wales'. The Welsh language channel, Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), treats Wales as a distinct nation. However, the ability of the Welsh media to develop national consciousness has been limited by the fragmentary nature of Welsh identity and the structural underdevelopment of media institutions in Wales. The referendum campaign witnessed an attempt by sections of the Welsh media to represent and project the nation in the face of the apathy of the general public. It is possible to argue with such a small majority in favour of devolution that in certain parts of Wales these efforts proved decisive.

Since the referendum, parts of the Welsh media have begun to show more commitment to Wales. The contests for the Labour leadership in Wales

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<sup>1</sup> Wyn Jones and Lewis (1999) have directly discussed the role of the media in the referendum campaign while reference to the relationship between media consumption and voting is made in McCrone and Lewis (1999) and Wyn Jones and Trystan (1998). But as Wyn Jones and Lewis say the 'difficulties facing those trying to campaign in a country without a real national media' have been 'largely ignored'.

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propelled the media into a more sustained and intense debate about political change. This debate coincided with the disappearance of the traditional modes of economic production that have underpinned Welsh culture. As pits closed, steel works declined and communities fell apart, the traditional Welsh way of life has evaporated. The present crisis in Welsh farming is the most recent aspect of this development. The growing fluidity of the political and economic situation in Wales is allowing for new expressions of Welshness which some see as linked to a cultural renaissance. Morgan (1999) speaks of an upsurge in national self-confidence with 'the youthful appeal of such harbingers of Welsh culture as Catatonia, Stereophonics and the Manic Street Preachers'. Whereas devolution in Scotland is about reclaiming the political, in Wales it is about embarking on the process of claiming the national. The Welsh media is beginning to play a new role in the process of imagining how regional, linguistic and social divisions can be forged into a new and more modern national community. The article examines how this is happening. It begins by distinguishing some of the traditional features of Welsh culture and identity and highlights the obstacles that have retarded the development of the media system in Wales. It then proceeds to describe and discuss the role of the media in the process of political change in Wales before and after the referendum.

#### **WHAT IS WALES?**

Numerous authors have warned about the dangers of talking about a single unified national culture in relation to any kind of nation. In Wales - as elsewhere - it is not possible to discuss identity as a homogeneous entity. Welsh culture is continually being re-drawn and re-defined in accordance with pressures from inside as well as outside Wales<sup>2</sup>. Emyr Humphreys (1989) attributes the survival of Wales as a collective entity to the power and ability of the Welsh to continually re-invent themselves as a people. The story telling tradition of Wales - labelled by Humphreys as the 'Taliesin tradition' after a seventh century bard - it is argued has allowed the sense of Welsh nationhood to stubbornly persist without the exercise of military or political power nor any indigenous control of the economic base. While myth and history have always mingled side by side in the discussion of national identity it is perhaps some of the more concrete social, economic and

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<sup>2</sup> *The complexities and contradictions of Welshness and Welsh identity have been the subject of much analysis - see Williams, G (1985); Humphreys, E (1989); Williams, R (1990); Smith, D (1984); Curtis, T (1986); Hume, I and Pryce, WTR (1986).*

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political factors that explain the contemporary nature of nationhood. There are four aspects of Welsh identity which are important in understanding the development of the media in modern Wales.

The first point is that Wales has throughout its history suffered from doubts about its national identity. Whereas Scotland is the outcome of an act of union negotiated between two sovereign entities, Wales is the product of an act of conquest. There is no dispute about the territorial separateness of Scotland before its unification with the English state. Even after 1707 forms of distinct Scottish institutional and social identity have been maintained. Many of the essential pre-requisites of nation-statehood are present: a national banking system and currency, an educational system, an established religion and above all, a distinct legal system. The subjugation of Wales to England following the defeat of Llewelyn, Prince of Gwynedd, in 1282 was confirmed by Acts of Union between England and Wales of 1536 and 1543. The incorporation of Wales into the English state became inevitable as the Tudors, a Welsh dynasty, modernised the administration of government and completed the removal of distinct Welsh legal, educational and administrative structures. This process is described by Raymond Williams (1990, p.70) as one of 'simple subordination' which 'can properly be seen as ... political and cultural colonisation'. It is also important to point out that prior to conquest Wales had never really existed as a separate territorial entity. Only briefly had the different 'houses' of Wales been united under one ruler. Wales in this sense is distinct from Scotland in that it can be described as a 'non-historic' nation.

This historical legacy accounts for the second aspect of modern Wales - the underdevelopment of civil society. Wales was unable to retain the separate legal, educational and religious structures that have maintained a distinctive national culture in Scotland. Civil society in Wales is characterised by a lack of confidence. Pressure for greater institutional expression for Welsh identity in the nineteenth century took the form of protest to defend the Welsh language. The event that gave rise to protest was the publication of the 'Blue Books' in 1847 in which English educational commissioners attributed what they saw as Welsh immorality and backwardness to the Welsh language. Through protest Welsh consciousness began to emerge. In the 1850s Wales acquired its national anthem and established the annual National Eisteddfod - a cultural festival. However, efforts to establish separate political institutions failed. It was not until the post-war period that Wales received any political acknowledgement of its distinctiveness. The Welsh Office was only established in 1964 - almost eighty years after the birth of the Scottish Office. Civil society has thus emerged for the most part within a British context.

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Since 1964 the institutional landscape of Wales has begun to grow. With the reform of existing institutions which, for example, led to the formation of the Wales TUC in 1974 and the establishment of new bodies, such as the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) and the Konica Football League of Wales, a Welsh civil society has begun to emerge (see Osmond 1989). However, this society is weak and many of those professional organisations identified as central to a strong civil society are lacking and the 'Welshness of what has developed remains a matter of doubt' (Paterson and Wyn Jones 1999, p.173).

The third aspect is the Welsh language. Wales is a country in which two languages reside side by side. Unlike other Celtic languages, Welsh still remains a feature of daily life. Most of Wales was Welsh speaking in 1800. By the end of the century the Welsh speaking population had declined to 57% - the comparable figures for Scotland and Ireland were 11% and 14% respectively. Today the Welsh speaking population has fallen to around 19%. In Wales language is a crucial, and at times determining, factor. Much of the political geography of Wales is shaped by the language. The decline of Welsh has been accompanied by the territorial shrinkage of Welsh speaking regions with corresponding concerns about the ethno-linguistic vitality of the language. Measures have been taken - both official and unofficial - to preserve and protect the language in these shrinking zones. The Welsh Language Acts, the activities of Meibion Glyndwr (better known outside Wales as the 'cottage burners') and the non-violent Welsh Language Society have all been in response to the perceived threat to the language.

The outcome has been political conflict inside Welsh society across what Anglo-Welsh historian Dai Smith has labelled the 'great linguistic divide'. The special treatment for the language is seen by some English speaking Welsh people as a threat. New Labour minister Kim Howells (1990) talks of the 'philistinism of the language zealots' whom he sees as constituting a narrow elite that runs much of Welsh life with the priority of advancing the Welsh language. On the other hand, Lynn Williams (1999, p.13) notes that 'the place, within the nation, for those who do not speak the local language is certainly considered to be problematic by at least some of those who continue to speak it as their mother tongue'. The tension between Welsh and non-Welsh speakers is 'not merely linguistic. It was also a fracture in the economy and society which led to a difference in collective psychology' (Smith 1984, p.8). There are two separate but equal communities in Wales. These are not simply language communities. There are differences in their culture, histories and roots. While Welsh speakers can call on the historical legacy of Aneurin, Taliesin, Gwenallt, William Williams of Pantycelyn and Saunders Lewis, English speakers can draw on Richard Price, Arthur Horner, Aneurin Bevan,

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Gwyn Thomas and Dylan Thomas. These different histories, traditions and experiences were for many years re-inforced by an educational system which taught very little 'Welsh speaking' history. Like Scotland, Wales has its political, social and economic divisions but the linguistic divide cuts across these other fissures with consequences for the political geography of Wales.

The final aspect is the issue of migration into Wales which has skewed the structure of society. While 90% of the people who live in Scotland and England were born in those countries in Wales only 79% of the population was born there (Talfan Davies 1996). Incomers into Wales have located themselves primarily in the coastal belt of North Wales, where the influx of retired people has earned the area the nickname Costa Geriatrica, South West Wales, especially Pembrokeshire which is often referred to as 'Little England beyond Wales' and the urban areas of the South East.

### **THE THREE WALES MODEL**

The divisions in Wales led political scientist Denis Balsom (1985) to draw up a 'Three Wales Model'. He makes a distinction between Y Fro Gymraeg, Welsh Wales and British Wales. The former is the Welsh speaking heartland of the nation, taking in North and West Wales with the exception of Pembrokeshire, where the language is most commonly spoken on a daily basis and agriculture and rural life dominate. It is in this area that Plaid Cymru enjoys its greatest political support and the sense of being Welsh is most acutely felt. Welsh Wales - or the Valleys - is the industrial belt across South Wales which has served as Labour's electoral heartland for its dominance of Welsh political life. Welsh Wales has the highest proportion of inhabitants born in Wales. Economic decline and deprivation are features of this area as the coal and steel industries disappear and people leave in growing numbers. British Wales is the rest - the coastal belts of North and South East Wales and the border areas. Parts of British Wales have a high percentage of English born inhabitants. This area has received the bulk of inward investment coming into Wales and has the highest rates of economic growth. Modernisation has taken place most rapidly in British Wales and it is where the issue of identity is most contested. Welsh identity and nationhood are negotiated differently in each of these 'areas'.

The breakdown of the referendum result seems to support the 'Three Wales' model. The Yes vote was most heavily located in the South Wales valleys and the rural West and Northwest. For Balsom (1997) 'the referendum demonstrated an almost unique alliance between Welsh speaking Wales and

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the traditional industrial heartland of southern Wales'. While there were variations within each area - in the North, for example, Gwynedd voted overwhelmingly for, while in neighbouring Anglesey the result was marginal - it is possible to identify the particular characteristics of Yes voting areas as being populated by a large number of Welsh speakers, people born in Wales and higher levels of people out of work. Voting Yes in 1997 correlated with a strong sense of Welsh identity and economic deprivation. The lowest turnout and strongest opposition to devolution was in British Wales which can be attributed to a weak sense of identity, a high proportion of English born inhabitants and economic development. Voting Yes also related to access to information from Welsh based media. Since 1979 the most rapid development of indigenous media has been in the Welsh heartland, Y Fro Gymraeg, where the sense of Welsh national identity has deepened. In addition to S4C and the growth of Welsh language community newspapers, the establishment of Radio Ceredigion, a Welsh language radio station serving West and Mid Wales, has helped to provide channels for the consolidation of Welshness. The rise in support for devolution in the South Wales valleys - Welsh Wales - is mostly attributable to an increased alienation from Britain as a result of economic decline. However, English language television in Wales has increasingly reflected the cultural life of this region and TV drama and sitcom have sought to reflect the Welshness of the valleys. Complaints from people in North Wales of the southern bias in the English language Welsh broadcast media - for example, some refer to BBC Radio Wales as 'Radio Rhondda' - attest to this. Many of those areas of Wales that voted against devolution were those with less access to Welsh based television (Wyn Jones and Trystan 1998). There is no simple correlation between the media coverage of the referendum and the outcome of the vote but as Wyn Jones and Lewis (1999) point out the main channels of political information, the press and television, did not fully function for the population of Wales during the referendum.

The failure of Welsh media to establish themselves as national entities has not only denied many people access to political information but is one of the main reasons put forward for a fragile national consciousness. According to Tunstall (1983, p.228) the 'Welsh media are much less Welsh than the Scottish media are Scottish'. The history of the print and broadcasting industries in Wales highlights the difficulties faced by the media in the development of a sense of Welsh national identity that can act as a unifying factor. It is only since 1982 with the birth of S4C that Wales has witnessed the emergence of a 'national' media system cutting across the geographical and cultural divisions. The opportunity to imagine Wales as a national

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community - other than in the context of Britain - has traditionally been severely curtailed.

#### **THE LACK OF A NATIONAL PRESS**

Welsh newspapers have been marginal to the development of Welsh national consciousness. The industry has always been highly localised - a stark contrast with England, Scotland and Ireland where the print industry grew up in and expanded from the major conurbations of Glasgow, Edinburgh, London and Dublin (see Jones 1990). It has only been in the 20th century that efforts have been made to appeal beyond locality to address the Welsh nation as a whole. The **Western Mail** has made the most concerted effort to reach a national audience through the medium of the English language. By the early 1960s it was established in South, West and, to some extent, East Wales. But the failure to make inroads into North Wales meant that the newspaper has never been able to fully live up to its claim to be the 'national newspaper of Wales'. North Wales is served by the **Liverpool Daily Post** which through its Welsh edition has claimed to be 'speaking up for Wales'. There has also never been a successful national daily newspaper in the Welsh language. In the nineteenth century there was a thriving weekly, monthly and periodical press in Welsh. In 1866 it has been said that there were 'five quarterlies, twenty-five monthlies and eight weeklies published in the Welsh language' (Morgan 1981, p.21). Wales, more than any other part of Britain, benefited from the repeal of the 'taxes on knowledge' and newspapers expanded rapidly from the 1850s onwards. At this time the language of contemporary argument and discussion was Welsh. However, efforts to establish a daily paper in Welsh failed. The first daily newspaper launched in 1861 was in the English language. The Welsh press, closely associated with Nonconformity, was above all a religious press and the emphasis on crime, sport and entertainment in the mass circulation newspapers of the late 19th century was an anathema.

The best-read newspapers in Wales are the London newspapers. In Scotland 90% of the people buy daily morning newspapers edited or produced in their country while only 13% of people in Wales buy daily morning newspapers produced in Wales. Since the 1979 referendum the hold of the London press has strengthened. Despite a new English-language Sunday newspaper, **Wales on Sunday**, launched in 1989 in recognition of Wales's 'over-dependence on the London press' (see K. Williams 1993), the total circulation of the daily morning and evening newspapers produced in Wales has fallen. As the London press has strengthened its hold over the Welsh newspaper reading

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audience, there has been a decline of resources devoted by London newspapers to gathering news about Wales. In 1979 there were Wales-based correspondents for most of the national Fleet street newspapers. By 1997 all the London papers relied heavily on the representative of the Press Association (PA), Britain's national news agency, in Wales.

The strength of the localism of the indigenous press is seen by some in the performance of evening newspapers in Wales which in the last few years have performed more strongly than their English counterparts (Fowler 1997). There is also a thriving weekly press. A striking feature of the local press in Wales since 1979 has been the emergence of Welsh language community newspapers - *papurau bro*. They come in a variety of forms from cyclo-styled newsletters to organs resembling the local newspaper. They are not all published regularly and estimates of their distribution range from between 50,000 to 70,000 (E. Williams 1992; Mackay and Powell 1998). They have played an important role in reflecting local and regional interests and identities and news in the Welsh language. However, the local newspaper market in Wales is small and has been subject to the same changes that have happened elsewhere in Britain with paid for weeklies being eclipsed by free sheets. Their commitment to advertisements not news has contributed to the decline of the role of the local newspaper in both languages in local politics and community.

The Welsh press is also limited in its national aspirations through ownership. Most newspapers published in Wales are owned by one company, Trinity, which owns **The Western Mail**, **Daily Post**, **Wales on Sunday**, **South Wales Echo** (Wales's largest circulation evening newspaper) as well as the Celtic Press Group, which includes weekly newspapers across south Wales and the Caernarfon and Denbigh Herald Associated Newspaper Group which holds titles in north Wales. Other major newspaper owners in Wales include Southern, whose titles include the **South Wales Argus** in Newport and Northcliffe Newspapers with the **Swansea Evening Post**. The Welsh press is today controlled by newspaper groups based in Chester, Leeds, Southampton, Harrow, Farnham and Birmingham. The only major indigenous newspaper owner is North Wales Newspapers which owns titles in Mid and North Wales, including the **Wrexham Evening Leader**. The increasing concentration of ownership into the hands of outside interests raises issues about the ability of Welsh newspapers to serve their communities rather than their financial masters. Patrick Hannan (1998) sees this concentration of ownership as sapping the vigour of journalism. The limitations on reporting the development of civil society have been reinforced by the economic restructuring of the industry. Hannan sees that 'the structure of (print)

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journalism and Wales's particular need for self-knowledge are moving in opposite directions'.

### **A BROADCAST NATION?**

In contrast to the press, broadcasting in Wales from the very early days of radio has been intimately tied up with issues of the language and identity. In 1927 the former Welsh board of education reported that it regarded the policy of the British Broadcasting Corporation as 'one of the most serious menaces to the life of the Welsh language' (quoted in Howell 1992, p.221). Saunders Lewis, the father of modern Welsh nationalism, regarded the BBC as 'achieving the complete anglicisation of the intellectual life of the nation' (quoted in Davies 1994, p.48). The struggle for the recognition of language and identity in Welsh broadcasting was seen as being finally won with the establishment of S4C, a television channel born out of the political struggles of its audience and committed to the preservation of a language and culture. However, S4C and the rest of Welsh broadcasting have faced many obstacles in making a contribution to developing Welsh national consciousness.

Broadcasting in Wales until 1955 was the sole responsibility of the BBC when it was joined by the regional ITV contractor for Wales and the West. A separate Welsh service of BBC radio was first set up in 1937 and for TV in 1964. The BBC in Wales has always been firmly part of the Corporation, a 'national region' in an organisation that has throughout most of its career vigorously pursued a policy of making the people of the United Kingdom part of one British happy family. At times BBC Wales has proved a difficult child to manage because its output has been in two languages but throughout much of its history BBC Wales has had limited autonomy from London to develop its own policies (for history of BBC Wales, see Davies 1994). Commercial TV was introduced partly to act as an antidote to the centralised nature of the BBC. It had a mandate to reflect life in the 'regions'. The birth of ITV was a shambles in Wales. Wales West and North (WWN), which began broadcasting in September 1962, became the only ITV company to go out of business. A number of technical, cultural and financial reasons have been cited for this debacle but the main reason was that the audience was already receiving ITV programmes from Cardiff and Manchester. The first Welsh-language programmes were produced by Granada. Television West and Wales (TWW) produced programmes from Cardiff for audiences in the West of England, South Wales and Welsh-speakers in Wales. The size, poverty and low purchasing power of Wales has been the major factor in the resistance to setting up an independent TV channel serving Wales alone. In

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commercial broadcasting terms Wales has never been treated as a national entity.

The setting up of S4C in 1982 changed broadcasting in Wales. The main purpose of the channel is to enable Welsh speakers, as S4C's chief executive puts it, 'to communicate and entertain each other in our own language' (H. Jones 1995). By broadcasting in the Welsh language the channel also provides the affirmation of a separate Welsh identity. Research shows that the 'broadcast media in the Welsh language appear to have a relatively clear identity, linked to a perception of Wales as a spatially defined political, social and cultural entity' (Hume 1986, p.331). S4C provides Welsh-speakers with a Welsh perspective on international affairs through current affairs programmes and features and dramas which represent popular culture and life in Wales. The main evening news bulletin 'Newyddion' presents a Welsh perspective on international, British and national affairs in the Welsh language. 'Newyddion' is produced by BBC Wales which as part of the original agreement to establish the channel provide 10 hours of programmes free for S4C. The arrangement is an acknowledgement by the BBC that people in Wales have a right to express themselves in their own voice on the main issues of the day - an argument recently rejected by the Board of Governors for English speakers in Wales (and Scotland) over calls for a separate news service for the mainland 'national regions' of Britain.

S4C assisted the growth of English-language television in Wales. Both HTV and BBC Wales devoted more attention to Welsh affairs in the 1980s with an increase of their English-language output to about ten hours each a week. Making programmes for S4C has resulted in a more Wales-orientated approach in the production values of the whole of Welsh broadcasting. S4C has been the catalyst in this 'new deal' for English-language television in Wales. However, the service for English speakers in Wales is still limited. Overall Welsh television broadcasts around 55 hours of programmes each week but only around 22 hours are for English speakers, who make up four-fifths of the people living in Wales. This has led to calls for a dedicated English-language channel for Wales. While many people say they are in favour of such a channel, most have traditionally said they would not watch it very much (see Evans 1991).

English speakers in Wales have become used to tuning into television from English regions. This is partly a result of the geography of the country. It is estimated that 35% of Welsh people live in areas which overlap with English transmitters - compared to only 2.5% of Scots who live in areas which can receive news and information from England - which means that

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approximately 400,000 people in Wales do not receive Welsh television (Welsh Affairs Committee 1999). Traditionally many viewers in Wales have tuned their aerials to transmitters in England. In South Wales it has been estimated that as many as 55% of the households in the Vale of Glamorgan tune their aerials to the Mendip transmitter while in Cardiff the figure is 37% and Newport 46% (Osmond 1990). In the North certain reception areas such as most of Wrexham and Deeside have not until very recently even been able to pick up HTV Wales. Over the years little effort was made by either BBC Wales or HTV Wales to mount a campaign to persuade viewers to tune into Wales. That segments of the Welsh audience watch programmes from the Midlands, Manchester and the West of England is only partly explained by the search for a better transmission signal. Some have singled out the poor quality of Welsh-made programmes but recent ITC Performance Reports have, however, stated that the quality of programmes provided by HTV Wales is better than that provided by HTV West. Welsh broadcasters say many people are too lazy in getting around to change their aerials or are unwilling to meet the cost involved. But it is clear many viewers believe the range of programmes on Welsh television is limited.

The aspirations of making more programmes for a Welsh audience have had to be realised in a less conducive environment since the beginning of the 1990s. The commercialisation and de-regulation of broadcasting in the United Kingdom has made it more difficult to produce programmes of quality to cater for the diversity of Welshness. For example, S4C has become a commercial player in its own right and some see tension between the channel's commercial role and its cultural remit. If sales and commercial considerations are to be the bottom line in making judgements about programme quality, then changes in the nature of S4C's commitment to the Welsh language and culture may follow. Co-productions for the international market while potentially profitable could weaken the relevance of S4C's output to the Welsh audience. The effort S4C is putting into participating in the digital world is a particular area of concern. Critics see the need to fill more time as reducing the resources committed to providing a full range of programming.

These changes have exacerbated tensions between language and nation in S4C's operation. Early efforts to represent the bilingual and multicultural nature of Welsh society in drama programmes such as 'Bowen a'i Bartner' were criticised by 'linguistic purists' who regarded them as slipping from the remit to serve the Welsh language. Matters came to a head over the launch by S4C of its early-evening magazine programme, 'Heno', broadcast not from the traditional base of Welsh-language TV production, Gwynedd and Cardiff,

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but from Swansea. 'Heno' was established to appeal to the working-class Welsh-speakers of industrial South Wales by using 'street Welsh' and a mixture of Welsh and English. The move was criticised by traditionalists who condemned the channel for 'lowering standards'. Behind this difference of opinion over the language is a conflict over the nation. Traditionalists see the 'Welsh way of life' as focused on the chapel, the language, the 'oldest literary tradition in Europe'; Wales is represented as an 'essentially rural society' whose cohesion and stability and completeness has been undermined by the forces of urbanisation and 'anglicisation' (Bevan 1984). This is Balsom's Y Fro Gymraeg and traditionalists see the role of S4C as defending this 'heartland'. However, as we have noted, this is a partial view of Welsh life. The revival of the language in recent years has been in urban areas in the South; most Welsh learners are located in this part of Wales. These realities are drawing S4C to South East Wales and it is possible to see different kinds of engagement with Welshness on the channel. Griffiths (1995) in her research into S4C's highest rated programme, the daily soap 'Pobol Y Cwm', has documented how its representation of Welshness has changed since its inception in 1974. S4C in recent years has also made efforts to breach the linguistic divide in Wales: over 50% of the channel's output is now subtitled in English and a subtitling service has been designed for Welsh learners. The problems of serving two language communities, representing Welsh life in all its forms and balancing commercial and cultural requirements has posed and will continue to pose a dilemma for the channel.

Welsh broadcasting organisations have perhaps been more successful than the print media in promoting national consciousness and reporting a national agenda but they are hampered by a number of technical, linguistic, political and economic problems. S4C is outwardly a success in that it has helped to maintain the Welsh language, provide a full service to Welsh speakers and reinforce a sense of collective identity. This has nevertheless only been in the Welsh language. The channel has contributed to the emergence of English language broadcasting in Wales but the failure to develop a significant service for the majority of the Welsh population has limited the efforts to build a national community.

### **THE MEDIA AND 1997 REFERENDUM**

The 'weakness of the press' and 'gaps in Welsh TV coverage' are seen as major factors in the result of the referendum. The Welsh Office concluded that 'in Wales there is no match between the notion of a national referendum and national media, since Wales's national media is overwhelmingly located

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in London'. Seasoned commentators have argued the Welsh media failed to inform their readers. Wales's newspapers are accused of treating the devolution debate as 'having less consequence for their readers than the next episode of Coronation Street' while the 'scent of office boredom was heavy on the airwaves' (Humphries 1998). McAllister (1998) refers to the 'dearth of serious political debate' in Wales and the 'lukewarm stance' taken by Wales's leading newspaper, **The Western Mail**. While there is truth in these charges, it is also possible to detect during the referendum the beginning of change in the media's approach to devolution and more importantly in their relationship with Wales.

How people learn about devolution is not simply the responsibility of the media. They are in a two-way relationship with other groups seeking to communicate to the public. There were numerous problems in the campaigns waged by the government, the political parties and the referendum camps to inform people about devolution and persuade them of the main issues. The contrast between Wales and Scotland is again illustrative. In Scotland the Constitutional Convention established in 1989 brought together the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and other minor political parties and a variety of groups in Scottish society to build a common approach to constitutional change. By 1995 the Convention had established a consensus amongst most of the leading parties in Scottish society. The deliberations of the Convention had been widely reported in the media and were an established part of the media agenda in the 1990s. In Wales devolution was not on the political agenda in the early 1990s. This was in part the legacy of the bitterness of the struggle inside the Welsh Labour party in the 1979 referendum. Discussion of constitutional change was confined to the ranks of the Party which rejected calls for the establishment of a Welsh Constitutional Convention in 1992 (McCrone and Lewis 1999; Morgan and Mugham 2000a). The overwhelming influence of the Labour machine in Wales and the weakness of Welsh civil society meant that the consequence of this decision was that devolution was not widely discussed in the public domain. As a result prior to 1997 a significant proportion of people in Wales had little or no information on devolution.

The Campaign for a Welsh Assembly was crammed into three months. The Welsh Office set up a Devolution Unit to publicise the government's proposals. It operated an information line and website, organised a leaflet drop and television advertising campaign. As the television campaign was only geared to encouraging a high turnout it did not help inform people of policy. The campaign was also halted following Princess Diana's death, thereby making its contribution to the public's knowledge minimal. The

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Wales Labour Party faced considerable hurdles in getting its message across. Its efforts were, as in 1979, stymied by divisions inside the Party which included public opposition from leading Labour MPs. The hostility of many grass root members was a major block on the mobilisation of the Party as well as the moribund state of the party machine in certain parts of Labour's heartlands and a lack of energy and enthusiasm drained away in the General Election. Concern about the campaigning efficiency led Millbank to draft in its own spin doctor to co-ordinate the efforts. Alan Barnard - nicknamed the Governor General - was sent down from London to impose discipline on the Welsh Party. His priorities were to get the Labour vote out, reassure people it was Blair's programme and ensure that everyone was behind the campaign slogan, 'A Voice for Wales' (D. Williams 1997). However, Barnard's rule was never writ large and throughout the campaign tensions within the Welsh Party, between Ron Davies and Downing Street and Millbank and Transport House (Welsh HQ) weakened the campaign.

The Yes campaign obtained cross party and non party support, drawing on leading academics, trade unionists and celebrities. The effectiveness of the campaign varied from region to region, often depending on the calibre of local participation. The strategy focused on setting up groups such as Students Say Yes and Actors Say Yes and arranging staged announcements of celebrity support for the National Assembly. The focus was on personalities not issues and the strategy co-ordinated across the media. The 'Just Say No' campaign, launched in July 1997 by a group of dissenting Labour activists, Welsh Conservatives and leading businessmen, was poorly organised and lacked local representation in several parts of the country. The platform of the campaign concentrated on three issues - cost, 'jobs for the boys' and the break-up of the Union - none of which were effectively rebutted by the Yes campaign. Leading anti-devolution Labour MPs while not formally part of the campaign played an active role in the background (D. Williams 1997; McCrone and Lewis 1999). The problems of the campaigns, however, were compounded by the performance of the mass media.

One crucial section of the 'Welsh' media was uninterested in the referendum vote. Only when the possibility of Wales voting No became clear did coverage in the London press increase. Most of the coverage was fitted into the week after the Scottish vote, described by **The Times** as 'Wales's Week'. But even then only a small number of news stories appeared (see K. Williams 2000). Celebrity support in favour and against an Assembly made up the bulk of the coverage of the tabloid press. The broadsheets were not averse to celebrity coverage simply preferring to report film star Julie Christie rather than Hi-de-Hi's Ruth Madoc. They focused on the 'metropolitan' angle -

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dissent inside the Labour Party and the possible consequence for the Blair project if Wales voted No (see K. Williams 2000). Welsh identity was explored in the broadsheets but much of the reporting did not go beyond traditional stereotypes. Particularly vindictive were the 'boyo' portraits of Welsh Secretary Ron Davies described by the **Sunday Telegraph** as 'your actual South Walian oaf: and accordingly what he says is often (like Davies himself) nasty and brutish but (unlike Davies himself) emphatically not short' (14 September). Such coverage compares with that of Neil Kinnock during his period as leader of the Labour Party and has a lineage back to Lloyd George (see Thomas 1997). However, editorially there was support for devolution. Those who bothered to comment supported government policy and the **Mirror** on the day of the vote provided a separate front page for Wales with a banner headline in Welsh. Support came from some unexpected quarters including **The Times** which argued that 'Wales deserves better government and better arguments'. The London press, however, saw Welsh devolution as marginal to the debate about constitutional change in Britain and what coverage there was saw Wales through London eyes, often trading on old stereotypes of Wales and the Welsh. There was little sustained information about the issues around Welsh devolution.

The media inside Wales varied in its approach to the referendum. McAllister's accusation that **The Western Mail** took 'no clear or unequivocal lead on the issue until the day of the referendum' is unfair (1998). **The Western Mail** used devolution to promote its claim to be the 'national newspaper of Wales'. Motivated by criticisms of its coverage of Welsh affairs and falling circulation, the newspaper in 1996 ran a series of articles under the title 'Where Wales? The Nationhood Debate' which were then published as a special supplement. The paper claimed that the 'issues of nationhood and culture are the lifeblood of **The Western Mail**' as it sought to establish itself as the platform for a national debate. The tenor of the paper's editorial position was set out as early as St Davids Day 1997 when it put 'A case for the right kind of Assembly for Wales'. During the referendum campaign the paper ran almost three times as many devolution stories as its rivals in Wales (see K. Williams 2000). **The Western Mail**, however, went further than any other newspaper in providing a context within which readers could make judgements about the claims of the different camps. The newspaper's coverage was broader and more comprehensive than the rest of the press, and complemented regular features on background issues that appeared in the newspaper prior to the campaign. For example, in July the paper devoted a week to how the establishment of an Assembly could 'improve' or 'change' health, transport, environment, education, housing, business and industry and

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politics in Wales. This series of articles was launched under the heading 'Case for an Assembly is as strong as it was before the change of government' (7 July). Some of its main competitors describe the paper as taking a 'campaigning' stance which can be explained by the coming together of commercial needs and political commitment, but the clear underpinning of the newspaper's reporting was that devolution was right for Wales.

Most of the leading newspapers in Wales to a varying degree either supported a Yes vote or remained non committal - even newspapers in areas which strongly voted no such as the **Argus** in Newport and the **Evening Leader** in Wrexham. This represented a turnaround from the 1979 referendum. At the local level there was editorial support for the Yes vote. For the daily and evening newspapers the referendum campaign merited some coverage whereas the weekly press largely neglected the story (see K. Williams 2000). Some newspapers did try to use their editorial columns to explain some of the issues and in one or two cases special supplements laid out these issues in some detail - for example, the **South Wales Echo** published on 11 September a free, twelve-page 'readers guide to devolution', 'Wales Decides'. Much of the coverage, however, focused on the rituals of political electioneering rather than on sober and serious accounts of the issues. Personalities and events not issues dominated the news reporting of the referendum campaign.

The Welsh broadcast media had a vested interest in the success of the Assembly. Both HTV Wales and BBC Wales were under threat. The new owners of HTV, United News and Media, were laying down the foundations for increasing their profit margin. Their placemen swept through the company, less concerned about programme making and more interested in who spends what, where (see K. Williams 1997). BBC Wales was under the cloud of another round of cuts as part of Birt's rationalisation plans. In such a situation, the Assembly helped to provide a political constituency to ward off what some portrayed as the 're-anglicisation' of Welsh broadcasting. The Assembly allows Welsh broadcasters to justify the claim that the country is distinct which enables more effective lobbying for a bigger slice of the broadcasting cake - at the same time maintaining Welsh programmes and ensuring Welsh jobs. The reward was increased resources with BBC Wales receiving an additional £6 million - the so called 'devolution dividend' - to cover the new Wales.

The political map drawn up around the 'Three Wales' model hides as much as it illuminates about the referendum. The breakdown of the vote on territorial grounds can be seen as 'a dangerous misrepresentation of voting patterns'

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(O'Leary 1998). The Yes vote was more evenly spread across the country than the model implies. For example, more Yes votes were cast in the No area of Powys than in the Yes area of Merthyr Tydfil. The key divisions are not territorial but a matter of social class, community allegiance and effective political organisation (O'Leary 1998; Trystan 1997). According to O'Leary 'the referendum was not a confirmation of old and entrenched attitudes so much as a snapshot of an electorate whose attitudes are in a state of flux'. What is interesting is the weakening of opposition to devolution across Wales. This corresponds to a shift in the position of much of the media from one of outright hostility to devolution. While it is not possible to do anything more than speculate about the relationship between media coverage and voting patterns, what is apparent is that the media were far more committed to the cause of devolution in 1997 than in 1979.

### **THE MEDIA AND THE 'NEW' WALES**

Since the 1997 referendum, as devolution has come to the forefront of Welsh politics and life, we have seen further development of the national role of the Welsh media. The trials and tribulations of Ron Davies and the search for his successor are the main reason for the fillip given to the issue. Davies's departure rekindled the struggles in the Wales Labour Party. Simmering dissent spilled over into a full-scale conflict over whether the Labour Party in Wales would select the person it wanted for leader or whether London's candidate would succeed. After a bitter and close-fought struggle the 'man from London' narrowly beat off the local favourite with the help of a heavily skewed electoral college (see Mungham 1999). The overwhelming majority of ordinary Labour Party members voted for the 'local candidate'. This contest was more than a political struggle; it became a symbolic struggle over devolution. It brought out and made real the inherent tension between the centre and periphery in the process of devolution. In both leadership contests - Ron Davies himself had had to fight Morgan before Alun Michael - what was at issue was the extent to which power was to be devolved and how much say the periphery would have under the new constitutional arrangements.

The leadership election brought considerable attention from the media. Most of the British press as well as all the main news and current affairs programmes sent their men and women down to Wales to report the conflict. In this struggle much of the Welsh media took the side of 'local contender' Rhodri Morgan - opposing the bulk of the London press which plumped for Welsh Secretary, Alun Michael. **The Western Mail** further developed its

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national agenda by strongly defending the position that Wales should decide for itself. Editorially it and its sister paper, **Wales on Sunday**, expressed hostility to the news management and political intervention of Millbank. The weekend after the Assembly elections **Wales on Sunday** returned to this theme when its front page headline read 'Wales Strikes Back: The people punish Blair for treating democracy with contempt'. Broadcasters in Wales cleared space for coverage of the contest with the contenders and their point-men and women fighting it out in studio debates. The main feature of the television and radio reporting was that both the Welsh and English language services participated fully and equally. Their ability to cross the linguistic divide for the first time was because the contenders were both Welsh speakers - a unique feature in recent Welsh Labour history. This was a truly national contest (see Morgan and Mungham 2000b).

The Labour leadership contest did more to help raise the public profile of the Assembly than the publicity campaign launched by the Welsh Office following the referendum. Billboard and newspaper advertising and promotional material to promote the Assembly failed to excite the interest of the people of Wales. Since 1997 attention has been paid to the role of the broadcast media and the National Assembly. Two aspects in particular have been discussed - the nature and content of their political output and their efforts to ensure that a service is provided for the whole of Wales. Some argue that the broadcasting institutions in Wales have been slow to adjust to the demands of reporting the 'new' politics. Several reasons have been identified including public indifference to the Assembly, lack of popular interest in political programmes and London holding back local efforts. New money from the centre has not brought forward much innovation in broadcasting coverage and calls for new vision in media policy have been made (Andrews 1998). There has also been pressure on the broadcasters to launch a marketing campaign to encourage people to tune into Wales. The political urgency of these questions led the Welsh Affairs Committee of the House of Commons to set up in November 1998 an enquiry into broadcasting in Wales.

Broadcasting in Wales - as in Scotland - is a reserved subject. It remains under the direct control of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. How long this will last is open to question. The Assembly is responsible for the arts, culture and the Welsh language which creates a grey area in relation to the accountability of S4C. Political parties in Wales including the Tories and Plaid Cymru have called for the Assembly to take control of Welsh language broadcasting (**The Western Mail** 1998). S4C is wary of such a move and former Chairman, Prys Edwards, has said that the £70 million subsidy should

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remain under London control. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport recommended to Ron Davies when he was Welsh Secretary that the grant making powers in relation to S4C be taken on by the Assembly. Davies declined. Fear of a predominantly English speaking Assembly being responsible for S4C as well as the argument that the remit should extend to taking responsibility for BBC Wales, HTV Wales, Channel Four in Wales and so on appear to have been the reasons. The Welsh Affairs Committee rejected 'at this stage' the case that S4C be devolved to the Assembly. Its main recommendations called on broadcasters to work harder to make the Assembly 'accessible to all ... particularly those currently excluded from the political process' by 'exploring new ways to interest people in what goes on at the Assembly'.

The Report welcomed the co-operation between S4C and BBC Wales in the live coverage of the Assembly on digital television. New technology presents an opportunity to overcome the social, linguistic and physical geography of Wales 'by providing a reliable and identifiable space for Welsh broadcasting' and offering 'the option for development of the television services in both languages (Talfan Davies 1996). There are many questions about the digital future but the possibility of closer co-operation between Welsh broadcasters has been emphasised by the outgoing Controller of BBC Wales, Geraint Talfan Davies, who has talked about the desirability of such co-operation in building a dual language service, with a single broadcasting authority to meet the needs of a bilingual society and help to develop the emerging political and national community. Other broadcasters are wary of the growing influence of the BBC in Wales. The large increase in the BBC's devolution dividend is seen by some as having a negative impact on the development of a national media system. BBC Wales is using its extra cash to produce more political programmes and more news, current affairs and documentaries but in doing so the Corporation is buying up all the journalistic talent in Wales. There is a flow out of **The Western Mail**, HTV and local radio and newspapers into BBC Wales. The imbalance created by a BBC stranglehold can be seen as further contributing to the decline in media diversity in Wales.

Nevertheless, the print and broadcast media in Wales are becoming more Welsh in their outlook. More London newspapers have appointed their own 'Wales correspondent' while the **Mirror** is now producing its own Welsh edition. 'New' political programmes are appearing on all the main TV channels and, while there is some doubt about their popular appeal and criticism of their approach to covering the National Assembly, they provide more of an all-Wales perspective on the issues of the day. Perhaps more significant is the growth of Welsh voices reflected in the increase in Welsh

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drama on television. The emphasis on drama has been a feature of Welsh television in the Assembly age. High cost and innovative productions such as HTV's 'In the Company of Strangers' and its soap 'Nuts and Bolts' as well as BBC Wales's 'Belonging' are now starting to address the English speaking audience as S4C drama has done the Welsh speaking audience. While these developments are limited, and Wales has a long way to go before it can claim a fully fledged media system of its own, there are signs of a national outlook becoming more prominent in the output of the Welsh media.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Understanding the role of the mass media in Welsh devolution must begin with the nature of Welsh identity. The fragmented and fragile nature of this identity and the particular characteristics of national and social formation in Wales have shaped the way in which the media have developed and their role in the process of political and cultural change in Wales. The historical development of Wales has produced a weak civil society, a linguistically divided community, social imbalance through large inward migration and strong local and regional loyalties. These factors have prevented the growth of strong indigenous media in Wales - even S4C has failed to reach out to the wider national community. The media - despite their public commitment to nation building - have been handicapped by the limitations placed on them by the nature of Welsh society. Their reporting of devolution reflected this. The inability to sustain a public debate in the run up to the referendum indicates the underdevelopment of Welsh media as well as a failure in the process of political communication.

However, during the referendum there was a growing awareness within the Welsh media of the advantages of supporting the case for the National Assembly. Since the referendum 'devolution appears increasingly as an idea whose time has come' (Morgan 1999). The political struggle in the Wales Labour Party has led many to re-examine the nature of their political allegiance and their involvement in the political process. The Welsh Labour machine - traditionally a strong plank of Unionism in Wales - is having to re-assess its position in relation to the Welsh polity. The result of the 1999 election further forced such a re-examination. Welsh civil society is beginning to stir as a range of voluntary groups embark on lobbying the National Assembly. In the 1970s and 1980s a number of institutions emerged which gave some leverage to Welsh intellectuals. Today the growth of community and voluntary organisations promises to extend such influence to other sectors of Welsh society. The media in Wales is beginning to reflect

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these changes as well as play their part in helping them to develop. They are part of a cultural renaissance which is beginning to encourage people to be more confident about being Welsh in the modern world. Such a process is difficult and contradictory; some seek to expand their horizons, others are fearful that they are losing the benefits of the old order. There are still many structural limitations and problems but perhaps the Welsh media for the first time is beginning to realise their claims to represent a national community.

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*April 2000*