

The future of broadcasting in Wales

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Recent broadcasting developments in Wales have prompted calls for devolving this area of policy – but is it a truly viable option?

Virtually all of the main political decisions affecting broadcasting in Wales are made in London by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Even after the referendum result in March, this remains the case.

Critics of the arrangements argue that concerns about the future of S4C, the lack of plurality in Welsh media and the absence of Welsh representation on the national networks have been very prominent in recent years, and make a compelling basis for change. Others would not so readily agree.

Further devolution: The arguments against

The DCMS has consistently stated that it has no plans to transfer powers over broadcasting to any of the devolved nations. According to UK Ministers, retaining broadcasting as a reserved matter is the only way of maintaining national standards and ensuring the independence of broadcasters.

In the past, previous Welsh Governments have not displayed a great degree of enthusiasm for such a move either. Their reluctance to show support has often been based on apprehensions about the difficulties of devolving certain aspects of broadcasting in isolation from others, and uncertainties about any ensuing funding arrangements.

Others point out that broadcasting services are increasingly being delivered by national and multinational companies. To encourage greater devolution in this area would be unwise,

especially in a period of severe financial constraints.

There is also an argument that Welsh broadcasting outlets would not be able to fund themselves sufficiently without subsidy from licence fee payers in England. Other practical considerations and technical obstacles mean that the status quo remains a much more likely option.

In 2008, the Assembly's own Broadcasting Committee suggested that too much of this debate has been fixed on the devolution of policy whereas the focus should be on the accountability, transparency and scrutiny arrangements under the current structures.

The case for transferring powers

Conversely, those in favour of devolving broadcasting functions point out that it makes no sense that decisions in this context are taken in London while competence over other interrelated policy areas, such as culture and the creative industries, rests in Wales.

Such arguments were highlighted recently after the DCMS decided to cut S4C's budget and to transfer the funding responsibilities to the BBC without consulting Welsh Ministers. This is despite the fact that overall policy direction on the Welsh language is determined by the Welsh Government.

The case would be that Assembly Members and Welsh Ministers are in a much better position, and much better informed, to address issues

facing the broadcasting industry in Wales than Ministers in London who may be unfamiliar with the intrinsic complexities and distinctiveness of Welsh needs.

A cultural and democratic deficit

Supporters of devolving broadcasting would further claim that the current position is hindering the development of Wales's national and civic life. In particular:

- broadcasting in Wales is facing a crisis, with funding towards BBC and ITV English language programmes for Wales having fallen by 44 per cent between 2004 and 2009. Further cuts are expected in the coming years;
- Welsh issues are under-represented in the London newspapers and on the national networks, from which the majority of Welsh people receive their news. Plurality of news within Wales is also a concern;
- broadcasting has always had a tendency towards centralisation in the UK, especially in periods of financial pressure. This centralisation goes against the tide of devolution;
- all of the above have the potential to create a deficit in the cultural landscape of Wales, and could have far-reaching democratic implications due to the lack of coverage of Welsh politics.

A shared responsibility?

Some commentators have suggested that the ideal solution may not lie in blanket devolution of broadcasting powers or in retaining the status quo.

Key figures in Welsh broadcasting, for instance, argue that the responsibility for broadcasting should be shared between Cardiff and London, with power resting in different places and different institutions according to what's most

suitable to reflect the new constitutional shape of the devolved Britain.

Work would be needed to set out the details of a new relationship between S4C, the BBC, the Welsh Government, the DCMS and Ofcom. But by looking at different grades of devolution, there could be both a realistic and desirable way forward.

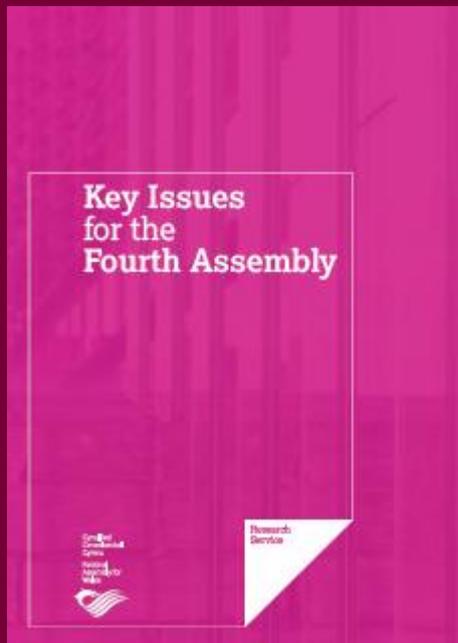
Others have similarly called for establishing a Welsh Media Commission to fund English language media content in Wales, claiming that such a step could have a significant impact. While primary responsibility for broadcasting would be retained at a UK level, it would give Wales shared responsibility and would improve accountability. Similar action could be taken with regard to S4C.

Such options, however, would depend heavily on political will and agreement. Whether that consensus can ever emerge is another matter entirely.

Developments in Scotland

Wales is not the only nation in which issues around broadcasting are being discussed. The Scottish Government is currently advocating the idea of establishing a Scottish Digital Network, which would see the main elements of the UK broadcasting system being retained, while enabling a greater level of programming which reflects Scottish life and culture.

Article taken from Research Service publication



Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

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