Wales: not on their radar?

The RTS Wales Annual Lecture 2013

given by Guto Harri

Noswaith dda … a diolch yn fawr am fy ngwahodd i yma

Mae wastad yn bleser i ddod nol i Gaerdydd

Ro’n i yma ddwetha I wobrau BAFTA – a rhyfeddu at y talent a’r creadigrwydd aruthrol sydd yn y ddinas yma nawr

Unig drueni o fod yma heno yw y byddai yn colli y bennod ddiweddara o’r Gwyll. Dechre ardderchog I gyfres arloesol ac allweddol bwysig

We are here tonight to discuss a “**democratic deficit**” – not the ***only*** one in Welsh politics, but an important one …

… One you care passionately about – Presiding Officer – and one you are right o focus upon.

Let me start by agreeing with a core premise. A healthy democracy needs a robust and responsible press, independent, professional, well resourced and free from political interference.

That’s why I am proud to be playing my small part in the big battle that’s currently underway to preserve that freedom and see off the lobbyists and politicians that are trying to override centuries of progress to safeguard freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the UK

A free press in a mature democracy should not be at the mercy of the politicians it is charged with holding to account.

And nor does it need to be. I can look you all in the eye tonight – as someone who is heavily involved in these plans – and say that I am extremely confident that a robust new regulator will be in place by the spring

Paid for by the industry

But delivering virtually everything Lord Justice Leveson demanded:

Able to levy fines of up to a million pounds

Order corrections

Demand apologies

… And initiate investigations

What’s more – nearly the entire industry is signed up to this

Left and right …

Tabloid and broadsheet …

So-called “National” and local papers

There is no need for a Royal Charter

The recognition body it will establish will be redundant

Another quango with no real role

A sad waste of precious taxpayer funds

I would hope everyone in this room who wants a robust and responsible press would agree on that and back the speedy establishment of the Independent Press Standards Organisation - IPSO.

The threat of regulation – however - is not the main threat I’ve been asked to address tonight.

The democratic deficit that you – Presiding Officer – have highlighted … is focussed not on the freedom of the Press but on it’s OUTLOOK.

The argument – basically – is that too many people in Wales rely on the **London media** for their news

… and the London media – though strong, independent and professional – is either ignorant or not interested in Wales.

That’s the claim …

It is a fact that a number of Welsh people watch network news and read so-called National newspapers

I speak for a company that produces the Sun, Times and Sunday Times and I’m proud to say that about 3 million people pay to read one of our papers virtually every day. Around 400,00 of those are in Wales.

About 300 thousand watch the Six o Clock Network news on the BBC and others will watch Sky, ITV and others.

I won’t go into social media tonight, but the numbers there often dwarf so-called traditional media …

My old boss – Boris – now has more than 800 thousand twitter followers … people he can connect with directly without the filter of the press – or his spin doctor … not always wise.

My current boss – Rupert Murdoch – has half a million followers … and talks to them pretty openly in plain English!

Digital platforms offer cheap and effective opportunities in Wales that could overcome some of the difficult distribution issues we’ve had historically …

… and any platform that can reach Welsh speakers across the globe effortlessly – has got to be have huge potential - though I wont dwell on this any further tonight.

Nor will I talk about the Welsh press and media – y cyfryngau Cymreig a Chymraeg.

They matter, and I’m pleased to have witnessed a considerable investment in news and current affairs in Wales over my professional lifetime.

Where I was once part of a tiny political team based at Westminster, there is now a hefty department with a lot of emerging talent and plenty of outlets – including cast coverage of the Senedd.

No – I’ve been asked to address a particular claim that has considerable – and possibly growing – resonance:

… the suggestion that the London media is ignorant, dismissive, hostile or patronising when it comes to Wales.

So is it?

Clearly it hasn’t always been as well informed and well intentioned as it should be. And attitudes towards Wales across Offa’s Dyke are often less than ideal

I have my own HORROR STORIES:

*“Please take your silly name, and even more stupid accent back to Wales where you belong” …*

That was the charming response from one listener when I presented **The World at One** for the first time about 20 years ago. I remember the rest too …

*“Living in England, I am well aware of the hatred that the Welsh race has towards the English nation …*

*… Why should we the English have to put up with ghastly Welsh plebs preaching to us on Radio 4”.*

There was another complaint to my editor about his new stand-in presenter:

*“I do not know his name, but he was very Welsh, with a one dimensional voice and the brain of a retarded amoeba”*

… yup – not even a clever amoeba, or amoeba with special needs or learning difficulties

I remember being sent back to Wales on a story for the network. The Islwyn by-election when Neil Kinnock stood down …

*“Get me lots of poor people with strong accents”,* said the producer for Radio 4’s flagship Today programme.

But - that same programme has – as it’s lead presenter - a boy from Splott, John Humphrys.

And the main tv news at Ten is presented – as we know by Huw Edwards – a boy from Llangennech

(try pronouncing that when you’ve been born and bred in Surrey).

More important – in my view – are the men and women who’ve been reporters in Wales for the network news – Tim Hartley here tonight, Rhun ap Iorwerth, Gail Foley, Sian Lloyd and in particular perhaps – Wyre Davies. There are more …

Not only have they ensured that major milestones in recent Welsh history have been covered …

… but major stories now – that could be done anywhere – are often done in Wales.

The recent storms which hit large chunks of the UK – for instance – were covered very well from Aberystwyth (I think) by Hywel Griffiths for the main evening news on TV.

There are others – crime, welfare changes, social trends or business stories – are done in Wales rather than the midlands, West Country or within the M25.

And that’s important.

I’ve also done a trawl of recent Welsh stories that have hit the Sun and the Times – produced by the company I work for:

Wales offered tax-raising powers

Higher stamp duty to be applied on second homes

Cardiff airport nationalised

Plaid’s victory in Ynys Mon

And – BELIEVE IT OR NOT – the Welsh government offering business advice to Lap dancers!

The SUN ran an employment road show in Cardiff and took an opinion piece from Carwyn Jones … (NO CONNECTION!)

I heard today that there’ll be a similar gig next spring

… and with two Welsh teams in the Premier league, Dr Who in the Bay, and one Cardiff comprehensive producing both Gareth Bale and Sam Warburton in one vintage, I’m pleased to say that the new Editor of the Sun (a Scot, and a top man) is starting to think about investing in a stronger presence in Wales.

The Sun already has an Irish edition, a Scottish edition and a well-staffed office in Manchester covering the north of England. It’s early days yet – but a Sun office in Swansea or Cardiff is not out of the question.

I think that would be great for journalism in Wales, and I obviously think there is room for improvement. It would be good to see more coverage of Wales and better coverage of Wales in press and broadcast.

**But - cards on the table now – do I think Wales gets a particularly rough deal from the responsible London media – NOT REALLY.**

You can only really argue that point if you can show that there are great stories in Wales – which could resonate much further afield – that are being ignored.

So – lets imagine the editor of the Ten o clock news – looking at his or her running order – wondering what to put in tonight’s programme

Every day, there’ll be at least one big political story – relevant to most of the audience … probably two …

There’s business, industry, the markets … both here and abroad. I covered New York and pitched stories every day.

Big bureau in Washington, Brussels, Johannesburg and Jerusalem are pitching stories that each affect a continent

Then there’s science, technology, nature, culture and the quirky …

Only eight or nine of these will make the bulletin

How often is there a Welsh story that can cross that bar? When there is – on the whole – they get done.

The Presiding Officer suggests in *“Welsh Agenda”* that “policy differences” at the Assembly would be interesting to English audiences.

Maybe – but to be honest – not very often.

News has to be novel.

Journalism is about telling great tales that help people make sense of the world … and ideally take better decisions by being better informed.

Particular stories are great if they tell a broader or universal truth. Big themes come alive if they can be put in the compelling context of a particular person or place

The fact that Wales does some political things differently is not that interesting - in itself.

Doing things differently is ONLY interesting if there are lessons that can be drawn for people outside the immediate patch

If I asked tonight how many people here would be interested in the proceedings of Milton Keynes council … I confidently predict there wouldn’t be many.

AND I AM NOT COMPARING Y SENEDD WITH A COUNCIL NOT WALES WITH MILTON KEYNES

But if I asked you **whether you thought it was a good idea to allow people to vote in a referendum on whether their taxes should go up or their services cut**, you might find that interesting …

… And yes – Milton Keynes did that once, and I was sent there and I did the story for the *World at One*

And it was interesting.

But that was not in order to tick a box next to Milton Keynes or to point out there were differences between a council outside London and one within.

It wasn’t a story about Milton Keynes. It was a story about PEOPLE and what they are prepared to pay for their politics and what they want in return – which is a universal and timeless question

There have been such stories here at the Assembly.

What the Senedd decided on organ donation was genuinely interesting – an example of Wales leading the way, trailblazing on an issue that will save lives. It begged the question virtually everywhere else – why aren’t you doing this too? I was proud …

And guess what?

It got the coverage … in the biggest and most prestigious outlets – including *The Sun*.

(Going back a bit to a story I covered myself … )

The toppling of Alun Michael as First Minister was another example - a real story of universal resonance well beyond the Parish.

Think of it in **Shakespearian** terms. Rhodri and Alun: Two men, one destined to lead his clan, but condemned by outside interference to serve under another chief who never wanted the job in the first place. Two lives ruined until a dramatic coup allows both to live happy ever after.

I’m not saying Carwyn has to be toppled for the Senedd to get noticed …

But in 4 years working with Boris Johnson at City Hall in London, I found it pretty easy to get coverage for our political agenda – as well as the huge personality of the Mayor …

… and I can’t help wondering why there isn’t more interest in Carwyn Jones.

Carwyn Jones is the most senior Labour figure in OFFICE in the UK today.

What he and his team do here could easily be seen as a template for what Britain could be like under a Labour government.

He could *also* offer an alternative outlook to his own party leader, as I dare say Boris Johnson *occasionally* did!

Trust me –

either of those would be interesting …

but how many people in this room … about as well informed and engaged as they come ... feel they could explain what the big story is here?

Could you really articulate how Number ten would be different if its inhabitant was more like Carwyn Jones than David Cameron?

I don’t feel – as someone who spent more than a decade as a political correspondent and as a Welsh- speaking Cardiff boy, that I could spell out in simple sentences what the current Welsh agenda is. What is the big story?

So is the London media missing something??

Or is the administration and wider political class in Cardiff failing to articulate something??

Politicians don’t just get coverage. It’s not part of the package when you’re elected. It has to be earned – and generated

Apart from doing something distinct and tangible, it needs to be timely, relevant, in tune with wider agendas and public pre-occupations

Journalists need tlc. They need help making sense of a fast moving complex world which they now have to report and interpret in an instant.

Do the big players in Wales do enough to cultivate those contacts, engage with influential journalists, provide them with compelling tales that will put them in the paper or on the bulletin?

In other words – **are we still too passive in our politics in Wales** – sitting in Cardiff complaining about coalition cuts from London and then moaning that the London media doesn’t care. I hope I’m wrong.

There are of course some specific policy issues where Wales is making its mark

Tuition fees

Prescription charges

Nationalising airports

… and there are interesting questions to be asked on all of those …

difficult questions about political priorities, good use of precious public funds, whether political creed or sentiment is clashing with sound public policy …

If the London media hasn’t caught up with the fact that Wales is dishing out free paracetamol to the masses – but denying some cancer sufferers drugs they could get in England – be grateful.

When the SUN did a whole page a few months ago on unemployment in the Valleys – they found a family where four generations hadn’t worked. Not a great picture to portray to the world.

I’m almost tempted to say: **Careful what you wish for.**

That isn’t my view – of course. I believe in a free press as a core component of an effective democratic system.

And here in Wales – not uniquely – but as in far too many countries – that free press is increasingly struggling to survive.

Most papers have seen circulation decline and advertising collapse. Most respond with cuts.

I’m pleased that my company is very clear that cuts are not the answer. And because we charge for our papers – ONLINE as well as in print – we can invest in them.

Our stated mission is to secure a sustainable future for news, and next year we will be moving to a new building where we have taken a 30-year lease – a real long terms commitment.

Lasting that long means finding new people to read our titles on different platforms – and new people to write them of course …

And one of the sad effects of a decline in local and regional papers is that the food chain that feeds talent to the big papers has been depleted considerably.

So I am particularly pleased – tonight – to be able to share with you details of am ambitious new scheme that we are formally announcing tomorrow - to invest in the future of journalism by investing in the next generation of journalists.

We’re calling it **the News Academy …**

… Using established journalists on the Sun, Times and Sunday Times to get today's teenagers to appreciate news and consider it as a career.

We will send them to speak to thousands of young people in hundreds of schools across the UK …

… I’ll go back to Ysgol Gyfun Llanhari if they’ll have me.

There’ll be competitions and a website where the best photos, features and news can be published.

That website will offer online training tools – free of charge - providing the basic skills you need to operate effectively: how to spot a story, write well, stay with in the law, adhere to a code of ethics, build contacts and so forth.

And we will be holding a series of one-day conferences in Glasgow, Manchester, and Dublin and yes – I’m pleased to announce tonight - here in Cardiff

A chance for up to 200 welsh students between 15 and 18 to spend a day with senior figures across the industry getting tips and exploring whether they may want to pursue one of the most interesting and worthwhile careers I can think of

Wales needs good journalists

Welsh democracy – hopefully still evolving – needs a strong press

Yes – we could – and SHOULD – seek better coverage from London

But what we need above all is to sort out our story here in Wales

**If we don’t know it**

**How can we ever expect others to tell it?**

Diolch yn fawr