

## **The S4C Authority Bulletin** **- December 1999**

The Authority held meetings in the Porth Hotel, Llandysul on 25 and 26 November.

### **THE PUBLIC MEETING**

On the evening of 25 November, the Authority held the latest of its open public meetings. There was an excellent turnout, with some 40 members of the public taking the trouble to attend and air their views on what was a wet and windy night.

As well as the Authority's Chair, Elan Closs Stephens, the Chief Executive, Huw Jones, and the Director of Programmes, Huw Eirug, took part in the discussion. Other members of the Authority were present to listen to the discussion and to talk to the public informally before and after the meeting.

The discussion, which continued for over two hours, was wide-ranging and searching. Amongst the issues discussed were:

### **The Challenges Facing S4C**

Huw Jones explained some of the main challenges facing S4C as it seeks to continue to be relevant and successful for viewers in the years ahead. These include:

- What services to provide in the digital age, with more and more people having access to a vastly greater number of channels than hitherto; and, in homes with digital, young people spending much of their viewing time watching the new channels.
- How to reflect and play a part in a fast changing Wales and wider world, and to meet the needs of older and existing viewers as well as the often different needs and aspirations of younger people.
- How to exploit successfully S4C's freedom to take part in commercial broadcasting ventures so as to supplement S4C's capped government funding and ensure a level of investment which will make it possible to provide Welsh language and other public services in the future which can compete in the digital age.
- How to ensure that there is a strong flow of new talent able to write, produce, perform and broadcast the programmes which will continue to make Welsh language television attractive to audiences in the future. S4C already offers a number of scholarships and sponsors a range of other schemes to bring on talent. Huw Jones explained that S4C is reviewing this programme, with partners in the industry, to see what needs to be done in the future.

Members of the public expressed concern at the impact on Welsh speaking communities and families of the increasing tide of expensively made and polished Anglo-American programmes. They wanted more and better Welsh language programmes for children and young people.

Huw Eirug explained that the new programme schedule to be launched in the New Year would respond to this need. Huw Jones said that S4C could not afford to try to compete with everything that was done in English; but what it could do and must do was to offer services which were distinctive and relevant to the lives of young people in Wales. He drew attention to the work in train in S4C to develop its website and other interactive services. These would be designed to be accessible and attractive to all but they would include special features aimed at the needs and interests of younger viewers. He added, however, that audience research showed that soaps were at least, as important in the viewing lives of younger people as programmes specifically designed for them.

## **The Reception of Digital Services**

Members of the public applauded S4C's decision to be at the forefront of digital broadcasting and to extend its Welsh language services to twelve hours a day on S4C Digital. One described these developments as just as important to the Welsh language and Welsh life as the original decision to establish S4C. This had, however, increased their concern and frustration at the current cost of gaining access to digital television. They believed this was beyond the means of many people, not least in rural areas such as Ceredigion. They were particularly concerned that they would be forced to subscribe to Sky to get services via satellite, since it wasn't possible in their area to receive them on digital terrestrial television (DTT).

Elan Closs Stephens sympathised. Although, according to the UK Government's figures, over 90% of the population in Wales is already within reach of digital signals on either satellite or DTT, and with digital cable coming on stream soon in more urban areas, S4C was pressing the Government to live up to its objective that digital should be available to the whole population, regardless of wealth and where people live. Viewers themselves might wish to consider lobbying the Government directly, or via their Assembly members and MPs, to make their concerns known.

Huw Jones said that S4C had decided to go up on digital satellite so as to make services available immediately to as many people as possible. It couldn't afford to invest more in DTT transmission facilities – which were expensive to provide in Wales because of the topography – without making wholly unacceptable cuts in budgets for programmes. He pointed out that Sky was currently offering to provide a free box and satellite dish and to charge only £100 for installation, without requiring people to take out a subscription to its channels. This would enable viewers to receive S4C Digital, S4C2 and other free to air services like the BBC and ITV. It wasn't possible however, to say whether this offer would continue indefinitely.

## **Specific Programmes**

Members of this public offered a wide range of comments and suggestions on particular programmes:

- There was a warm welcome for *The Miracle Maker/Gŵr y Gwyrthiau*, which was about the life of Christ. The Welsh version is now touring cinemas throughout Wales and Llandysul village had arranged a bus to visit the cinema in Cardigan. The film will go on general release in English throughout the U.K. at Easter 2000. It has also been sold internationally and would be shown on network television by ABC in the USA at Easter 2000 and 2001.

There was equal praise for *Y Graith* and other adaptations of Welsh literary classics. Elan Closs Stephens mentioned that Sixth Formers in Ysgol Dyffryn Teifi had been equally full of praise when she gave a talk in the school that morning.

- Concern was expressed about a perceived lack of humour and sparkle in *Pobol y Cwm*. Some took particular exception to a storyline which had similar features to the recent murder of a family in Clydach. Huw Eirug said that viewers should notice much more ordinary human interest, warmth and humour in *Pobol y Cwm* in coming months. Lessons had been learned and special attention would be paid to avoiding serious lapses of taste, especially in relation to real contemporary events.
- There was a plea for more Welsh language broadcasts for schools including, possibly, broadcasts in the early hours of the morning, which could be videoed. Huw Jones explained that S4C's schools programmes were provided by the BBC. To expand schools provision with commissions of its own would direct S4C's resources from other programme areas. At present, S4C was of the opinion that an appropriate balance was being struck.
- Serious concern was expressed about what some regarded as a deterioration in the quality of coverage in the National Eisteddfod and the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show. In their view, there was too much informal chat and comment and far too little of the actual competitions, which people throughout Wales had prepared for over many months. Huw Jones said that this would be reviewed carefully and taken into account in decisions about the nature of programmes in the future.
- Other comments about Welsh language programmes included:
  - The case for a programme about personal finance, which might attract sponsorship from one or more financial institutions
  - The need for better comedy programmes
  - Reservations about the nature and quality of some of the rugby commentaries.
  - The need, when broadcasting choirs, to show the whole choir rather than focusing on a few individuals
  - A call for more frequent programmes on history and religion. Those that were shown, including the recent series 'Wales 2000', were valued and praised for their high quality. S4C was urged to do more in a similar vein.

Huw Jones said that all these points would be considered carefully. Huw Eirug was optimistic that the New Year's programme schedules would demonstrate that S4C had taken on board at least some of these issues already and was responding to them.

### **The Use of English in Welsh Language Programmes**

One member of the public expressed disappointment about what he described as S4C's lack of vision, ingenuity and experiment in dealing with the use of English in Welsh language programmes. He believed that this meant that more English was heard in programmes than was necessary. He said that, prior to the establishment of S4C, HTV had had a policy of always applying a Welsh language voiceover to English language contributions.

Another member of the public thought it important not to take too purist a view. He believed that the odd word or sentence in English (or coined from English) shouldn't matter, although he was concerned that in some programmes there was an excessive use of English in long features. For him, the key word was "balance".

Elan Closs Stephens said that the S4C Authority took S4C's role in relation to the Welsh language exceptionally seriously. That was why it had given long and detailed consideration to this issue in preparing its programme guidelines, including commissioning audience research. This had shown that, for the great majority of present-day Welsh speaking viewers, the use of voice-overs for English language contributions, by, for instance, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Welsh rugby coach would be regarded as unnatural and unnecessary. On the other hand, the guidelines also reflected viewers' concern that the use of English should be restricted to that which was strictly necessary and justified in the context of the particular programme. She pointed to the exceptionally stringent rules which meant that English could be used only in wholly exceptional circumstances in children's programmes. The guidelines also sought to allow programmes to reflect the different linguistic patterns and preferences of people in different parts of Wales. *Heno*, for instance, had a particular mission to attract viewers in the industrial areas of South West Wales and made more use of English than the majority of programmes, since this is an area where language transfer between generations does not occur at a high level.

Huw Jones added that he believed that S4C already showed considerable ingenuity and imagination in tackling this issue. He pointed to the success and popularity of *Pam Fi Duw*, which reflected the reality of many people's lives in the industrial valleys of South Wales. He contrasted this with the documentary series *Ysbyty Glan Clwyd*. To reflect the reality of the hospital's life it was necessary to include a good deal of footage which involved English speakers. To avoid this becoming a dominant feature in a Welsh language programme, voice-overs and explanatory passages in Welsh were used extensively. He said that S4C and its suppliers would continue to experiment within the guidelines so as to create a strong and attractive range of Welsh language programmes.

Elan Closs Stephens added that it was incumbent on all broadcasters, not just S4C, to build bridges between Welsh and English language speakers and communities.

### **The Commissioning of Programmes**

The question was posed whether S4C's decision to commission programmes from a smaller number of producers would cut jobs in the industry and reduce creativity.

Huw Jones said that S4C had had to reduce the cost of providing programmes, not least to meet the opportunity and challenge of extended Welsh hours on S4C Digital. It had sought to do so in a way which strengthened rather than weakened the industry and which protected the quality of programmes. The approach had been to invite companies to tender for a package of programmes over a period of two years at a time, thus encouraging efficient working practices. S4C still commissioned programmes on the basis of their overall value for money, with the primary emphasis on quality. S4C did not place a bar on small companies submitting tenders and a number had been successful. In other cases, people in smaller companies had worked together or joined other companies to win commissions. Although there was now a smaller number of companies commissioned to make programmes for S4C, they were still not large in terms of the broadcasting industry. Nor was there any falling off in creativity; on the contrary, there was more cross-fertilisation of ideas within larger companies; and the larger companies were better able to provide good training and development opportunities for their staff and bring on the next generation of people the industry would need.

## **The Appointment of S4C Authority Members**

Asked how S4C's Chair and Members are appointed, Elan Closs Stephens explained that this followed an open public advertisement, to which all were able to reply and be considered for membership. There then followed a competitive interview, at which candidates had to share their vision and what they had to offer. They were judged in terms of the published job description. Final decisions were made by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, up until now after consultation with the Secretary of State for Wales, in the future following consultation with the National Assembly for Wales. She said that she valued this process, which she believed meant that only people who were committed and able would undertake this important role on behalf of viewers, the general public and tax-payers.

## **THE AUTHORITY'S BUSINESS MEETING**

The Authority's business meeting the following day focused on:

### **Party Political Broadcasts**

Last summer, the Authority had authorised consultation with the main political parties about the future arrangements for party political broadcasts. The proposals reflected, in particular, research which had shown a strong viewer preference for the linking of such broadcasts with important events in the political calendar.

The parties had generally welcomed the proposals but had urged that additional broadcasts should be offered in Wales to reflect the new constitutional realities, under which some powers are now devolved to the National Assembly for Wales while others remain with the United Kingdom Government.

The Authority approved revised proposals which acknowledged the force of these arguments. It had also reaffirmed that only Welsh language broadcast slots would be offered in the peak Welsh language hours on S4C, while English language slots would be offered in the English language block of programming on the analogue service between 17.55 and 18.00.

### **Review of Budgets in 1999 and 2000**

The Authority agreed that a proportion of savings on 1999 budgets could be used in 2000 to improve substantially S4C's website, to begin to develop interactive digital services and to launch S4C's first digital text services. These will be designed to be accessible and attractive to all users, offering more in-depth information about S4C's programmes and personalities and extending and deepening the relationship viewers can have with S4C. Details of the new services will be publicised when they become available in the months ahead.

## **Membership of the Board of S4C Masnachol**

S4C Masnachol is a wholly owned commercial subsidiary of S4C, the profits from which are used to sustain and improve S4C's public services and to invest and secure income for the same purpose in future years. The Authority agreed that it would make sense to appoint to the board of the company a non-executive director with broadcasting and commercial experience. The appointment itself is a matter for S4C Masnachol to determine.

## **Holocaust Memorial Day**

The Authority welcomed the UK Government's proposal to establish, from 2001, an annual day of remembrance to commemorate the Jewish Holocaust. This was intended to serve as a commemoration for all acts of genocide. The day will be held on 27 January, this being the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The Authority agreed to support the proposal and looks forward to S4C contributing to the commemoration in its programming at the time.

## **Sponsorship**

S4C had been a founder sponsor of the British Animation Awards in 1988 to provide a public stage to celebrate and give public recognition to achievements in animation. They are now well-established and attract sponsorship from a number of companies. The Authority agreed that S4C should provide sponsorship of £5,000 in 2000.

## **Congratulations**

The Authority were delighted to be able to congratulate:

- Geraint Stanley Jones on his appointment to be Chair of Sgrin
- Menna Richards on her appointment as Controller-designate of BBC Wales
- Rhys Evans and Glyn Roberts of S4C on winning Gold and Silver in the UK wide Promax Awards for their programme trailers
- Everyone concerned with *Tecwyn y Tractor*, which had been awarded the British BAFTA Award in the category Best Programme for Pre-School Children.

## **In Memoriam**

The Authority noted with sadness the recent death of Harriet Lewis, who had made an unforgettable and much-loved contribution to the success of Welsh language broadcasting and to S4C through her portrayal of Magi Post in *Pobol y Cwm* over many years.

## Other Issues

The Authority received presentations on:

- The development of S4C's interactive services
- Future plans for animation, including further ambitious co-productions
- The work of S4C's Research Department which focuses particularly on viewing patterns and the needs and wishes of viewers.

It also received routine reports on:

- Compliance with programme codes
- Viewers' complaints about individual programmes
- S4C's budgets.

## Future Meetings

The Authority has its normal business meetings in Cardiff in December and January. Its next public meeting will be held at the County Hall, Mold at 7.00 p.m. on 24 February 2000. It will hold its monthly business meeting there the next day.

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