

S4C Authority Bulletin December 2000

Open Meeting

The Authority held an Open Meeting on Thursday evening, 23 November 2000, in Llanofor Hall, Treganna, Cardiff where some 50 members of the public were present.

In addition to the Chair of the Authority, Elan Closs Stephens, also taking part in the discussion were the Chief Executive, Huw Jones, and the Director of Programmes, Huw Eirug. Other members of the Authority were also present to listen to the discussion and to have an informal chat with the public before and after the meeting. Amongst the matters that were discussed in the meeting were:

Vision for the Digital Channel

A member of the audience asked what was S4C's vision for S4C Digital. Was it to offer a range of programmes to a wide spectrum of people in Welsh? Huw Jones answered that it was obvious that a key part of S4C's rôle was to reflect and enrich life in Wales today. It was believed that S4C also had a role to be part of the process of creating cultural wealth in contemporary Wales. Creative activity in the form of drama or entertainment or whatever, is a part of the process of creating and of re-creating contemporary Welsh culture and it is believed that it is a part of S4C's role to allow creative and talented people to contribute to that vision. Whilst English digital channels could decide to appeal to one group of people only, S4C could not do that. It had to try to appeal to everyone in each part of Wales. This meant a wider range of content and a more open attitude to ideas of all kinds.

Programme Standards

It was asked what difference S4C saw in the standards of its programmes in comparison to when the Channel started 18 years ago. Elan Closs Stephens replied that she believed that some things such as the contribution of the BBC had been consistent in quality from the start, and there were some independent producers who had vast experience of creating programmes; HTV had also been a cornerstone. Even so, looking back on the early programmes there were some she supposed she would not wish to see, as the world of television matured in Wales. Having said that, it should be recognised that expanding the service to 12 hours a day had undoubtedly put a financial strain on the independent companies and on S4C in all sorts of ways. It was not possible to make 4 and a half hours of money stretch across 12 hours in the same way and it had to be recognised that there were weaker parts in the Channel's service. It was believed that this was unavoidable but, on the other hand, the Channel had some especially good parts to offer as well which would make people stay with it and appreciate it.

Huw Jones was of the opinion that the service S4C offered today was very much richer than it was in the eighties. He suggested that if one was to compare any week from the mid eighties period with any week now that, apart from one area, programmes today were as good if not better. More programmes of different types were being offered now. It was particularly felt that the standard of dramas broadcast by S4C these days was something to be proud of.

The National Assembly

A member of the audience said that there was much on which to congratulate S4C in the programmes that were broadcast in relation to the Assembly. It was believed that *Maniffesto* was particularly good, as was *Newyddion* and there was a young generation of journalists who were excellent in their expression and very thorough in their work. Even so, it was felt that there were some aspects of life in the Assembly that hardly ever reached public awareness. They were matters that could be complicated and dry but were nevertheless important. An example was given of regulations and special education for children which affected Welsh children; and sex education in schools. Concern was also expressed that the Assembly's dealings with the voluntary sector was not having enough attention either. The perception was that people's awareness in communities across Wales about what went on in the Assembly was really limited.

In responding to the above points, Huw Jones said that this was a difficult subject. He began his reply by mentioning that Wales was the only country in terms of the British Isles that broadcast live the activities of the Assembly, or Parliament as in Scotland. S4C did this through the medium of S4C2 and the Channel believed that there was an appreciation of this service. Having said that, the majority of viewers turned to this service infrequently unless there was a specific point of interest to them. There was no easy answer to the above points, however, because broadcasters had the dilemma of competing for viewers in a sea of other attractive programmes. What had happened with ITV and BBC in changing their news reflected this dilemma. No blame should be placed upon journalists therefore for seeking issues which are a little more colourful.

Language Standards

A member of the audience raised the subject of language standards on S4C. It was felt that people who had learned Welsh had nowhere to go in order to improve and it was believed that one advantage of having a Welsh channel in the first place was that there should be a place where people could go to hear correct language.

Elan Closs Stephens replied that it was true that this had been a subject for discussion over the last couple of years and she said that she believed that everyone present in the meeting would share the intention of creating correct yet flexible language. Even so, it was believed that there was an opportunity to vary the correctness of language between different programmes, and people would not expect the same type of language on the *Newyddion* as was heard on a pop programme late at night, for example. The Channel was attempting to keep the difficult balance between attempting to maintain a language image that portrays Welsh as modern but of good standard and other opportunities where it was possible for some young people who are learning or who perhaps come from mixed-language homes to feel a little more comfortable.

There was a specific discussion about the nature of the language in *Pam fi Duw*. Some members of the audience were supportive of the type of language that was used if it meant that it drew young people and learners to watch. Some of the audience doubted that children in Welsh schools talk in the way the children in *Pam fi Duw* talked; whilst there were others who believed that it was a realistic portrayal.

It was asked if it was possible to have consistent slots somewhere in the S4C schedule for programmes in standard Welsh for learners. It was believed that more linguistically correct programmes would be popular ones. Huw Jones said that S4C provided for people who are learning and gave as an example the programme *Talk about Welsh* which was a soap opera drama for learners. Even so, it was believed that the point made was fair and it was recognised that perhaps there was too much of a gap between the programme for learners and the fluent Welsh programmes. This was a matter that officers would go back and give attention to once more.

Financing Programmes

There was an enquiry regarding how S4C had coped in the last two/three years with the challenge of providing almost three times as many programmes without any increase in finance. "With difficulty," was Huw Jones' reply. Even so, with a great deal of dedication and creativity on the part of the people who provided programmes for S4C it had coped. There was also more than one answer to this question. On the analogue service, there are approximately 36 hours of Welsh programmes; on the digital service there are approximately 78. One of the elements was that producers who were already providing programmes for the main service (that is, the analogue service) were using the same resources to produce extra hours to go on digital television. Therefore, it was possible for those extra hours to be cheaper than the basic hours. Also, there was quite a bit of repeat showing on the digital service, including re-showing programmes from the past that were worth seeing again and also a second chance to watch programmes within the same week (which was appreciated by people who were home at different times). There was also some buying in of programmes from other countries with an amount of re-packaging. In addition, there were some programmes that were made for digital only but at a lower cost than for ordinary programmes. All in all, then, the answer to the basic question was: "through being creative".

There was a further enquiry regarding the financing of programmes. It was asked what was the proportion of money which was used for sport now in comparison with drama to what it was some ten years ago. The concern was that drama had suffered because of the significant rises that had occurred in the costs of sports broadcasting rights. Specifically, it was felt that individual dramas (that is, not series) had disappeared.

Elan Closs Stephens replied that S4C had kept and increased drama hours despite the financial situation. Nevertheless, she recognised that these were drama series in the main rather than individual dramas. For better or for worse, this was by now a pattern across television everywhere, and was not unique to Wales. Huw Jones tackled the matter of sports rights costs, confirming that rights costs had risen. Nevertheless, sport was important to S4C with research on the numbers of people viewing showing that sport not only drew a large audience share but also drew a large share of Welsh-speakers.

Targeting Young Audiences

It was enquired whether S4C had a policy of making more programmes for young people; it was felt that middle aged people were being forgotten by the Channel. Huw Eirug replied that S4C did not have such a policy, nevertheless, there was a desire to draw younger audiences to watch S4C. It was mentioned that it was a matter of concern how few young people in homes with digital were watching S4C Digital and it was believed that if S4C did not do something definite and positive to make it a habit for them to watch the Channel it would become harder to attract them to watch when they were older. Nevertheless, Huw Eirug recognised that it was also important for the Channel to ensure that it did not alienate a cohort of its viewers.

Eisteddfodau

It was asked why there were not more programmes being made of the activities - the concerts and the dramas - which were took place during the week of the Eisteddfod. Huw Eirug replied saying that S4C, as it happened, was in discussion with the Eisteddfod to see whether it might be possible to broadcasting more of the events outside the Pavilion. Some of the concerts were problematic because of the rights involved but S4C would be looking at each one in turn to examine their worth. The Channel, of course, had already broadcast the Bryn Terfel concert.

Business Meeting

Welcome

A warm welcome was given to Alun Davies, the new S4C Director of Corporate Affairs, to his first meeting of the Authority.

S4C Charity

The Chair reported that an advertisement had now appeared in the press inviting applications for the S4C Charity Appeal in 2001. A meeting to draw up a short list was organised for 12 January and the bodies on that list would be invited to attend an interview on 19 January.

Welsh Woman of the Year

This competition was going from strength to strength and some one thousand people were present on the night. The organisers greatly appreciated the contribution of *Heno* in bringing the event to the notice of the general public; in particular, it had raised awareness in the West and North. Nevertheless, a degree of concern was expressed that the evening itself had been very monolingual and had taken a step back in comparison to last year. It was mentioned that the organisers had accepted S4C's observations on this matter and had shown good will in doing something about the matter next year.

Digital College

It was noted the Digital College was launched on 1 November. It was mentioned that staff in the Digital College and S4C had worked very closely, and deserved great praise for ensuring that everything was ready on the due date. It was mentioned that a number of colleges in England by now had contacted the Digital College showing an interest. Furthermore, there was now a feeling that the Digital College was an innovative venture and indeed the Director had gone out to Italy to give advice to people there who wished to do something similar.

Report of the Director of Programmes

The Director of Programmes reported on how his ideas for programme services for the future had developed since the last meeting. He mentioned that he had started to go around production companies to share and discuss with them the ideas outlined to the Authority in the last meeting. It was felt, whatever the decisions of S4C, there would be little point for the Channel to push on with its ideas if the independent companies did not share the vision.

S4C's strategy had to be practical whilst attempting to establish a new foundation for development and evolution from 2002 onwards to the time of analogue switch-off. Was S4C going to give several opportunities for viewers to see programmes or commission to fill the schedule? As part and parcel of the policy of offering different viewing opportunities it was essential to prioritise. There was a need to ensure that programmes enriched and offered value. Not value in the narrow sense of the word, but good, comprehensive, value in the Welsh language. The Channel's priorities should include programmes on drama, sports, documentary, children, events such as concerts, themed evenings. That did not mean that S4C would give up the other *genres*.

S4C should also adopt a philosophy that would allow it from time to time to clear its schedule to do special programmes. To take recent events as an example, the floods could have been discussed by offering advice to people who had been affected. It was essential that S4C grasped this type of opportunity to talk directly to its audience and for that audience to talk back. The trend in the last century was for broadcasters to talk at their audience; in this century there was a need for broadcasters to talk with the individual and to allow that individual to talk back - ensuring the ability to interact in this way would be vitally important.

The Director was thanked for explaining to the Members how his ideas had developed since the last meeting. Support was expressed on behalf of the Authority for the direction in which the general strategy for the next commissioning round was moving.

Corporate Plan 2001-03

The draft Corporate Plan for 2001-03 was presented to the Authority and Members were specifically asked to consider the structure and content of the Plan and the specific targets that were attached to each objective. Mention was also made that there had been an attempt to draw up a document for the next three years that was more strategic in nature than the current plan. Nevertheless, the intention was to ensure that the more detailed targets contained in that document would not be lost but that they would be incorporated in the departmental plans that would be produced separately. It would be possible to monitor these during the regular presentations given by heads of department to the Authority.

Members expressed satisfaction with the Corporate Plan 2001-03 and agreed that it should be published on the S4C Website, as soon as it had been presented to S4C staff at the beginning of January 2001.

Viewers' Hotline Report

The first report by the Viewers' Hotline to be placed before the Authority, was received and discussed. It was agreed that this report was interesting and valuable for Members to receive and it should therefore appear on the agenda as a standard item from now on.

Sponsorship

An application from Ty Ffilm for sponsorship from S4C was circulated around the table. The Chief Executive reminded Members that S4C had given sponsorship to this body over the last three years and explained the nature of courses that Ty Ffilm offered to people. It was agreed that sponsorship of £2,000 should be given to Ty Ffilm for the year 2000.

Other Matters

In addition, the Authority considered the following:

- financial report
- Chief Executive's report - matters for information
- complaints report
- research report
- report of the Managing Director, S4C Masnachol