

How Wales is understood in the UK is a problem – strengthening Welsh media is part of the solution

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A healthy democracy needs mechanisms that enable citizens to understand the political process and engage in the functioning of politics. But as simple as this may sound, achieving such an understanding is proving a major problem for Wales. [Craig Johnson](#) reflects on the broader problems caused by the inadequate reporting of Welsh politics UK-wide.

It was recently announced that a new BBC TV channel [will broadcast](#) in Scotland from 2018. It will have a budget of £30m, roughly equivalent to that of BBC Four. Alongside that, Scotland will receive more money to make UK-wide programmes. Perhaps the most interesting development is that, included in the new channel's scheduling is an hour-long news programme, edited and presented from Scotland. This brings with it 80 new journalist posts. Even if viewing figures on the new channel turn out to be low, it will still be a significant boost to Scotland's journalism.

This is great news for Scotland, with BBC Scotland's [Sarah Smith](#) arguing that 'for those who wanted a news programme reflecting the world from a Scottish perspective, produced and presented from Scotland – the BBC is now delivering what they asked for'. However, it begs the question: what about Wales?

Just a day earlier, [the BBC announced](#) that an additional £8.5m would be spent in Wales on both news and entertainment English-language programming. While this is still welcome news for Wales – and it is worth remembering Wales still has [S4C](#) and once had [BBC 2W](#) – the Welsh Government, Assembly Members and the Institute for Welsh Affairs requested a [much larger figure](#) (£30m). It should be noted too that £9m of efficiency savings have already [been announced](#). Relative to Scotland, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this is a rough deal for Wales.

Keeping a low profile

Wales's media profile doesn't reflect what one might expect given the Welsh Government's powers, and this can be observed beyond announcements relating to the BBC.

Since last year's referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, media attention has been focused on the government's handling of Brexit, and reasonably so. It is one of the most defining issues in British and European politics. However, despite Theresa May's insistence that the devolved administrations will have a '[direct line](#)' to help shape the UK's Brexit strategy, it increasingly sounds as if the UK government is [not particularly interested](#) in picking up the phone. Carwyn Jones has said that Theresa May has a '[tin ear](#)' on matters of devolution, while Mark Drakeford [argues](#) that the UK Government's consultative process 'has been a vehicle for managing and suppressing difficult issues rather than addressing and engaging with them'.



And yet, this is not just a problem for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland collectively. This is also a specifically Welsh problem. Scotland continues to [receive a lot](#) of media coverage on Brexit thanks to its formal and informal power over Brexit negotiations, helped both by effective leadership, and by the Scottish National Party's joint presence in Holyrood and Westminster. Northern Ireland has also received [increased coverage](#) with regard to Brexit. Wales barely gets a mention. See, for example, [this](#) New Statesman editorial from the end of January. In the article itself Wales appears only once, following the words 'England and...'.

There are at least two potential reasons for this. First, unlike other devolved territories, Wales does not present any immediate threat to the existence of the United Kingdom. [Support](#) for Welsh independence remains very low, and lower than support for returning all devolved powers to Westminster. Second, along with the UK as a whole, Wales voted to leave the European Union. Similar to the UK, the Welsh Government is eager to address the concerns of those who voted to leave, and has adopted a less conflictual approach to negotiations than the Scottish Government. So while the Welsh Government has raised [fundamental questions](#) about how the UK operates either as a polity or as a market outside of the European Union, and developed a firm position on the [role](#) of Wales and its relationship with the UK within that, such questions remain secondary in a UK context for now.

Those interested in Northern Irish politics would be right to protest that Northern Ireland is not adequately reported either. Focus more specifically on how Northern Irish politics is understood, and you realise that coverage reflects its destabilising effect on Brexit negotiations much more than it does substantive discussion of Northern Ireland itself. As an example, on Friday 3rd March you could have easily browsed the BBC and major newspaper website home pages and not known that significant changes in unionist and separatist representation were taking place at that very moment.

But it does not discount the underlying problems that are specific to Wales. There is a general problem of how Wales is recognised in the UK. In another example, following the 2016 London mayoral election, various media outlets (see [The Guardian](#), [The Daily Record](#), [Huffington Post](#) and [Daily Mirror](#)) generously referred to Sadiq Khan as the Labour Party's 'most powerful politician' in the UK. Welsh First Minister Carwyn Jones, actually the Labour Party's most powerful politician in the UK, was largely ignored in this proclamation (credit is due to [Bloomberg](#), who labelled Khan 'Labour's most powerful politician outside of Wales').

Recognising Wales

This suggests problems for how Wales is recognised and understood across the UK. In response to criticism that BBC Scotland was receiving a huge funding boost compared to BBC Cymru Wales, a BBC spokeswoman [said that](#) 'the needs of [the] audience in Scotland are different'. However, it is not the needs that are different, but the demands. It is hard to ignore the consequences of the independence campaign and referendum in these announcements. Scotland is able to shout louder than Wales, and has greater influence in British politics as a consequence.

Related to this is the dearth of influential Welsh media. While Scotland and Northern Ireland both have a reasonably healthy domestic media, Wales does not. Daniel Evans has written a detailed piece on the Welsh [‘information deficit’](#). In it, he argues that ‘Wales suffers the unique problem of invisibility, of no information rather than distorted information’. There is a supply problem in Welsh media that needs to be addressed. This makes it even more important that the UK (or English) media covers Wales properly, or that Wales argues more vociferously for a greater share of funding and recognition.

It could be argued that Wales’ ‘low profile’ is both [a cause and effect](#) of the wider challenge of a weak civic society: Welsh media is weak because civic society is not able to (or perhaps not keen to) feed it; and civic society is weak because the Welsh media does not (or cannot) shine a light on Wales and Welsh issues. There is evidence of a relationship here: the [Electoral Commission](#) conducted research of the 2011 Welsh Assembly elections. More people thought that there was media coverage of the Alternative Vote referendum than the Assembly elections. They argue that this ‘reflects the more prominent coverage of the UK-wide referendum by London-based media, which is read, viewed or heard in Wales’. This is somewhat less of an issue in Scotland, which has Scottish versions of national newspapers.

Data collected by BBC Cymru Wales on [public awareness](#) of responsibility for key policy areas highlights this issue. Fewer than half of respondents (48%) knew that the Welsh Government is responsible for the NHS in Wales. A similar number (42%) wrongly thought that the Welsh Government is responsible for policing in Wales. A more encouraging 61% knew that the Welsh Government is responsible for education. Roger Scully [concludes](#) that ‘after a decade and a half of devolution... [the Welsh public] neither knows a great deal about devolution, nor thinks very highly of its impact’.

In a healthy and effective democratic system, there need to be mechanisms, and robust mechanisms, to engage the public in the functioning of policy and the political process. Strengthening Welsh media could be seen as central to achieving this.

There is cause for optimism. As Emily St. Denny [authoritatively argues](#), in recent years Wales has been able to ‘develop distinctive and place-appropriate responses to the issues’ that it faces. Devolution has greatly aided this objective. However, if this is not combined with a distinctive and place-appropriate platform to report and challenge these issues, then it will continue to limit how Wales is represented and understood.

Note: this article was [originally published](#) on the Public Policy Institute for Wales blog.

About the Author

Craig Johnson is a Research Officer at the Public Policy Institute for Wales.

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