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Author(s): Simon Gwyn Roberts

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Clear red water? Devolved education policy and the Welsh news media audience

Simon Gwyn Roberts, University of Chester

Abstract:

The long-running debate about the information gap between the Welsh voting public and the processes of devolution tends to revolve around structural, cultural and economic deficiencies in the media. However, there is little empirical evidence for assertions about the effects of these alleged deficiencies on public opinion, which typically argue that an inadequate news media fails to properly inform Welsh residents about the evolution of, and rationale for, devolved policy. The earlier work of Thomas, Jewell and Cushion (2003) examined the public consumption of news about Welsh Assembly elections, finding that 'very substantial' proportions of the population consumed little or no news relating to devolved politics. But fewer attempts have been made to examine the ways in which audiences understand specific areas of devolved policy via the media. This article focuses on a key area of devolved decision-making, education, and attempts to quantify that alleged 'disconnect' through the use of focus groups in which the parents of children progressing through the foundation stage of a Welsh primary school (a key post-devolution policy difference) are questioned about their understanding of the main issues.

Keywords: Devolution, News, Politics, Media

Introduction: Welsh media deficit

Wales was granted limited self-governing powers (through the Welsh Assembly) by the UK government after a closely contested referendum in 1997. A second referendum, on extending the law-making powers of the Assembly, was held in March 2011 and was passed by a considerably larger majority (63.49%). However, these important constitutional changes have not been reflected in the media. Indeed, the deficiencies of the Welsh media have become increasingly politically relevant in recent years, with its shortcomings regularly highlighted by politicians, academics and journalists. The accusations focus on long-established structural problems and resource issues which combine with a commercially-led disinclination to cover politics to contribute to a disconnect between the processes of devolution and the voting public. This is often cited as a serious democratic deficit, in that legislative changes deriving from the Assembly Government are simply not conveyed, via the news media, to those they affect. These changes may (in the case of education, for instance) have a significant impact on Welsh residents, yet go largely unreported (Davies and Morris, 2008).

The situation parallels that in the other devolved entities of the UK. Cushion, Lewis and Groves (2009) argue that while Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own media outlets 'it would be difficult to argue that a realignment of UK media has matched the major constitutional settlement of devolution'. Scottish devolution, in particular, marked a significant shift in editorial policy for most newspapers. In interviews, London journalists expressed the view that since Scotland had its own parliament it had its 'own news' and its own newspaper editions to carry it (Denver, 2002). However, sentiments like this highlight the additional and arguably more serious media deficiencies in Wales, because the Welsh media is considerably more fragmented than its Scottish equivalent, with no real tradition of a Welsh national press to draw upon. Thomas and Davies (2008) argue that, while much intellectual discussion has focused on the political and cultural desirability of an all-Wales daily national newspaper, concentration of ownership acts as a substantial barrier to this, in that most regional and local newspapers in Wales are owned by one company: Trinity Mirror. Readers are not provided with a plurality of views or even a genuine sense of debate about Wales. Geraint Talfan Davies, co-author of a report by the Institute of Welsh Affairs in May 2008 which attempted to bring some statistical weight to bear on these issues, encapsulated the significance of this at a public consultation: "What hit me harder than any other statistic in this review is that of the 3.75 million newspaper readers in Scotland, only 100,000 read newspapers without Scottish content. In Wales, however, 1,760,000 are reading newspapers with virtually no Welsh content. It seems impossible to argue that those figures do not have serious consequences for informed democracy in Wales" (Davies, 2008).

Structural deficiencies in the Welsh broadcast media are almost as serious. For Cushion et al (2009), few would argue that the Welsh media provide a strong counterpoint to English-based UK-wide media. Instead, the Welsh media remain more local than national in focus with BBC Wales having a near-monopoly over the coverage of devolved politics, partly because HTV and independent commercial media choose to remain light on devolved news. Overall, people in Wales remain highly dependent on UK news media

for news about politics and government. Whilst there are news outlets in Wales that might be expected to cover politics and the devolved institutions, the process of devolution has not diminished the use of UK-wide news media in Wales (Thomas et al, 2003). Indeed, few would dispute the assertion that the dominance of the UK press in Wales hinders the development of an informed political culture in a country which suffers from a 'structurally weak' media (Thomas, 2004), particularly in a context where that London-based media is increasingly likely to marginalise Welsh and Scottish political content post-devolution.

The importance of the media's parallel role in creating a sense of community by encouraging and informing political engagement is particularly relevant in post-devolution Wales, given the context of the country's fragmented cultural geography which renders genuine national political debate problematic. This deficiency is particularly notable in the print press. Indeed, newspaper journalism underpins the debate on the future of the media in Wales, with the question not merely one of circulation but of influence. Newspapers have a cultural significance and a symbolism that transcends readership statistics. For Anderson (1983), it was the widespread readership of newspapers which created the 'imagined communities' who were subsequently able to inform a nascent shared national consciousness. More recently, Gillespie (2003) argued that the mass ritual and ceremony of reading the newspaper continues to contribute to the construction of ideas of national community. Idealistic interpretations of the role of journalism see it as encouraging civic participation, improving debate and enhancing public life without sacrificing the independence of a free press (Rosen, 1999). Schudson (2008), however, cautions that journalism has long existed outside democracy and that journalism does not by itself produce or provide democracy. Habermas, too, argues that the large scale media of 'monopoly capitalism' compromise the political public sphere by turning the media into an arena for commodity consumption. A healthy public sphere requires small-scale media not exclusively motivated by commercial interests (Habermas, 1989). It could be argued that this latter ideal, which may be considered unrealistic and naïve in the Anglo-American context, is of great relevance in Wales, where the smaller scale political and media milieu lends itself, potentially, to innovative use of web-based political journalism which directly addresses, and sometimes transcends, those mainstream deficiencies by providing a platform for public debate (Roberts, 2011)

Welsh journalism and the audience

Given this long-established academic focus on the evolution of the mass media and the public sphere, it is perhaps surprising that the debate has primarily been normative, rather than empirical, in nature. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) make this point by arguing that there is, in particular, a significant gap in studying the experiential dimensions of citizenship: the practices that link private action to the public sphere. They argue that two assumptions are made about democratic politics. Firstly, in 'mature' democracies, most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern should be addressed. Second, this public connection is focused mainly on mediated versions of that public world. In most models of democracy, informed consent to political authority requires that people's attention to the public world can be assumed (Couldry et al, 2007:29). In the Welsh context, however, this fundamental assumption would be regarded by many as hopelessly idealistic, with the public sphere damagingly compromised by the structural and cultural shortcomings of the news media. However, such criticisms only highlight Couldry et al's central point, that there remains a gap in studying the experiential dimensions of citizenship: a gap that is filled by assumption and assertion.

The study of audiences for news journalism in this context has evolved considerably since the groundbreaking work of Hall and Morley in the 1980s. Several authors (Philo, 2008, Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998) have argued for a 'new paradigm' in audience research which questions the older assumptions of Hall, Morley and others. In his oft-cited work on audiences, Hall (1984) assumed that social class would be the basic determinant when it came to audience reception, and that audiences read from one of three hypothetical positions. Broadly, these are the dominant-hegemonic position (where the communication is read from a position similar to the one from which it has been spoken), the negotiated position (where basic structures may be accepted but the details challenged and negotiated) and the oppositional position (where the message is decoded entirely from within a different framework). For Hall, the assumption is that any society's dominant ideas will be encoded into its media messages. Following Hall's 1974 occasional paper on the subject, Morley (1980) famously tested this on viewers of the UK current affairs programme Nationwide, by conducting a content analysis of the programme, then looking specifically at the audience response.

Philo (2008) is critical of the continuing trend towards acceptance of this model, or versions of it, in media and cultural studies, which he argues inaccurately emphasises the active nature of audiences and their capacity to resist messages as well as create their own. Much of his and his colleagues work at the Glasgow University Media Group finds strong evidence pointing to the power and

influence of the media, notwithstanding additional evidence supportive of the Hall/Morley assertion that audiences can sometimes be active and critical. Philo (2008) argues that the crucial dimension of media power is often neglected in current scholarship and is particularly critical of Hall's 'oppositional code', which he says had the effect of sending numerous people in media and cultural studies up 'a very long and ultimately pointless path'. In particular, he says it encouraged the belief that the language of news texts was polysemic, that it could have a variety of meanings to different groups. By contrast, the Glasgow group argue that the media are a key element in the construction of public understanding.

In the Welsh context, the issues also revolve around media power, in the related sense that the reason for the lack of coverage of devolved politics is essentially economic, revolving around the priorities of commercial news organisations. These organisations cannot justify the expense of covering issues that they deem to be of little interest to the public. The result is the commonplace accusation that audiences are becoming increasingly politically apathetic and disengaged. In other words, deficiencies in media coverage of devolved Welsh politics tend to relate to the amount of coverage rather than issues of objectivity. News is largely derived from national UK sources, including the BBC, whilst that news is increasingly inclined, post-Scottish and Welsh-devolution, to present news affecting only England without further explanation. Cushion et al (2009) found a blurring of the distinction between England and the UK, and argued that this lapse might misinform viewers and listeners that policy initiatives in England apply to the UK as a whole.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998:68) argue that changes in media culture have altered the audience experience by making that audience more 'diffuse'. In Wales, these trends are compounded by a fragmented geography, and a media whose fragmentation predates changes wrought by web-based technology. The result is an ever more diffuse, less unified audience. This need not necessarily preclude engagement, however, as Washbourne (2010: 120) argues that when events make news more relevant and a larger feature of peoples lives, they are often able and willing to engage in sustained and informed action. This has been seen in numerous contexts in recent years, from the responses to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Student Fee protests of 2010, through to the events of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. Such actions are, increasingly, responses to media discussion, and audience access to it, with action eventually resulting from the judgements audiences subsequently make about the relevance of such debates for their lives. Couldry et al (2007) put forward the concept of the active extended audience – spatially and socially organised in new forms and accessing media via a variety of new platforms. For Washbourne (2010: 121) the precise sense made by that audience of the contemporary world and ongoing events is crucially affected by the exact nature of the media mix in particular places. In the Welsh context, however, it could be argued that the nature of that 'media mix' is less skewed in favour of the mainstream press, because of the smaller-scale nature of political debate in the country. During the focus groups, attempts were made to assess the success or otherwise of web-based attempts to address the deficiencies of the mainstream press by providing alternative platforms for debate. Roberts (2011) highlights the '*WalesHome*' independent political news website as an example of this kind of interactive online journalism and debating chamber.

Methodological rationale

Morley's seminal audience work involved 29 focus groups, each of 5 to 10 members, which he gathered into different occupational and educational contexts for a viewing of two episodes of the British current affairs programme *Nationwide*. Responses were codified and compared, both statistically and descriptively, with sample profiles (Morley, 1980). The assumption was that social class would be the key determinant of discussions and responses to the programme, although he found much less of a match with class position than expected. One of the obvious weaknesses with this kind of research is the reliance on what respondents choose to disclose, and what they are able to articulate about their media choices and understanding. Morley was also criticised for treating his 'groups' as representatives of their social class without much further investigation, although he stressed that the relationship between class and readings is probabilistic, rather than deterministic. Lawler (2005) suggests that class remains a fundamental facet of taste formation, however, and the focus groups outlined below deliberately focused on a small group of degree-educated parents in a middle-class location in an attempt to minimise issues of class bias. A more detailed rationale for this is discussed later in this section.

This article concentrates on a more limited set of overall objectives, with the overarching aim being an assessment of audience understanding of devolved policies as it relates to one area of decision-making for which the Welsh Assembly Government has responsibility. The theme of education was chosen as it is a key area of devolved policy, with the Welsh Assembly Government pursuing a distinctive set of policies since 1999, emphasising what Reynolds (2008) calls a 'producerist' paradigm which stresses

collaboration between educational partners in contrast to the English approach which emphasises consumer choice concerning accountability and central state support. This approach relates to wider efforts to show 'clear red water' between England and Wales on issues relating to state welfare (this phrase, intended to emphasise the increasing policy divergence between Wales and Westminster, was coined by former leader of the Assembly Government, Rhodri Morgan). The path followed in Wales did not simply reflect a rejection of New Labour commitment to 'market' based solutions of England but also reflected a historical commitment in Wales to the use of the education system to transform society, rather than maintain the existing relations of production. 'In their tone, content and organisation, the policies pursued in Wales have been very different to those in England ... it is clear that two very different paradigms about the nature of the school/society/state relationship are being explored here in the two societies' (Reynolds, 2008).

This overarching theme of education was then further narrowed down, in an attempt to lend more coherence to the analysis, and as an acknowledgement of the limited scale of the focus groups organised by the author. The research revolved around three separate focus groups, with all participants asked open-ended questions about their understanding of three Welsh Assembly Government education initiatives, all of which were key features of the news at the time (the focus groups were conducted in April 2011) and all of which clearly differed from English or UK policy. The three themes were the abolition of externally based assessment in key stages one, two and three, the remission of top-up HE fees for Welsh domiciled students, and, most importantly for the focus groups in question, the development of the Foundation Phase for children aged 3-7. The questions were posed neutrally, without prior value judgements about the quality or volume of media coverage. The author prompted participants only when necessary to extract further detail from the discussion. The discussion from all three groups was transcribed in full, although not all responses are included in this work and the responses are not given in order. Instead, an attempt has been made to thematically organise responses to better facilitate meaningful analysis.

Each focus group contained three participants, each one of whom had a child progressing through the Welsh education system at the time of the meetings. Specifically, all those questioned had at least one child in the Foundation Phase. The rationale for this was that the Foundation Phase is one of the highest profile differences between Welsh and English education post-devolution and so was chosen as the key focus for the semi-structured interviews conducted. It applies to children aged 3-7, with a curriculum focused upon learning basic social competencies through structured play and other activities will be implemented over the four years from autumn 2008 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

A location in Flintshire on the English-Welsh border was chosen for the study, as it is in such locations that the tension between UK media and Welsh media becomes most apparent (Roberts, 2007). Williams (2005) argues that more attention should be paid to the geographical borderland of Wales as well as the affective borderland, pointing out that a Wales that does not take proper account of the ambiguities and complexities that render the national project problematic will only generate a future embraced by a minority of its citizens. For Roberts (2007) Flintshire has a more ambiguous identity than both the rest of Wales and neighbouring parts of North West England with an associated disconnect with Assembly politics and Welsh cultural life. Flintshire is not served by any specific newspaper titles, just local versions of newspapers published elsewhere, and residents often choose or are forced to access English broadcast media. Estimates suggest that almost all Flintshire residents receive TV signals from England, while just under half receive signals from Wales, and 75% of viewing is of English channels (Thomas et al, 2003).

The school attended by the children of all participants in the focus groups is located in a village less than a mile from the English border. It is, therefore, a distilled encapsulation of the media access issues detailed above. In addition, the village has an above-average social profile, with 19.2% of its residents in management/senior official roles (compared to a GB average of 14.8%) and 16.7% in professional roles, compared to a GB average of 11.1% (Census Statistics, 2001: the 2011 Census Statistics were unavailable at the time of writing). All those in the focus groups were educated to degree level, with five in full time professional employment, two in part-time professional employment and two former professionals turned full-time parents. Clearly, the village is not representative of Wales, or Flintshire, as a whole. However, the rationale for the selection of this location was the desire to question parents who may reasonably be considered to be better informed than the average citizen. Social class is known to be a significant demographic influence on media consumption, although Morley admitted that his focus on class meant that he paid less attention to other important variables, like gender and race, which often define the preference for and reading of certain media products (Skeggs,

Thurmin & Wood, 2008). Social class remains a crucial determinant, however: web use, for instance, is highest in ABC1 households, TV viewing highest in C2DE.

Couldry et al (2007: 31) agree that the general features of the mediated public sphere remain stratified by class, age and gender. Further, they found that people acknowledge social reinforcements to follow a public world through media and that engagement with media frequently explains and contributes to political interest, notwithstanding Morley's earlier and well-documented conclusions of a weaker than expected link between social class and audience reception of current affairs (Morley, 1980).

Analysis of focus group responses

All participants in the focus group were female, all aged between 35 and 45. The intention was to transcend potential gender bias and focus specifically on engaged parents who could reasonably have been assumed to take an interest in news specifically affecting their children. Each focus group was conducted by the author and each lasted around 30-40 minutes. The focus groups were based around the three leading themes outlined above. Discussion took place in semi-structured fashion after each of these themes was introduced by the author. Evidence from sociological research suggests that the processes involved in interpreting a question and formulating an answer are complex. For example, if the researcher re-words questions, responses from participants tend to change. If the interviewer provides even slightly amended response options then people will give different answers (Clarke and Schober, 1992). This is an inevitable result of human interaction, although attempts can be made to standardise the process as much as possible and therefore minimise possible bias or variation between the groups, and individual participants. The author made an attempt to standardise the three leading questions, as the small size and scale of the focus groups allowed for this, in order to avoid potential sources of bias that inevitably arise when questions are reworded. Instead, discussion was allowed to progress after the standardised leading questions with a minimum of prompting from the author. However, this does not, of course, lead to standardisation of 'meaning' from the perspective of the participants. Instead, understanding is often affected by a range of social and cultural factors. As previously stated, the author attempted to overcome some of these issues by ensuring that all participants were drawn from similar educational and economic backgrounds. It should also be noted that all participants were anonymised by prior agreement, with forenames only used to separate the responses.

Before introducing the three themes, all three focus groups were initially asked a specific question about a recently reported underspend in Welsh education compared to that in England. Assembly government statistics released in January 2011 showed that Councils in Wales spend an average of £604 less on each pupil compared to councils in England. This news was particularly pertinent for the focus groups, partly because it was the most recent 'devolved education' story to have been covered in the press and therefore a potentially interesting yardstick for the research, but also because schools along the Wales-England border, close to the location used for the focus groups, were used by the BBC to illustrate the implications of the statistics. Figures showed, for instance, a £643 funding disparity between Connah's Quay High School in Flintshire, Wales, and the nearby Chester Catholic High School in Cheshire, England (BBC, 2011). The Assembly Government points out that direct statistical comparisons between England and Wales are becoming increasingly difficult and misleading as devolution progresses. However, the story was used as a means of assessing the respondents' relationship with the news media and was not connected to the wider political questions, or the three themes later introduced.

The three groups were asked whether they were aware of any educational funding gap between Wales and England. If they were, they were then asked to explain what they knew about it, and where they had seen or heard that news. The semi-structured nature of these focus groups meant that markedly different exchanges took place within each group. For instance, the first group spent considerably longer discussing the implications of the 'funding gap' highlighted by the first question, partly because that group contained a school governor who was considerably better informed about some of the issues. Sally, from the first group, immediately refers to her status as school governor and goes on to link this position to her knowledge of the issues, quite deliberately setting that acquired knowledge apart from any connection with information that may have been derived from the news media.

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Sally: 'I have heard of the funding gap. I think that it's true to say that pupils in England get more spent on them than pupils in Wales but I think I'm probably only aware of this because I'm a governor. When you mentioned the media I thought to myself, you know, I've got to say that from the point of view of the press, I haven't picked up anything at all.'

The other two participants in the first group were not aware of the story about the funding gap.

Lucy: 'I didn't know anything about a funding gap, nothing, I've never had that explained to me. It's probably because I don't read any Welsh newspapers, I only read national newspapers'.

It is perhaps notable that this participant felt that the fact that she read only national UK newspapers was adequate explanation for why she was not aware of the news of the underspend, thereby encapsulating one of the key failings of the media in Wales. As Thomas et al (2003) argued, devolution has not diminished the dependence of Welsh newspaper readers on London-produced newspapers, despite the fact that many of those newspapers have used devolution as a cue to lessen or eliminate content from Wales and Scotland. The earlier comments of Davies (2008) resonate here. The fact that the vast majority of Welsh newspaper readers consume publications with virtually no Welsh content (that is, UK national newspapers) can, he argues, only have serious consequences for informed democracy. The second group, however, were all aware of the funding gap story, although individual's understanding of its precise implications varied considerably.

Angharad: 'There's a financial difference isn't there? Schools in Wales get less per pupil than the English schools I think.'

Debbie: 'Yes, I've heard...er, I thought that was more to do with Flintshire rather than Wales as a whole? Isn't this county, area...whatever, particularly badly affected?'

Statistics suggest that funding for Flintshire schools is 2.5% lower than the Welsh average (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011). It is notable that this response was one of very few comments that focused on local statistics or differences from either the Welsh or UK average. The local press in North-East Wales is generally cross-border in scope, with newspapers simply regionalised editions of titles that span the Wales-England border. Although there have been some recent signs of a devolution-led switch to specifically Welsh political content in those 'Welsh' editions, and this is perhaps borne out by the comments here, much of the content is shared and there is a long tradition of cross-border coverage which has not always sat comfortably with the new devolved paradigm (Roberts, 2010) and does not always reflect the nuances of local identity. Later comments discussed what some participants perceived to be an inadequate local press that failed to inform local residents about important policy changes emanating from the Welsh Assembly Government.

The discussion in the second group about the funding gap continued, with the debate this time dominated by one of the participants who had recently moved to the area from Leicestershire. The implications of this kind of group dynamic, where one respondent tends to dominate discussion, will be discussed in the conclusion. However, it should be noted that all participants were given the opportunity, and time, to respond to each theme.

Angharad: 'Well, the funding difference has definitely been on the news recently, probably...probably on the BBC, it was on the news. We've just moved from England to Wales so, um, we've probably picked up on it that way. Obviously, you're, you know, concerned about moving your children from school to school at the best of times. I think we've probably been hyper-aware of stories like this for quite a while now, since well before we moved, so we've been actively looking for information about schools.'

Emma: 'D'you know, now that you've mentioned it [the funding gap], it rings a bell, but I don't know where I've heard it.'

Angharad: 'I think I must have heard about the underspend on the news, probably on the BBC.'

The first two focus groups then embarked, without prompting, on a wider discussion about media coverage of Welsh education. All seemed conscious that there was a lack of information on the topic, and most said they were sometimes dependent on other people, teachers, and often rumour among other parents at the school, for information.

Sally: 'My husband's dad told me just the other week something about how the Welsh education is failing in comparison to English education and I didn't know that. I was amazed when he said that and I said: why haven't I heard anything about that? You hear lots about Wales making more decisions on their own, but he was against it, and he lives on Anglesey so he's very very pro-Welsh and all that, but he was going to vote against it [referring to the referendum for greater devolved powers] because he thinks they're not making the right decisions.'

Lucy: 'Sometimes you hear things from the other parents at the school gates and, er, you're not too sure whether what they're saying is true or not. But, like I say, I only read national newspapers and I'm not as up-to-date as I should be'.

The third focus group spent less time discussing the topic than the first two, with participants seemingly unsure about the nature of the underspend.

Marie: 'Now you've said it, it rings a bell actually, but I don't know where I, er...I've not heard it recently, well I don't know where I've heard it. I go on the BBC Wales website, you know, and that vaguely rings a bell as something I might have read but I couldn't tell you anything about it'

Kate: 'I've heard that Welsh education authorities spend less money than English ones, er... and I think it's also true that Flintshire is below the Welsh average in terms of per head spending.'

When asked where this information had come from, Kate continued: 'I think the headmaster mentioned it in a PTA meeting in the context of how important PTA fundraising was for the school. I think I've heard it somewhere else too but that's the most recent place'. A distinct pattern began to emerge at this stage in the questioning, in all three focus groups, with informed and engaged parents claiming that they derived their information directly from the school, and struggling to recall meaningful coverage in the wider news media.

The first theme was then introduced to the focus groups, with participants asked about the foundation phase, a flagship policy for devolved education in Wales, with the final phase in its implementation (the roll-out to seven year olds) scheduled for implementation in September 2011 and directly affecting the children of all those involved in the focus groups.

Sally: 'I know that, er, the foundation phase goes up to year two in Wales and it only covers, er...what was it, nursery and reception in England.'

The author questioned this respondent about the specifics of the foundation phase.

Sally: 'It's the learning through play thing, isn't it...so the way they teach children is that they're not sat behind desks, they're more interactive and they learn by what they do'

Would you say everyone is aware of this?

Sally: 'Probably not, no. I'm only aware of it because I'm a school governor, I reckon...I'm not too sure where I got the information from originally'.

You wouldn't pick that up from newspapers?

'Nope. I wouldn't have a clue'

Angharad: 'Learning through play is the same, though, isn't it? I'm sure our kids did this in England too.'

Emma: 'Oh, do you do extra years of play? Oh, right, I didn't know that.'

None of the others were aware of the specific differences inherent in the Foundation Phase, including the general principles of 'learning through play', although all had children aged 3-7 that were going through the Foundation Phase at the time of the interviews. This was a surprise to the author, who had expected responses to this theme to be detailed and well-informed by comparison to the other two themes, partly because the Foundation Phase generated considerably more coverage in the press than the other two themes. It is hard to avoid concluding that media deficiencies are at least partly responsible for the participants lack of awareness about this topic. Instead of the anticipated discussion about the Foundation Phase, discussion progressed, after some prompting by the researcher, on to further 'differences' that the participants were aware of between English and devolved Welsh education policy.

Sally: 'The other difference is grammar schools isn't it? I think they still have grammar schools in some parts of England but we don't have any in the whole of Wales, at least I don't think we do.'

Emma: 'I must admit that the only difference I can think of is that children in Welsh schools learn Welsh.' After some consideration, she contributed again. 'Also, they don't do SATS in Wales do they? They're obsessed with testing in England aren't they? But they don't do it in Wales.'

Angharad: 'Oh yes, that's true. We were looking at that so we could pick the schools here when we moved from Leicestershire. Er...there are charts and everything with English schools, but we tried to find the same information to decide which school to pick and obviously we couldn't and had to go to the Estyn [the Welsh equivalent of Ofsted] reports instead. We wanted the statistics and we couldn't find them, which was a problem when we moved.'

The latter two responses anticipated the next theme to be introduced: the abolition of externally based assessment in key stages one, two and three. Somewhat surprisingly, and in direct contrast to the Foundation Phase theme, all three focus groups mentioned the different approach to testing pupils without prompting, and without the theme being formally introduced by the researcher.

Sally: 'In England they have all the SATS that they have to do, don't they...whereas they don't have it in Wales. Again I say that more from people I know rather than from anything I've seen in the press.'

Annette: 'Yes, I knew about the testing thing too, but I think I only knew that because my sister teaches in England and, er, she's always going on about these SATS.'

These responses all refer to the Standard Assessment Tests abandoned in Wales, along with school performance league tables, in 2004. Attention was focused on this issue in the wider media at the time of the interview, following the release of the Pisa International Assessments of 15-year-olds which found Wales lagging behind the rest of the UK (BBC, 2011). Indeed, just before the focus groups took place a new national literacy plan, including reading tests, was announced by the Welsh Assembly Government. It was scheduled to be introduced in the Autumn of 2011 and is a partial response to the criticisms associated with the Pisa Assessments. This may have been the reason for the participants being aware of the testing 'difference' between England and Wales, although when the groups were asked about the Pisa Assessments and the specifics of the new literacy plan, as a follow-up to the previous discussion, none of the participants had heard about the initiative. This is perhaps because the specific details of the story was only covered by BBC Wales and given relatively low editorial priority, whereas the overarching theme of abandoned tests had received wider coverage.

Sally: 'Well I've heard them say in the media that they're worried about boys reading because, er...because they're way behind girls. But I don't know whether that's a Welsh thing or whether that's national'

Lucy: 'I thought that was national. You know, it's a problem for the whole country not just Wales isn't it?'

Debbie: 'That is vaguely ringing a bell as something I might have seen but I...couldn't tell you any...knowledge about it.'

None of the other participants were aware of the new national literacy plan, which could be taken as a further litmus test for the successful transmission of information about devolved policy, in the sense that this measure again directly affected the children of these middle-class parents, all of whom were closely engaged with their children's education but none could define the specific implications of this potentially important story.

The third theme, the remission of top-up university tuition fees, was then introduced. The difference between the discussion surrounding this issue and that of the much more recent announcement of a new national literacy plan was stark, despite the fact that the literacy plan directly affected the children of the participants. It should be noted, however, that the issue of variable tuition fees across the devolved UK generated, and continues to generate, a significant amount of coverage in the mainstream UK press.

Marie: 'You pay less in Wales when you go to University don't you? I know that you don't pay the full tuition fees, which will be good for our kids I suppose. And, er, as an adult learner I'm pretty sure you get more for your money in Wales.'

Annette: 'Yes, I've picked that up because of the national focus on student fees, so the media focus is on it anyway. In fact, of everything that's been mentioned so far this is the difference that I'm most conscious of so I guess it must be something to do with the amount of media attention.'

Lucy: 'Well, no, I heard about it being better in Wales before all this. I heard about it before all that because I'm looking at doing a course so I was quite pleased that I might get some funding. When all this happened I thought: I hope they're not going to cut it'.

The debate then shifted to the exact nature of the fee difference, with one person in each group aware that the fees would be discounted even if the Welsh-domiciled student went to University in England.

Sally: 'Oh, they can still go to the English universities and pay less? I didn't actually realise that. I thought that the discount only applied if they went to universities in Wales and, er...I think lived in Wales. That is definitely what the news reports I've read have implied. It'll probably be even more money when our kids go!'

In the second group, all participants were also aware of the tuition fees story.

Emma: 'Yes, it means we've got to stay here now because they're going to pay the fees and we won't have to pay the full fees for our kids when they're older. We can't move to England now! It's the difference between the three thousand and the nine, isn't it? There's only 45,000 students in Wales, apparently, so they can afford to do it'.

Emma used this policy difference as a cue to articulate and reflect upon one of the 'new' oddities of living in a border location post-devolution, particularly where that border is urban or suburban in character. The anonymity of the Wales-England border in this area means that it is frequently unmarked and often splits streets that are effectively suburbs of the nearby city of Chester. There is, in other words, a widening political gulf but little cultural, social or visual difference (Roberts, 2010). The fact that 'Welsh-domiciled' students will pay significantly less in University tuition fees has particular resonance in this area, when some of their peers and friends, living less than a mile away in Cheshire, will have to pay the full amount.

Emma: 'It's slightly different for us, too, because now some children who live in England go to our local school (in Wales). It must seem very strange to them that, you know, they're not going to get the tuition fees discount even though they're going to the same school as our kids. They only live a mile or two away from us but they're

on the wrong side of the border now! When I grew up round here you could *not* go to school in Wales if you lived in England, and vice versa, you just could *not* do it. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't do it.'

Although not prompted by the author, the debate then evolved, in the first two groups, to encompass the recent referendum for greater powers for the Assembly government. This took place in March 2011, a month before the focus groups, and so it was perhaps inevitable that the debate would move in this direction. Most of the participants linked the issue, again without prompting, to the lack of publicity and coverage it received in the news media.

Lucy: 'It's quite a small amount of changes, that's all I know. I remember thinking that it wasn't going to make a huge difference. Reading the news on a national scale I hear a lot of negative things about the Welsh getting more powers. But I'm married to a fervent Welshman so, you know, maybe that's why I had a negative feeling about it when I went in to vote!'

Marie: 'I found virtually nothing about what the referendum was actually about in the newspapers, you know, I think that's amazing. I think that Wales is either ignored or generally covered quite negatively in the British national press. I, er...it's almost as if they don't realise that their papers are read by people in Wales.'

Sally: 'I think a lot of people will have voted quite ignorantly this time.'

Lucy: 'I think most people vote ignorantly anyway but that's a bigger discussion'

Angharad: 'We didn't vote because we didn't know enough about it and, I suppose, have time to go into it, and, er, didn't bother in the end.'

Annette: 'Well I didn't know about it. I got the ballot thing through the post but I didn't know anything about it. I'm going to have to blame the media for that because it certainly wouldn't happen if we were having a general election.'

Lucy: 'I must admit I forgot to tell my husband so he didn't know anything about it. He'd have been furious because he'd definitely have voted yes'

Debbie 'I can't bear to not know what I'm voting for, and I could barely find any information on the referendum in the press. And I have to say that the leaflet on it that came through the post was a bitter disappointment!' This refers to a leaflet that was distributed to all homes in Wales, intended to outline the rationale behind the referendum and the changes that were proposed.

Emma: 'I only knew what I was voting on because I looked into it myself. As far as I'm concerned the Welsh Assembly's done very well for us around here. I'm in favour of it, but I...I got most if not all my information from the BBC. I don't even know what the Welsh equivalent of ITV is'.

Although the debate had shifted away from the confines of education, the comments strongly suggested a frustration with the wider media over the referendum. Almost all respondents felt that there was a lack of information and agreed with the general tone of the ensuing debate: that casting an informed vote was difficult. The debate then shifted to general topics, returning in particular to the oddities of living in a suburban border location in post-devolution Wales and reflecting again on the over-arching topic of representation, and the failure of the national and local media to adequately reflect the realities of the fragmented cultural geography of Wales.

Sally 'I think it is hard for us, you know, because of where we are. It's an English part of Wales isn't it?'

Annette: 'It's north Wales as well, and there's always that bit of a change, er...that bit of a difference between north and south'

Sally: 'I'm from south Wales originally and our paper when I was young was the South Wales Echo, so the media we used to have was...you know, Welsh...and then you'd watch things like S4C [the Welsh language channel] as your normal channel and you'd get information in that and probably be exposed to it a lot more, whereas you know how it is here...anything that's English is in and Wales is often ignored. You know, they play rugby and Wales might win but it's all about England isn't it?'

Emma: 'It must be quite difficult if you come from England though. I grew up in Wales so the strangeness of this area isn't alien to me. Everywhere around here is sort of on the border. So being on the border and, er, sort of half and half isn't alien to me, but coming from England it must seem very strange. It still feels very English round here but it's not in England. I think people make assumptions.'

Debbie: 'I found out more about the, er, quirks of the area when Ben started school than I...I found out through my research and...reading when we moved from the Cheshire side of the border.'

Emma: 'I think it makes a difference what heritage you're from too. If you're, you know...English, you probably would do some research into the referendum, say, whereas if you're Welsh you'll automatically vote 'yes' because you think: Welsh Assembly? That's for me.'

In the Welsh (and British) context, devolution has been accompanied by a rapid reconfiguring of national identities and allegiances. Indeed, McCrone et al (1998) argue that the British Isles is a good place to study the impact of what they call the "new identity politics" because there is something problematic and contested about British identity. If national identity is a continuous process of making and remaking, invention and construction, singular narratives are clearly redundant. In this context, where multiple narratives compete for legitimacy as the nations of the UK attempt to assert themselves post-devolution, the news media have an obvious, defining role. They constitute the arena in which the processes of devolution are transmitted to the voting public. The ambiguity of Flintshire's position post-devolution therefore seems pertinent to the wider debate in Wales, but has received little academic attention. Williams (2005) points to the fact that much contemporary writing on "postcolonialism" celebrates the fractured identity of those on the "edge" and gives a voice to those on the margins of the nation. In a Welsh context, he suggests, this might mean paying greater attention to the geographical borderland in the context of devolution. Indeed, Eastern Flintshire has to deal, politically, with the geographical reality of a highly urbanised, culturally coherent and distinct English region immediately adjacent to it.

The focus groups were brought to a conclusion with a final general question, in which all participants were asked if they accessed specifically Welsh media sources.

Emma: 'I look at the BBC Wales website pretty regularly. It's a funny one because we can't get Welsh TV here, or I can't anyway. We can only get Granada, which of course is English. We can't get, on our aerial...we can't get the Welsh version of ITV or S4C or anything like that so the website is the only way we get any information about Welsh issues.'

Debbie: 'I use the BBC Wales website for exactly that reason. I do go into North West [England] as well as Wales, for my news headlines, but again that's not at all local. But I get most if not all my information about this sort of...stuff, from the web.'

Annette: 'I find online news better than most of our local papers. And our free papers are all Chester papers aren't they?'

Emma: 'I don't read local newspapers of any flavour. The only one I get pushed through the door is the Standard, which of course is a Chester paper. So you don't...we don't...get any free Welsh papers through the door. There's not a hell of a lot of it [information] about'

Debbie: 'We get the local papers at work on an official basis and I do flick through the local papers, occasionally, for maybe five minutes, but I really find them lacking in helpful information. They do seem to be very focused on Chester, and maybe sometimes Wrexham, but they don't have much about the issues that we've been talking about today.'

Angharad: 'I wish the local papers were...er, we wanted information when we moved from England and we couldn't get anything. We had to dig, dig to get anything.'

All participants in the focus groups mentioned their use of the BBC website for information. This trend to negotiate deficiencies in the mainstream press by accessing online sources was also highlighted by a recent study of Welsh political blogs which found that broader-based independent political news websites are having an impact on the mainstream media agenda and might offer a way forward in terms of informing the public about the processes of devolution, although they remain compromised by the restricted access which limits debate to the politically motivated. The BBC, in other words, maintains a near-monopoly over information about devolved politics as a result of its larger audience. Despite this, independent political websites like '*WalesHome*' are increasingly likely to influence the mainstream news agenda, and are increasingly legitimised as sources by the traditional press even if they are only accessed by a relatively small number of politically engaged Welsh residents (Roberts, 2011).

Discussion and conclusion

There is a pressing need for empirical work which analyses audience reception of news in the context of British political devolution, given the work of Cushion et al (2009) and Thomas et al (2003, 2008) which points to serious lapses in coverage of devolved politics by the mainstream UK press. It could also be argued that this need is most apparent in the Welsh context for two key reasons: the specifically Welsh news media deficiencies outlined in this article and the fragmented cultural geography that renders devolution politically 'problematic' and sometimes unpopular in parts of Wales, particularly those like Flintshire which are adjacent to the English border. However, undertaking work that assesses the real impact of a deficient media is unavoidably problematic when working with small scale interview groups. Focusing on a single theme and striving for a level of social coherence among the groups helps, but ultimately the validity of studies such as this is inevitably compromised by scale.

That said, it is also apparent that small-scale focus groups lend themselves to more natural conversation and thus produce some interesting, often revealing responses. While inferences and real meaning in this context remain problematic for the researcher, small groups allow for in-depth probing and exploration of the meaning the respondent intends to convey with their reply, a crucial part of the interviewing process (Suchman and Jordan, 1992). The author attempted to engage in some prompting of this sort, as this interactional technique to clarify meaning is almost unavoidable during human contact, with the process intended to mimic the process of natural conversation where attempts are usually made to establish the speakers real intended meaning, or check that their own message has been properly understood. The issue of meaning is obviously central to understanding subjective views like this, hence the vital importance of assessing interviewees understanding of questions. However, too much prompting would have been inappropriate given the scale and scope of the focus groups. This unobtrusive, relatively minimal approach to prompting was intended to avoid altering the interview dynamic and meant that much of the exploration of the meaning of the focus group responses was conducted during analysis of the data rather than in collaboration with the interviewees.

A degree of prompting is inevitable, however, and can be further rationalised by the fact that participants sometimes have to make suppositions to answer questions. Evidence from cognitive research suggests that many people will respond even if they do not understand the question (Clarke and Schober, 1992), and therefore inconsistencies in response should alert the interviewer to comprehension problems. One of the obvious further weaknesses with this kind of research, first highlighted by the work of Morley (1980), is the reliance on what respondents *choose* to disclose, and, crucially for this study, what they are able to articulate about their media choices and understanding. There is also evidence that people strive to be consistent when they answer questions and might choose logically consistent responses even if this does not reflect their views (Clarke and Schober, 1992). This can be a particular

problem with small scale samples such as those in this research, with dominant members of the group perhaps influencing the answers of the less well informed. There was some evidence of these processes during the interviews, notably in the group that contained the school governor, but in general all participants appeared to respond independently and did not seem reluctant to admit a lack of knowledge about a subject, for instance. Again, this could perhaps be attributed to the small scale of the groups, particularly to the fact that the participants were all parents of children at the same relatively small border village school and therefore presumably felt reasonably comfortable in each others' company. This does not preclude the possibility that the informal dynamic may have altered some responses, but it could be argued that it minimises the risk of this.

Issues of representation provided a focus, almost a rallying point, for all three groups. Many of the participants expressed a clear dissatisfaction with the news media, arguing that it failed to reflect both the realities of devolution and the peculiarities of the Anglo-Welsh border post-devolution. There were several interesting, unprompted, perspectives on identity and representation, some of which appeared to suggest that the participants felt disenfranchised by the representation of these issues in the wider news media.

The importance of these contemporary themes should not be underestimated. Indeed, the key issue of representation is worth stressing because, in the context of the post-devolution UK, the fragmented political and cultural geography of Wales is particularly notable. The unusual political dynamic present in some parts of Wales lends a particularly sharp focus to issues surrounding the contemporary news media and their audiences. Denis Balsom's 'Three Wales Model' (1985) remains the best-known attempt to encapsulate the fragmented nature of Welsh politics and his 'British Wales' tag is occasionally used post-devolution as shorthand for the problems of encouraging a sense of Welsh identity, and democratic participation, in those areas of the country in which voters have historically prioritised their British identity. Welsh regions adjacent to the English border encapsulate Balsom's 'British Wales'. While that border has always had a degree of symbolic significance, it has always been less defined than the Scottish equivalent: indeed, in the area encompassed by the focus groups cross-border suburban sprawl renders the border intriguingly nebulous in terms of identity. Yet despite this ill-defined geographic context, the reality of devolution forces engagement, with the border more politically significant than at any time in modern history. The London-based UK press increasingly marginalises devolved politics, while responses from the focus groups also suggest that the *local* media have yet to fully engage with this new reality and its constructions of the new paradigm fail to properly inform local residents about the processes of devolution. The local media, in short, misses a valuable opportunity to exploit the failings of the national press by articulating and representing the peculiarities of the local political dynamic. The inevitable result is an uninformed and therefore apathetic and disengaged public. Only 29.45% of Flintshire voters turned out in the 2011 referendum on extending the law-making powers of the Welsh Assembly.

The obvious question arising from this discussion is: what do the audience want from their local news media in the context of devolution, given the deficiencies of the 'national' press? Aldridge (2007) argues that journalists and academics often expect the local media to function as vital institutions for the creation and maintenance of a democratic political and public arena and a general sense of social cohesion and public connection. However, Meijer (2010) attempted instead to understand what kind of social role the *audience* wants their local media to perform. She found residents of Amsterdam expected local TV to supply background information, foster social integration, provide inspiration, ensure representation, increase local understanding, create civic memory and contribute to social cohesion and a sense of belonging. In the Welsh context, many of those functions are lacking because of structural and economic problems with a local news media that fails to properly serve its residents, and a non-existent pan-Welsh 'national' press.

Cushion et al (2009) argue that there remains an untapped potential for the London-based UK *national* media to explain domestic news items in the context of different policies followed by the various devolved administrations, suggesting that this might introduce a revealing comparative perspective that is currently lacking. What they call 'English-centric assumptions about national identity' are, they argue, deep-rooted, which makes it easy for journalists to simply forget about the other nations and speak to and for the English majority: 'For the many people living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who rely on UK network news, this inevitably leads to a democratic deficit, where the nature of devolved governments – or the policies they pursue – is neither understood nor scrutinised'.

The interviews outlined in this article suggests there might be an appetite for the 'hyperlocal'; that the social and geographical fragmentation within Wales that renders devolution problematic in some areas necessitates hyperlocalism to articulate and frame those culturally nuanced localised responses to political devolution. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) echo this, describing the growing gap between citizens, media and politics in terms of voice, while Schudson (2008: 21), perhaps anticipating the media

fragmentation that would later be wrought by new technologies, argued that the public's relationship with news changed in the 1990s from the ideal of informed citizenship, where citizens know all the issues all the time, to monitorial citizenship, which implies they should be informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good. In the Welsh context, even this more limited ideal is often not achieved.

Meijer (2010), by contrast, suggests that people have higher expectations and expect the news media to represent the world to them, and vice versa: they expect their situation, lifestyles and issues to be represented to the world as well. She found that local residents, especially those from migrant or poor white backgrounds, valued media which 'represent' them in all their diversity and which tell stories they can identify with or give them a sense of being recognised. Again, the local media in Wales singularly fail to represent the diversity inherent within Balsom's 'Three Wales Model', with many areas marginalised from the debate about the direction of devolved policy. Coleman and Ross (2010), indeed, caution that it is difficult, even for regional media, to give a platform to the concerns of 'ordinary people'. The contrast between the pessimism inherent in this Anglocentric prognosis of the democratic potential of the local press and the more idealistic conclusions of Meijer, in the Dutch context, is marked.

In order to serve a democratic culture, Meijer suggests the media may become more democratic themselves, in the sense of better representing and connecting local residents to a wider public. She found the public favoured a shift in media emphasis from watchdog to good neighbour – with the local news programmes most valued being those that are informative, relevant and entertaining. Such programmes are also marked by solution-oriented journalism, the presenting of positive important news, a diversity of sources, multifocality, multiple voices, and an unravelling of complexity.

This idealistic assessment of the most highly regarded local news sources in the Dutch context is noted in depth here because it places the failings of the Welsh news media into sharp comparative focus. The evidence outlined in this study suggests that many Welsh residents are fully aware of deficiencies in the mainstream press and are increasingly inclined to use online media as a means of sidestepping those deficiencies and engage in civic debate about devolved politics and associated matters of identity politics. While low levels of access continue to compromise the ability of online news sources to meaningfully counteract mainstream media deficiencies, their potential to articulate political concerns at the 'hyperlocal' level represents one way to improve levels of civic engagement.

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