

The Internet and Wales: Identity, Politics and Language

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Wales: a culturally constructed nation

This article is rooted in a set of debates about the mass media, nation states and imagined communities. Without going into these in any detail, the modern nation state cannot be understood without considering the role of the mass media, (Thompson, 1995) and nations are imagined communities – imagined in two senses: members of even the smallest nation will never *know* most other members of their nation, and the nation is always understood as something which *links* its members, with depth and horizontally. (Anderson 1983) The nation is an abstract entity in that it is too large to be known in its entirety by individuals. So a sense of belonging is engendered by opportunities to identify with ‘the nation.’

This is where the media – and the BBC centrally – come in, as agents of national culture. The BBC’s success in this respect is commonly attributed to the work of its first director-general, Lord Reith. His main focus was to establish standards for the whole of the UK, replacing local variety – of stations and broadcasting – with standardization. In the process he abolished the local radio which had pre-dated the BBC and replaced it with the National Programme, broadcast from London, and the lower status regional programme. Scannell and Cardiff argue forcefully that Reith’s BBC constructed ‘Britain’ as a nation. It served the national interest by synthesizing a national culture that had begun to converge since the late nineteenth century. They argue that the BBC’s most notable way of communicating and constructing national culture was through its ‘orderly and regular progression of festivities, rituals and celebrations [...] that marked the unfolding of the broadcast year’ – including Wimbledon, a bank holiday seaside feature, the King’s Christmas speech (from 1932), winter, summer, the Grand National and the FA Cup Final (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991: 278).

Turning to Wales, this is a country with a distinctive history and language. However, more than most nations, ‘Wales’ today is easily understood as something which has been culturally constructed. Key to this political and cultural process have been the political and administrative institutions, so central to the emergence and reinforcement of Welsh culture – notably the National Museum of Wales, the Welsh

Office, the Welsh Joint Education Committee, the University of Wales, and BBC Wales.

Less well known than its construction of British national culture, is that the BBC – largely due to the efforts of the Welsh intelligentsia and broadcasters – also played a crucial role in constructing Wales. Despite the tendencies towards centralization, BBC Wales became a very distinct ‘national region’, an oxymoron which characterizes some important tensions within the BBC that have continued to the present day: ‘[I]t was the BBC which invented the concept of all-Wales news and thereby, perhaps, invented Wales’ (Davies 1994: 95).

This fits with John Davies’s account of content, in the context of his discussion of relations between London and Wales in the 1930s – in the official history of BBC Wales: ‘most of the advocates of a separate Welsh region considered broadcasting to be a carrier of culture rather than a forum for debate.’ Davies adds that this meant that ‘the issues of the day received scant attention.’ (Davies 1994: 90)

Such a cultural mission is not confined to the BBC. *Sianel Pedwar Cymru* (S4C) – the Welsh fourth channel – is rooted in a very particular cultural mission: to promote the language. More surprisingly, HTV – the Channel 3 (ITV) broadcaster in Wales – also takes seriously its remit in relation to the Welsh nation. Recently it referred to its mission as being ‘to unify Wales’ and its *raison d’être* as ‘the reinforcement of our identity’ (cited by Mungham and Williams 1998: 121). So the mass media – and as we shall see, the Internet – are incredibly important to Wales.

Diversity and language in Wales

Although a clearly identifiable nation, Wales is far from homogenous. Wales is a nation divided by geography and the physical infrastructure that follows this. Mountain ranges mean that railway lines and main roads between north and south involve travel east into England, north or south along the Welsh border, then back west into Wales. For many years the Court of the University of Wales, a core Welsh cultural institution, met in Shrewsbury, accessible to mid Wales in the way that Chester and Liverpool are to the north, and Bristol to those in south Wales. These divisions are reflected in the mass media: it was Granada, the former Manchester-based ITV organization, that broadcast the first Welsh language television programme; the morning *Western Mail*, although proclaiming on its banner ‘the national newspaper of Wales,’ hardly sells at all in the north, which is instead served

by the *North Wales Daily Post*. And in some parts of the periphery of Wales, 45 per cent of the population have their television aerials pointing to English, not Welsh, transmitters – usually because they want to receive Five, Channel 4 (instead of S4C) or English variants of ITV and BBC schedules. Thus the mass media reflect a complex and hybrid culture – with differences not only between north and south, but also between rural and urban areas, between different cultures and ethnicities, between English and Welsh speakers, and even between variants of the language.

The language is a key element. In the 2001 census, 20 per cent of the population of Wales reported that they could ‘read, speak or write’ Welsh – meaning about 600,000 people. In recent years this figure has been rising, in large part because of the growth of Welsh medium schooling. (Aitchison and Carter 2000; Williams 2000) Such data, of course, tells us nothing about whether people can read, speak *and* write, whether in practice they *do*, how frequently, or how well. Nonetheless, and despite being spoken by only a minority of its people, for historical and cultural reasons, the language is of far greater cultural significance than suggested by these figures.

With the implementation of the Welsh Language Act 1993, bodies that deliver a service to the public in Wales have to produce a Welsh language scheme. Such schemes are subject to public consultation, and have to be approved by the Welsh Language Board. They detail both existing and planned service delivery in the Welsh language, as a move towards the Act’s requirement of parity. This legislation has meant a huge growth in jobs for Welsh speakers – many of them of relatively high standing. Such jobs are concentrated in Cardiff.

With its roots in the 1970s, the Welsh medium schooling movement is now clearly embedded as part of the Welsh education system. Currently some 21 per cent of children of primary school aged and 14 per cent of secondary school aged children attend Welsh medium schools.

These two in particular – the Language Act and the growth of Welsh medium schooling – have meant that language policies have shifted in important ways. Crucially, the focus is now much less on the ‘rural heartland’ (*Y Fro Cymraeg*) – communities where a majority of people speak Welsh – and it is the common language of everyday communication. Instead, the language has become much more prominent in the capital city, and has a much stronger public profile.

At the same time there has been some important political transformation. With the setting-up of the National Assembly for Wales we have seen the growing divergence of policies in Wales from those of England. (Mackay 2003) The Richard Commission is among the reports that suggest that devolution and the powers of the NAW look set to increase in significance – strengthening in important ways the distinctiveness of Wales and the importance of its institutions.

Welsh Internet uses

So much for the background to Internet use – but this context is crucial for understanding the significance of uses of the Internet. Obviously, it is hard to generalize or categorize Internet use – which is enormously complex and diverse. It includes education, entertainment and information; bulletin boards, IRC, gaming, MOOs/MUDs, e-mail and the World Wide Web, and it is debatable what these different uses have in common.

One way to start to get a picture of what is available on the Web on Wales is the website www.walesontheweb.org.uk.



Wales on the Web The Gateway to internet resources relating to Wales.mht

This gives a good indication of the bodies and issues concerning Wales that are on the Web.

My own research has focused on interactivity and use, and I have undertaken two studies on which I will draw briefly. First is a study in 1996 of two fora on Wales, Soc.Culture.Welsh and the Wales section of Compuserve's 'UK forum'. (Mackay and Powell 1998) About a third of the contributions to these fora came from each of Wales, England and the US and the Welsh language was a major concern. The Compuserve forum had discussion topics on 'promoting Welsh', 'learning Welsh', 'Welsh tutors' and more. In contrast with common discourses in England and Wales, there was extremely little criticism of the language. There was also considerable attention given to other 'traditional' elements of Welsh culture – the Eisteddfod and folk customs. '*Hiraeth*' – longing or homesickness – featured with some prominence. Some of this took the form of genealogy, or family history (often by the descendants of Welsh emigrants), whilst much of it was about re-establishing links with long-lost friends or relations (a form common in local newspapers too). So uses are very much

about connecting the diaspora, resembling other studies of such uses of national Internet fora (e.g. Mitra 1997) – with a strong focus on ‘place’. The tone of interaction was, from the one side inquisitive and, in response, helpful and supportive – a tone common on some Internet fora, but rather different from that which prevails in other realms. The process was highly interactive. On the basis of the occupations claimed and other details provided, those involved in the fora seem to span a considerable diversity. What was most striking, however, was the minimal presence on the fora of contemporary politics or culture. In sharp contrast with the press, there seemed a wish to avoid dissent or conflict – with US contributors notably unsympathetic to anti-establishment arguments. So whilst many voices are present, those with conflicting views are not engaging with one another.

More recently, in 2001 and 2002, I undertook a small-scale ethnographic study, of the use of the breadth of the mass media in ten very different households in Wales. (Mackay and Ivey, 2004) This involved an average of 26 hours’ fieldwork in each household. So this is a study that starts (and largely ends, too) in front of the screen, rather than behind it – examining how uses of home computers (*inter alia*) connect with everyday domestic routines and activities, with household dynamics and uses of space in the home.

Obviously, the strength of such a study is its accounting for the *context* of consumption; its weakness is its superficiality regarding texts. (see Slater 2002 and Mackay forthcoming) It is a study that leads to a more cautious analysis of cultural transformation than commonly provided by Internet researchers who focus on texts or interaction ‘behind the screen.’

Of the ten households, four had a PC with Internet access, and used it. One had Internet access via NTL (cable television), but found the service useless so did not use it. Two had PCs in cupboards (one of these had Internet access) and did not use them. In other words, they had in the past been PC users but, for various reasons, not for long. And three households had no PC or Internet access at all. So this is a very different picture from the hyperbole that characterizes so many debates about ‘the information society.’ As well as providing a salutary reminder regarding levels of ownership it shows how the trajectory is not simply one way and inevitable.

Focusing on the households who used their PCs to access the Internet, they saw their computer largely as a tool. It was used for relatively short time-spans, for pragmatic purposes. The surprisingly low level of use was in part because of concerns about the

cost and the risks – from viruses and fraudsters. The heaviest users were those for whom the technology had transformed their home-work boundary – the researcher and headteacher who could do much of their work while at home. The boundary was blurred by the spatial and temporal flexibility that was possible. More common was engagement in ‘domestic research’ – searching the Internet, commonly to inform domestic consumption decisions, seems to be a new leisure activity in the home. The major use, however, was e-mail – to keep in contact with distant others, commonly relations, in some cases in far-flung parts of the world.

In no case was the computer to be found in the living room. Rather, home computers were generally located away from the living space, commonly a study or spare bedroom. Historical accounts of the arrival of radio (Moore 1988) suggest that the process whereby a technology wins space in the home is a crucial moment. As yet, the home computer has far to go on this front, found in the closet rather than as a central feature of living space.

Finally, it is worth mentioning one distinct form of computer use – the vibrant gaming culture that we found among young men. Quantitative data shows that adolescent boys spend more time playing computer games than watching television. We found that, in sharp contrast to the powerful discourse of the isolation of gaming, that playing computer games was profoundly social and highly interactive. Those who played were connected by this activity in lively subcultures. The preferred location of the games console, in all houses where there was more than one games player, was the living room. So gaming provides an example of the breadth of identities that are facilitated by ICT and the Internet.

Conclusions

A significant lesson from the more recent, qualitative, study cited is that Internet use, and hence its significance for national identities, needs to be kept in perspective. When S4C (the Welsh fourth channel) launched its website, Huw Jones, Chief Executive, compared its significance with the translation of the Bible into Welsh. By contrast, the bases and material of national identity in Wales seem better understood in terms of continuity rather than rupture.

Second is that the picture I have presented counters strongly the homogenization thesis. Rather than the Internet contributing to the growth and dissemination of an increasingly homogenous, even bland, global culture, what we see, rather, is that

different and diversity are broadcast more widely. Like other studies (e.g. Miller and Slater (2000) on the Internet in Trinidad), I found the Internet working as a platform or stage, as a means for local culture to reach a wider audience. At the same time, with its multiplicity of voices and interactivity, we can identify a broadening of those in a position to define 'the nation' and its core cultural attributes – a profoundly democratizing phenomena. (Parekh 1997, Tomlinson 1999) We might expect spurious claims regarding the homogeneity of Welsh national culture to break down and fragment, as particular versions of Wales and Welshness, and the regulation of cultural identity become more contested and fragmented.

Third, an ethnographic study of domestic space shows clearly that Internet use is firmly embedded in reality (Robins 1995) and in place. In other words, use can be understood well by examining how it connects with existing, face-to-face, social relations and practices. The extent to which new media constitute a new social space seemed, from my few cases, profoundly limited. (Slater 2002) What I found seems a far cry from Rheingold's virtual communities or Turkle's virtuality. Rather, on-line activity and identities linked very closely with off-line activities and identities.

At the same time, there clearly *are* new patterns of connection – and these are especially significant for the Welsh language. With radio and television it took decades for the Welsh language to become firmly embedded, whereas with the Internet it has been there from the outset, and without any contest being necessary to achieve this. Whilst television remains a much more significant mass medium in relation to national identity in Wales, the Internet is clearly of increasing importance.

Finally, I have referred to how a diaspora community is facilitated by, and contributes to, transborder media flows. In the process, a minority language is fostered – in accord with EU DGXII policies for minority languages. This is quite the opposite of the development of any pan-European identity – which is the focus of a whole raft of other EU policies. My small studies found little that could be construed as imagining a European identity – in accord with Schlesinger's argument, (Schlesinger 1993) that any notion of European identity (which we are exhorted to imagine) seems problematic. So what I found conforms to the notion of Europe as a project of 'unity through diversity' rather than one based on the growth of a common culture. In short, Europeanization does not seem to constitute any threat to Wales or Welsh identity, or to be opposed to fostering diverse national identities in Europe.

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