

MEMORY AND MEDIA IN WALES – PROJECT REPORT

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We all know – or think we know - that family life during the second half of the twentieth century revolved increasingly around the television set that formed such a prominent feature – often the primary focus - of the nation's living rooms. From the late 1960s onwards, those television sets were increasingly ubiquitous. The content they broadcast was frequently the common currency of popular culture. Audiences for the most popular programmes, or for broadcasts of important national and international events, were numbered in the tens of millions. Overwhelmingly, the television during these decades was, or seemed to be, the main window through which Britain looked at itself and looked out on the world. From the perspective of the second decade of the 21st century, that period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s now looks like the golden age of television. Since then, the dominant role of the television as the primary medium of entertainment, exchange and information has been fragmenting under the impact of new media technologies. Few, if any, television events nowadays have an audience reach that comes even near the peak audiences of the 1970s or 1980s. We look elsewhere for news and celebrity gossip. The proliferation of channels now means that no programme has the reach that could be achieved then.

This seemed like a good time therefore to look back at this golden age of television and ask people to record their memories of what television had meant for them, their families and their communities. That is what 'Memory and Media in Wales' set out to do. The project aimed to collect and archive oral testimony relating to the age of television in Wales and solicit memories of significant television moments in politics and in culture. By focussing on four distinct and distinctive geographical and linguistic communities we would seek to provide a spectrum of memories that represented a national collective memory of television in Wales. We wanted to know what our interviewees remembered (and what they didn't). We wanted to know where they watched great moments on television and with whom. We wanted to know what they thought about the impact television had on their everyday lives. In other words we wanted to put some flesh on the bones of some of our common assumptions about the ways in which television has transformed us. We also wanted to do more than just collect these memories. We wanted to make them accessible and available to the individuals and communities that owned them.

It is not simply an accident of our geographical location on the west coast of Wales that makes Wales the focus of our project. The Welsh context is particularly pertinent to the project and adds significantly to its potential value since for a variety of political and linguistic reasons, the history of television in Wales has been particularly conflicted. For much of the fifty years in question, television formed a key battleground in struggles for linguistic and national identity. Welsh nationalists and language activists such as Cymdeithas yr Iaith recognized that maintaining and expanding the presence of Welsh on television would be key to protecting the language. For much of the 1970s, campaigning focussed on the call for a separate Welsh language television channel. That campaign culminated in the early 1980s with the Plaid Cymru leader Gwynfor Evans's threat to go on hunger strike unless the Thatcher government kept its manifesto promises to establish a Welsh language television channel. We hope that the archive resulting from this project will provide a

significant resource for understanding the politics of television in Wales and what individuals and communities feel Welsh television has delivered. The question is particularly pertinent once more as S4C comes under threat from the present Tory government and language campaigners prepare for direct action once more.

Following our successful application to JISC for funding under the Developing Community Content initiative, 'Media and Memory in Wales' have been in the process of engaging with communities in four very different geographical areas of Wales (Wrexham, Caernarfon, the Rhondda and Caerfyrddin) with the aim of recording a range of digital oral testimonies that relate to the development of television as a popular medium of information during the second half of the twentieth century in Wales. We are particularly interested in eliciting from our interviewees information that relates to two key and closely related themes: the sense of belonging and the sense of identity. So we are interested in finding out about the different kinds of social behaviour that might be associated with television viewing and how it might influence relationships with family and community. The kinds of memories we want to record might range from visiting a neighbour's house to watch a particular event during the 1950s to the proliferation of televisions in households during the 1990s and its impact on family life and organization. We also want to know how television influenced our interviewees' sense of identity – how it helped shape their sense of themselves as British and as Welsh citizens.

To do this, our project officers have been asking participants about their memories of watching key national events on television over the second half of the twentieth century. They have been asked what they remember about watching the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953; the drowning of the Tryweryn valley and the associated protests during the first half of the 1960s; the Aberfan disaster of 1966 when a collapsing tip of colliery waste buried two local schools killing 116 children as well as 28 adults; the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969 and the protests surrounding the investiture; the golden age of Welsh rugby during the 1970s; the devolution referendums of 1979 and 1997; the launch of the new Welsh language television channel, S4C in 1982; and the miners' strike of 1984-5 and the pit closures that followed. We have tried to choose historical 'events' that will provide insights into remembered experiences and senses of identity on a national, British and international scale.

We have chosen the four distinct geographical areas where our project officers are working with care so as to make sure that we achieve a thorough overview of contrasting communities in different parts of Wales and their memories of media. Caernarfon, in north Wales is in the Welsh-speaking heartland and has remained throughout the period we are studying as an important area of linguistic activism. It was also, of course, the location for prince Charles's investiture in 1969. Interviews already carried out there are revealing an interest and intriguing range of responses and memories of the investiture. The Rhondda provides an important contrast as a heavily industrialized and increasingly anglophone area that nevertheless maintains a distinct Welsh cultural identity. The Rhondda valley is also, of course, close to Aberfan and many of the memories we are eliciting there relate to that dreadful tragedy. In Wrexham, on the northeast border of Wales, we have an example of a community where a strong Welsh linguistic identity in the rural areas contrasts with a more heterogeneous and English cultural identity in the town itself. The area also presents an interesting mix of industrial and rural communities. Caerfyrddin and its hinterlands in southwest Wales provides a final example of an area where Welsh-speaking and anglophone communities intersect. It is also the former parliamentary seat of the Plaid Cymru leader

Gwynfor Evans whose uncompromising stance was so instrumental in establishing S4C as a Welsh television channel. Taken together, we are hopeful that the interviews we are carrying out in these four geographical areas are making it possible for us to produce a digital archive that will be both comprehensive and penetrative in its coverage.

We are finding participants through collaboration with existing groups and organisations in the areas, such as local history groups or branches of the Women's Institute, as well as advertising in local newsheets (Wales has a strong tradition of 'Papurau Bro'). We organized a launch event for the project at the National Eisteddfod, held in 2010 in Ebbw Vale in early August. This resulted in some very useful publicity including several radio interviews and a full page spread in the *Western Mail*. Thanks to the generosity of our partners at the BBC we also took part in a BBC Roadshow in Merthyr Tydfil in October which provided further radio coverage as well as a great opportunity to meet potential interviewees from the neighbouring Rhondda valley. We are finding, though, that by far the most effective way of spreading news about the project is the very old-fashioned one of word of mouth.

The actual recording of oral testimonies is being conducted by two project officers employed by Aberystwyth University: Lois Thomas is based in north Wales and Dana Edwards in south Wales. Following their appointment last October, Lois and Dana spent two weeks in Aberystwyth where they were provided with digitisation training by members of staff at project partners Culturenet Cymru, who kindly provided desk space, PC, email, access to all Culturenet Cymru equipment and IT services at their office in the National Library of Wales. The project officers have certainly benefitted a great deal from the experience of the Culturenet Cymru team members with whom they worked during the training period. They will continue to have direct access to Culturenet Cymru ICT staff throughout the period of the project while the functional and design specification is being developed. Culturenet Cymru are also providing a digital asset management system and ongoing technical support throughout the life of the project.

As I write this, Lois and Dana are still busy out in the field identifying participants and carrying out interviews. They are returning to Aberystwyth on a monthly basis to report on progress. The target for this stage of the project is to deliver audio recordings of 120 interviews conducted in both English and Welsh in the four designated geographical areas. The recordings are being captured to a high standard using professional solid state recorders. Both officers report excellent progress and there is every indication that they will hit their interview targets comfortably. Members of staff at Culturenet Cymru are hard at work processing the raw data from the interviews as it arrives in preparation for archiving on the project website as it is developed.

According to the officers, they have both had very positive responses from participants – both at the request for interview stage and following the interview process; people generally welcomed the opportunity to look back and assess their feelings about television. Early memories of television, often linked with the arrival of television in the community and the Coronation itself evoked the most interesting and revealing responses. From the list of topics selected Aberfan was widely remembered whilst the 1979 devolution referendum seems not to have left an impact. Tryweryn did not have much impact at the time, but in retrospect Tryweryn has become part of the Welsh psyche and many people attribute this event to the increase in their awareness of being Welsh. One trend that has become apparent is peoples' reluctance to admit to watching a lot of television, and watching television in the afternoon is

often something people are reluctant to admit to. Interviewees often give different opinions on the social effect of television – some considering it to be socially constructive in that it gives people a shared culture and topic of conversation and brings people together to watch some events (particularly Royal events), whilst others refer to the decline of family viewing and others consider television to be anti-social as it discourages people from going out to social gatherings.

The next stage of the project will be dedicated to ensuring the ongoing engagement with communities in the four target areas beyond its official end in April 2011. We will be hosting an event in each of the four target areas which will seek to bring participants and the wider community together to participate in a digitisation workshop which will also involve further recording of oral testimonies and the creation of digital stories. Culturenet Cymru will provide equipment and support to the project officers at these events. We hope that the creation of digital stories will be an effective way for Aberystwyth University to engage with the different communities as a major Welsh higher education institution committed to public engagement and will enable participants to engage creatively with the content we are producing. Lois and Dana, assisted by Culturenet Cymru staff will be working with community groups to combine still images and video from the archives of our partners in the BBC to create a collection of 10 digital stories that we hope will engage Web users and further promote the 'Media and Memory' resource. This will encourage ongoing use of the website as a repository for additional relevant content (audio, image or video) in the long term. Many of the digitally active community groups with which Culturenet Cymru has worked have expressed a desire to develop oral history skills in order to capture this kind of historical information. Towards the end of the project, an oral history training day will be held in each of the four project areas. Content that was created in the earlier months will be used to demonstrate the value of recording oral testimonies and to encourage the community to contribute additional content to the project website. We would like to thank the BBC and in particular archivist Edith Hughes for their commitment and enthusiasm for the project.

We are confident that the official launch of the website in the final stage of the project, for which plans are already underway, will provide us with an opportunity to promote the content which has been created and lead to further engagement between Aberystwyth University and the wider community in an online environment. It will also lead to the dissemination of unique content that will prove immensely valuable to the research community as the history of television and broadcasting in Wales and especially from the perspective of the audience has been largely unexplored as a field of study. The official launch, to be held on 17 June, will bring together project participants with academics from Aberystwyth and other Welsh universities, media professionals and policy-makers to explore ways in which this unique content can be exploited in a variety of contexts.

The full archive (full-length and clips) of oral history recordings will be accessed through a bilingual website based on open-source content management systems and open-source web technologies. Recordings will not be edited but they will be broken up into shorter clips of no more than 10 minutes based on the subject discussed. It is estimated that the total number of clips will be between 1,200-1,800 (10-15 per interview). This will allow users to browse and search for content on the website according to subject (such as the investiture of Prince Charles) and period (such as the 1970s) as well as geographical area. The interviews will not be transcribed or translated, but each clip will be indexed bilingually to enable easy access to relevant material by both language groups. Metadata for both full interviews and clips will be in Dublin Core. As well as providing access to the content created as part of the project, the

website will enable users to comment on the clips and interviews. They will also be able to contribute their own content (image, audio or video) directly to the resource. The launch of the project website in April-May 2011 will be an excellent opportunity to attract interest in the resource beyond the four target geographical areas and will hopefully lead to user contribution from across and beyond Wales. The content produced by the project will also be accessible through The People's Collection website via API, making it available to a wider audience as well as providing access to additional functionality, such as a 'storybuilder' tool, which will enable users to combine audio clips with images from museums, archives and libraries as well as other users to create their own digital stories. Another feature of The People's Collection website that will add value to the content will be the ability to create trails that can be downloaded to mobile devices.

As we are still not quite at the end of the project it is difficult to draw very many definitive conclusions from our experiences so far. It seems very clear that the project has struck a very definite chord with the communities with whom we have been engaging. Media coverage of the project as well as the responses of participants and others leaves little doubt that the project's theme has a wide resonance in communities across Wales. We are hopeful that this will lead to significant uptake of the project output when it is released. It is early days yet as to drawing any definitive conclusions about what the contents of the archives will show about how television has contributed to family and community life in Wales over the second half of the twentieth century. It seems clear that they will certainly be intriguing, sometimes unexpected and will provide useful food for thought for historians, media analysts and policy makers, as well as the communities with whom they were created.