



Address given by Menna Richards, the Controller of BBC Cymru Wales, to the IWA West Wales Branch, Trinity College Carmarthen, 23rd May 2001

It's a little over a year since I joined BBC Wales, which was something of a surprise, particularly in the light of the fact that some years ago I committed the ultimate BBC sin. I went to work for ITV.

When I left I was warned by a senior executive that I was making a big mistake. I was burning my boats, he said, and I'd never work for the BBC again.

It has been a remarkable year for the BBC in general and for BBC Wales in particular.

- a new Director-General, Greg Dyke who has set the tone for the huge changes that are taking place
- a new management structure
- new programmes and more programme-makers
- plans for new services including BBC 3 and 4
- plans for BBC Wales to develop our own digital service
- we've moved the 9 o'clock news to 10 - a development which did more to improve staff morale than any other single thing this year - they didn't believe the BBC could move so fast
- we've won some high-profile awards for our programmes including an International Emmy for our children's series, *The Magician's House*, a BAFTA for best drama for *Care*, a powerful and disturbing drama about child abuse and a Sony Gold Award for Radio Wales.
- an extra £11 million a year for BBC Wales

- and there are signs that the BBC's traditional obsessions with hierarchy are beginning to crack. Because even the security men are starting to call me Menna instead of Controller. Though there was a brief but unnerving period when one or two of them called me Ma'am.

It's worth considering why BBC Wales has been given an extra £11m a year. First of all, it's a tremendous vote of confidence by the new Director General and the Governors in our programme-makers. Because the extra money is to allow us to make more programmes and better programmes for audiences in Wales, on radio and television.

Greg Dyke believes that the BBC is too London-centric and that authority for decision-making should be devolved to the nations - to Wales, Scotland and to Northern Ireland.

This is the context for the increasingly important role that broadcasting has in helping to define Wales in the 21st century.

In his history of the BBC in Wales, the historian Dr. John Davies says that "to a greater extent than perhaps in any other country in Europe, broadcasting has played a central role in the development of the concept of a national community". The importance of broadcasting in creating modern Wales cannot be underestimated. Broadcasting is central to the way people understand what's going on in Wales, it is where they get their information; it is what helps them decide about political matters; it is the place where they can find the richness and diversity of Welsh artistic life.

In 1965, Hywel Davies, then the BBC's Head of Programmes said of BBC Wales that its role is to be "a debating chamber, an exhibition centre, a theatre, a concert hall, a workshop". He might also have added a classroom and a cinema.

Nearly 40 years later that description of the BBC holds true. In many parts of Wales, the BBC is still the theatre, the debating chamber and the concert hall for viewers and listeners.

The BBC, and indeed HTV and S4C have been pioneer institutions in helping to make this place called Wales.

Without certain programmes many people would have little idea of what's happening in Wales. Programmes like *Good Morning Wales*, *Wales Today*, *Dragon's Eye*, *The Exchange*, *Week In Week Out*. Their job is to report, to challenge, to scrutinize, to analyse. The popularity of such programmes reflects the demand of audiences for information and debate. *Good Morning Wales* has more listeners in Wales than the *Today* programme on Radio 4, *Wales Today* is the most successful of all the BBC's 6.30 news programmes throughout Britain. *The Exchange* with Huw Edwards and *Week In Week Out* are consistently successful and *Dragon's Eye* is required viewing for all those interested in politics.

I say this not only to tell you about the success of these programmes but to demonstrate what a huge appetite exists in Wales for programmes that tell viewers and listeners what they want and need to know about Wales.

And the importance of broadcasting in Wales is linked to the modest number of other sources of information. However good the *Western Mail* is, it is our only national newspaper and although the *Daily Post* in north Wales also has a wide circulation, both newspapers are owned by the same company, Trinity Mirror. One of the few recent developments in newspapers in Wales is the *Welsh Mirror*. By now, that too is owned by Trinity Mirror. This is not to criticize these publications but in a democracy, audiences deserve a choice of views and voices.

In Scotland the situation is very different with a wide range of national newspapers of differing positions and political views.

The role of broadcasting in helping people understand what's happening and why, becomes even more important as Wales develops and we make more decisions for ourselves.

The BBC responded to devolution by investing significant sums in enabling BBC Wales to provide coverage of the Assembly while maintaining its presence at Westminster. Six million pounds a year to provide comprehensive reporting and analysis of the Assembly on radio, television and online, in Welsh and English. Two years on, the BBC recognizes that its role in a devolved Britain is about more than simply reporting the new institutions. That is why at the end of last year the BBC's Board of Governors decided to give BBC Wales an extra eleven million pounds a year. The economic benefits of this increased funding are substantial - more jobs, investment in new technology and in giving people the skills to use it; investment in talent and creativity - in writers, actors, musicians, journalists. In short, contributing significantly to creating a bigger talent pool in Wales.

It is also because the BBC understands that part of the responsibility of a national broadcaster in post-devolution Britain is to reflect the particular interests of its audiences, which is why we're investing in drama, entertainment, arts, music, sport and factual programmes.

This is happening at a time when the broadcasting industry is facing fundamental, indeed revolutionary change. Not everyone **inside** the industry understands the extent of it and very few people outside have any real understanding of the way the business is changing.

You will all have heard of digital television; some of you will have it; some of you will no doubt dismiss it as just another bit of technology which will never catch on.

However, some people predict that we could have as many as three to four hundred channels before too long.

What is important to understand is not simply the **amount** of choice available to digital viewers but the way in which they watch television. Those of you who live in multi-channel homes, particularly if you've got digital satellite will know what I'm talking about.

If you only like old movies or comedy shows like *The Good Life* or *One Foot in the Grave* you can watch them all the time.

Today's technology means digital viewers don't need to buy the Radio Times or look at the listings in the Western Mail. There's a piece of kit which costs a few hundred pounds which will schedule your favourite types of programmes for you. If all you want are films, that's all you need watch; or American soaps, or even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Some people do. Many people don't watch channels any more - they don't browse through the listings for BBC 1, BBC 2 or ITV. They simply choose the kinds of programmes they like, tell the machine to select them and it's likely that's all they'll ever see.

Indeed some people may never see the BBC or ITV at all.

This is a particularly acute issue in multi-channel homes in Wales where take-up is more than 50% - well above the UK average of 46%.

However, there is growing evidence that the predictions of three to four hundred channels may not materialize. Despite the rate of digital take-up, research shows that

viewers tend to use only a fraction of the services available - around 15 channels at best. They simply can't keep up with the choice available and anyway haven't got time to watch. So scores of channels have very low ratings, can't sell advertising airtime, have no revenue and therefore close down.

Of course, this doesn't mean that you can forget about the digital future.

The government - if it is re-elected - is committed to analogue switch-off by 2010. And what is also clear from research is that channels which are strongly branded and rich in content and quality are the ones which will continue to be popular in the future.

So where does this leave viewers in Wales at a time when the role of broadcasting in defining a modern Wales is even more important.

As I explained earlier, the BBC is investing significant new sums in BBC Wales - an extra eleven million pounds a year.

Some of this will be spent on increased output on BBC 1 but we are also creating a regular zone of programmes from and about Wales on BBC 2 Digital. Because digital provides tremendous potential for more news, entertainment, politics, drama and so on about Wales. There will be many more programmes about Wales in addition to everything that we do now.

We know that 34% of the Welsh population have access to digital services; we know from research that viewers would welcome more programmes from Wales. But we cannot ignore the lessons to be learnt from the changing way in which people watch television. How do we get them to watch; how do we seize the attention of people when their inclination is to watch less in any case? At BBC Wales we've conducted extensive research in the last few months to find out what our audience thinks. We

need to listen to them because they've got lots of other places to go if they don't like what we're offering.

We asked them what they would expect from a BBC Wales digital service. What they **don't** want is as instructive as what they do.

This is what they said they wouldn't watch:-

a service which is pompous, old-fashioned, safe, sanctimonious, partisan, preachy, self-absorbed, cliquy, narrow and Welshy.

What they **do** want is a service which is intelligent, accessible, relevant, modern, topical, professional, contemporary, proud and unpretentious.

And of course it's expected to embody the high quality content that they would expect from the BBC.

This is underpinned by a real enthusiasm amongst those questioned for a dedicated service for Welsh viewers.

Later this year BBC Wales will begin to broadcast a regular weeknight block of programming on BBC 2 Digital. At the same time every evening you can be certain to find programmes about Wales for Wales.

It's a great opportunity - we are as enthusiastic about it as our audience is. Not only are we able to provide a dedicated service for viewers in Wales but digital technology means we can provide it for **all** viewers in Wales. Digital takes away the problems of accessibility particularly in the borders. Where viewers in some parts of Clwyd and Powys can only receive signals from across the border at the moment, digital technology means that everyone in Wales should be served. Another vital

consideration in a country where devolution means it's making more of its own decisions.

We shall be announcing more detail about this service in due course.

As far as BBC Wales is concerned, our commitment to exploiting the new technology for the benefit of licence-fee payers in Wales extends far beyond the provision of television programmes.

Later this year we shall be launching the first of the BBC's Where You Live Sites in Wales. Briefly the project involves setting up websites to serve local communities around Wales. It will create a partnership between the BBC and local people to provide news, information about events and a community forum. We intend to roll out the Where You Live Sites to other parts of Wales soon afterwards. We'll be working with schools and colleges in each area to develop the necessary skills and recruit local people. Our ambition is to use new technology to engage very directly with communities throughout Wales and to offer opportunities for people to acquire new skills.

Finally, I want to tell you about one more project that the BBC is developing to harness the potential of new technology and that is probably the most significant and exciting educational development Wales has seen. We call it the Digital Curriculum.

It will revolutionise the way children learn and also have a significant impact on the way teachers teach and their role in the classroom.

Imagine a child at a desk with a laptop. At the click of a mouse a wealth of video, sound and graphics is revealed, selected to illuminate this week's geography lesson, or maths, or French, or history.

Imagine a teacher at the desk guiding the child through this learning journey, stopping, starting, drawing on a wider archive as necessary.

Imagine later that evening, the same child, same laptop but at home and even later, the child in bed, but his mum or his older sister at the computer. They're all learning the same way, but pursuing different interests, skills and qualifications.

This is the challenge of the knowledge society. Technology making learning easier.

The BBC is planning to develop, through the digital curriculum, a bank of interactive lessons to support the national curriculum. In Wales, the material will be tailor-made for our own national curriculum - in both Welsh and English. (And, incidentally, offering special support to non-Welsh-speaking parents whose children are learning through the medium of Welsh.)

It's an ambitious project which has very significant implications for Wales - the BBC is using its unparalleled expertise in making programmes to create a challenging, imaginative and relevant resource for school children in Wales in both Welsh and English.

The digital curriculum offers a huge opportunity for school children, their teachers and families to learn new skills. Our ambition is for BBC Wales to make a critical contribution to raising the standards of education in Wales and to developing the technology skills of the employees of the future.

We are pleased to be working with the National Assembly and are delighted to have the enthusiastic support of the Education Minister, Jane Davidson for this ambitious project.

You asked me to talk this evening about the future of broadcasting in Wales. What I've described to you are the BBC's ambitions to expand its services for Wales by exploiting new technology to create more programming, greater engagement with the communities we serve and a revolutionary approach to teaching and learning.

Some people will argue, of course that because we have so much television already and anticipate so much more that there will no longer be a role for public service broadcasting. That it's not sustainable because of the fragmentation of audiences.

In fact the need for public service broadcasting is all the greater because none of what I've described this evening will be offered by the commercial world. That is not to criticize them - it's not what they do. It has always been clear that it is one of the central functions of the BBC to provide important services that won't come from the market. The temptation is always there, and will become greater as we come up to charter renewal in a few years' time, to ask what is the point of the licence fee. Far from supporting that argument, what's happening in the broadcasting industry means that we need the BBC more than ever.