

Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

Response from Carol Byrne Jones

Anatomy of a Co-Production: Abstract.

In 1993 I produced two 90' tv films for S4C and Saban International (US Distributors) based on T. Llew Jones' popular children's book, "*Tân ar y Comin.*" That bilingual, back-to-back co-production, which involved the translation of an indigenous Welsh language narrative for a global media market, became an arena in which conflicts of language, culture, commerce, creativity and Welsh public service broadcasting were played out. The resultant films were pioneering in that the story had originated in Wales and were produced by a small independent company,¹ using innovative digital technology to edit and deliver the films. The Welsh language film was very popular, while the American version sold world-wide. This thesis describes the principles of book to screen adaptation as applied to the original novel; outlines the European background to and emergence of small-language co-production; places S4C's philosophy and practice in that context: describes in detail the development process and practices of this co-production; assesses its effect on the locality where it was filmed; and examines the creative and commercial relationship between S4C, a broadcasting monopoly, and the independent production company during a time of market expansion and ambition. The methodology is both qualitative and quantitative, comprising interviews with ex-S4C commissioners and employees, information sourced from company and production archives, e-mailed correspondence together with materials acquired by the producer while on international training schemes.² Whereas theories of adaptation and co-production are discussed, the technique of "thick" description³ is

¹ Y Wennol Cyf., incorporated 1988

² EAVE (European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs) Producers scheme, 1991 and US/UK Media Xchange programme 1991

³ A detailed account of process and events acknowledging the narrator's presence and perspective.

applied to the production process. S4C has announced its intention to resume co-productions (2011). This account looks at the complex navigational skills involved in making the local global; the question of “entrepreneurship” in a not-so-open market; and the universal appeal of a “good” story. Can small be beautiful? And if so, how?

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The above is a copy of my Ph.D abstract for the thesis, submitted October 7th. 2011, which is currently being examined.

The conclusions reached include the following:

- a) The relationship between a small independent producer and S4C was frequently confusing as there was ambiguity regarding the real responsibility of each within the partnership. The producer responsible for making the product was in effect a “hired hand” subject to varying levels of S4C micro-management without complete knowledge of wider issues which affected the production. Perhaps there was a certain inevitability to this, given the relatively experimental stage of S4C’s development at the time, but in such a situation, it was not possible for the local producer truly to operate as a “producer”, according to the definitions and practices outlined in European/US markets. S4C took that position.
- b) Being a “producer” required much more than simply delivering programmes to a small, highly controlled market. At the time (1993) the producer’s investment in development and origination of a product was not considered as a cost to be recovered nor did the management fee adequately cover the costs of extended development and post-production administration etc involved in an international co-production. There was little or no “fat” for future r&d and local training.
- c) The community where the film was made benefitted economically and culturally as did the language. S4C more than recovered its investment and the film was shown / sold literally all over the world. But, despite the company’s parallel involvement with an international puppetry training project, which resulted in 20 local people being trained, and other, smaller production commissions, the changes in S4C’s commissioning pattern (1995/6) meant that companies of this size were sidelined in the interests of larger units. This subsequently created a cycle of dependence on smaller /fewer sources of creativity and controverted the principles of entrepreneurialism by seeking to give larger units some security of tenure as well as virtually devolving commissioning responsibility onto organisations which would “filter” submissions for S4C. This may have resulted in better business management at the Channel, but effectively it removed it yet another step away from its real source – the desire of Welsh-speaking people for their own voice. As a result, local media development, which first gave S4C its domestic profile and power, was stifled and the industry was deprived of smaller but perhaps more creatively attractive ambassadors from a variety of locations. The imposition of supermarket-like practices also showed a lack of understanding of the employment patterns and nature of micro-economic resources in areas traditionally most loyal to the channel, especially with regard to the employment of women in technology in these areas.
- d) S4C consequently lost its original status as the Welsh language community’s chief audio-visual storyteller. In order to recover its position and justify its existence, I suggest it has to do the following:

1. Abandon the traditional TV trope of “one broadcasting to many.” The targeted “family” of viewers is, as S4C research shows, varied, multiple and consumes media in many forms.
2. Although it needs to be commercial, the Channel should be more radical in its re-structuring. It has to revise and possibly reject the pyramidal, top-down business and institutional models that rely on traditional hierarchical patterns in favour of more imaginative, organic production and management units.
3. To that end, a 3-tier approach can be offered: an acknowledgement that internet and webcasting is a highly accessible reality for Welsh speakers of all ages and that this can and should be exploited, both in content and the technology. If S4C could offer its high quality broadband capacity not only to transmit from its centre, but also to be accessed by others, it would genuinely be a PSB.⁴ This access could be given to bona fide groups such as YFC, Merched y Wawr, etc. giving them opportunities to reach wider audiences with their activities – niche or hyper-local activities which would not necessarily justify high levels of production and therefore finance, but would allow communities to “own” S4C by their presence on its facility. The Clic facility, podcasts etc are fine, but they still are “top down” rather than bottom-up access. This access webcasting is far more likely to attract revenue from advertising (hyper-local) than the current TV model does. Local council matters etc could be reported on. Obviously broadcasting regulation, copyright guidance and training would be needed but that could be done by locally based small companies and colleges.

The second tier would be the PSB service as defined by TV, employing production crews on local / international news and domestic programmes – a Wales-based, local service. Such a service could also be fed by the first, webcast tier , in terms of personnel, information and hyper-local awareness. At one point S4C did consider “sub-regional” programming within its broadcasting hours and the BBC did so with certain radio opt-outs/ins. This thinking represented a move toward more localised services, something which is now easily achievable by the internet.

The third tier would consist of high-profile domestic and international productions, possibly co-productions – certainly those that would or could exploit both the need to serve local interests and also exploit their transnational, commercial potential.

4. Rapidly expanding technology is both challenging and empowering. A PSB must respond to these challenges with imagination and courage. It cannot do so if it remains encased within and subservient to old models of commerce, and creativity.

CBJ 16/11/2011

⁴ At The University of Wales Lampeter TSD, for the last 5 years I have trained voluntary groups such as YFC , schools, community history groups, the Urdd, etc to use media equipment enabling them to produce live webcasts of conferences, events, eisteddfodau, getting world-wide feedback to these webcasts,