



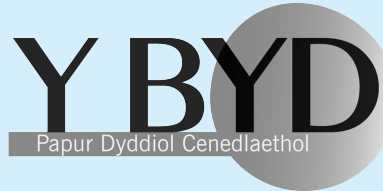
ned thomas argues that the time is ripe for a Welsh-language daily newspaper

"The commerce of the country is not done in the language, no business house uses it, there is no system of shorthand adapted to the language. The language does not possess words and terms for the Arts and Medicine, etc, it has never possessed either literature or author of international fame, neither does it possess a daily newspaper..."

the language referred to is Welsh and the words appeared in a letter to the press from a certain S. Barnes at the time of the proposal to drown Tryweryn in 1957. We have come some way since then. There is less ignorant prejudice, there is more use of Welsh in business, writers in Welsh tour the world and are translated into many languages. I seem to remember seeing a Welsh shorthand primer. But a Welsh daily newspaper? Barnes had a point. A daily newspaper is a fairly central institution in any self-respecting culture. In Jan Morris's words "A daily newspaper to my mind is critical to the well-being of a language and the confidence of a culture."

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language special iii



Welsh had the advantage over many other minority languages of relatively high levels of literacy at an early date, and the late nineteenth century saw a thriving publishing scene, including the publishing of newspapers in Welsh. But they were weeklies, often confined to particular parts of the country, or had a religious affiliation. This reflected on the one hand the geography of communications (which also ensured that London dailies were more easily distributed throughout Wales than Wales-based English-language papers), and on the other the confinement of Welsh to a cultural and religious ghetto. Welsh periodicals are still heavily skewed towards the cultural sector but a daily newspaper has to cover all areas of a community's life and of course requires more resources. It is an industrial product, closely related to the economy as well as to culture. As speakers of Welsh became increasingly bilingual, the commercial press and advertisers found they could reach them without the additional expense of publishing in Welsh. Like many others I had come to think that in the absence of a philanthropic millionaire, a Welsh-language daily was not a starter. Broadcasting was another matter. It had grown up in the public sector and broadcasting policy was open to political pressure.

What made me rethink the possibilities was getting to know over twenty editors and publishers of European minority-language dailies (see panel on opposite page). Our Mercator Centre at Aberystwyth runs a number of European projects, all connected with smaller languages in the field of press, media, publishing, and the Internet.

Together with the daily newspaper of the Slovenian minority in Italy we co-organized the first conference of daily newspapers in minority languages, which led over a number of years to the formation of an association. This now plans collaborative projects in which Wales can play no part unless and until we too have a daily paper in the national language.

As a former journalist I enjoyed visiting the newspaper offices, reading those papers which were within my capacity to read, and talking with editors and journalists. Standards vary, but some excellent papers are produced on relatively small budgets. The world is awash with raw information today, and the quality of selection and interpretation is all-important, finding what is relevant to your audience. But increasingly I found myself asking questions of the management: about costs, staffing, how subscriptions were collected, how distribution was organized, what grants (if any) were obtained and from whom. The point came at which I thought we should do systematic research on the possibility of establishing a Welsh-language daily. We were fortunate to obtain funding for the research, mainly from the European Union and the WDA.

In our research, which there is no space here to cover in detail, we had access to the accounts, structures and strategies of European models ranging from small to very small in their circulation. None of these, of course, is transportable in its entirety, but we learnt some very fundamental things about operating in a minority language context as well as gathering a great

many practical tips. The scale of the operations made things much more transparent than is the case where daily papers are subsumed in large groups. But most of our work took place within Wales: researching the market, the likely number of readers and their categorization by age, social group and so on; also the advertising potential, distribution questions, and technology of various kinds. The work was divided between outside consultants/market research companies (particularly the quantitative work) and ourselves, who concentrated more on the qualitative kind – what did our target group want and expect in a newspaper?

The research was carried out over eighteen months up to Christmas 2002 at which point we felt sufficiently confident of our findings to convert the project into a limited company and our research into a business plan. Though there is a great deal still to do we are now saying that publication before the end of 2004 has moved from the realm of possibility into that of probability. In the near future we shall begin looking for pre-publication subscribers and enough private investment by individuals to keep control in Wales.

We have a title – Y Byd – and the aim is to publish Monday to Friday inclusive, leaving room for other Welsh weekly publications. We do not intend to be printers. The format will be tabloid but mid to upmarket tabloid more like some continental papers and without the connotation of tabloid in Britain. We cannot rely simply on casual sales. Like every minority language newspaper we shall need a core of subscribers – people who will take the paper every day – and are confident of achieving 5,000 in the first year with a further 2,000 casual sales, and a total of 10,000 in year two. A ceiling will probably be reached at 15,000 or possibly 17,000. However, our model is based on heavy use of information technology which will allow output from a content management system into different media, making possible the

minority language daily newspapers in europe 2002*

Minority Group	Number of speakers	Daily Newspapers	Circulation
Swedish in Finland	300,000	10	5,000 – 60,000
Catalan	7,500,000	5	4,000 – 90,000
Italian in Slovenia and Croatia	13,500	1	5,000
German in the Südtirol, Italy	290,000	2	10,000 and 56,000.
German in Denmark	20,000	1	3,000
German in Belgium	100,000	1	13,000
Romansh in Switzerland	60,000	1	5,000
Sorbian in Germany	45,000	1	2,500
Slovene in Italy	100,000	1	11,000
Galician in Spain	2,400,000	1	5,600
Danish in Germany	50,000	1	7,500
Basque in Spain	560,000	1	17,000
Breton	300,000-600,000	0	0
Frisian in the Netherlands	350,000	0	0
Welsh	575,000	0	0

* An Irish-language daily was launched in April 2003 but is not included since we do not yet have established circulation figures. There are also one or two papers that are not members of the Association and a few that appear only three or four times a week. These are not included.

provision of other services. We expect to employ as many as 40 people, of whom not more than 16 will be journalists. We shall need small offices in north, south and the centre of Wales as well as a network of free-lance local correspondents. Distribution will be through the usual newsagent channels, with subscribers receiving a voucher redeemable against a regular supply over a given period. We found that about five per cent of our likely audience lives out of daily reach of a shop that sells newspapers of any kind. This is the result of the closure of village shops, and in those areas we may need to resort to direct distribution.

People often ask us which daily in English our project most resembles. The answer is none. Where there is only one daily newspaper in a language, it has to be seen as belonging to all, a meeting place, not aligned with any one political party or movement – which need not, of course, prevent campaigns on particular issues. Early on we secured support from members of all parties in the Assembly and, more recently, endorsements from a wide range of public figures in most areas of Welsh life, several of whom do not themselves speak Welsh. We are also in the process of establishing support groups outside Wales and indeed outside the UK.

We see this as a national undertaking for which we are the facilitators. M. Wynn Thomas, Jane Aaron and others have demonstrated in the field of literature interesting patterns of interaction between the two cultures of Wales. *Planet's* initial backers were very largely Welsh-speakers, I remember, and the Arts Council supported the magazine by analogy with what was already being done in Welsh. Who knows what interesting developments may not follow the creation of a Welsh daily? This is not simply a matter for speakers of Welsh.

The research exercise brought to light many things that are perhaps of wider interest. Several people told us that they would like to see a very popular kind of Welsh daily paper, but all our objective findings suggest that at the most popular levels – though more in some regions than others – there are problems of literacy in Welsh. While the paper will still need to bridge a fairly wide spectrum of readers, its appeal will have to be across the mid-market and up-market sectors. The actual language used will also need close attention. Despite the education system, standard written Welsh is not so well established as we would like to think, or as it perhaps once was. One of the long-term



The first generation to have a daily newspaper in Welsh.

Photo: Arvid Parry Jones

functions of a daily paper in Welsh will be to reinforce that standard through the daily creation of original material in a flexible, accessible, yet standard idiom.

Just as there are Welsh-speakers who are less than confident about reading Welsh, so there are learners of the language who are happier reading Welsh than holding more complicated conversations in the language. Good learners have stressed to us that while a daily paper would strengthen their knowledge of Welsh on a daily basis, they want to read for content and not be patronized by 'easy Welsh' sections or vocabularies, though something of this kind could be done outside the paper itself, say on the Internet. In other words we are in a time when it is too simple to speak of people as either 'speaking Welsh' or 'not speaking Welsh'. There is a spectrum of language skills, and increasing bilingualism from the English-speaking end can work in favour of a Welsh paper just as increasing bilingualism from the Welsh end worked against a press in Welsh.

Although we encountered strong local feeling – this most often took the form of

people complaining that their locality was ignored in the press or media – it did not translate into a majority view in favour of having different editions. This was just as well since the cost-benefit analysis of editions made them a non-starter. We had the impression that our target audience was more mobile and more various in employment patterns than we had perhaps assumed. They wanted news from different areas – where they had grown up, where they worked, and where they had previously worked and had friends. More than once the point was made to us that as Welsh-speakers became more dispersed and found themselves more often in minority situations, a daily newspaper could help give them a sense of keeping in touch and belonging. But the corollary of that is that the paper will need to reflect the many different communities and interest groups in which Welsh-speakers today find themselves.

Ideas become facts when their time has come. Many factors are now favourable to the establishment of a daily paper in Welsh. The Assembly provides a focus – though still a weak one – for political discussion, and in

turn needs as much coverage as it can get. Newsgathering within Wales and worldwide has become simpler and cheaper with the Internet, and while newspapers are no longer the main source of hot news, they are important as investigative setters of the agenda, and as providing immediate steer and discussion of the fast moving news.

Institutional bilingual policies ensure that large sums are spent on advertising in Welsh but at present this goes mainly to English language publications – which has a symbolic value but does little for Welsh in economic terms. Attitudes to Welsh have much improved among people who do not themselves speak Welsh but whose children perhaps go to Welsh schools. We shall count on their support too, since Welsh culture is not a static package which you opt for but something made and remade and hopefully expanded in each generation. We expect some element of public grant-aid, though channelled in ways that safeguard editorial independence. After all, the UK government undertook to support a newspaper in Welsh when it ratified the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages and cannot be content to be at the bottom of the European league in this respect.

A further consideration which has driven us to act now is that if a Welsh daily cannot be established when there is substantial support for business start-ups and job creation in Objective One areas, it will probably never be done at all. Which does not mean that we shall not also have a substantial presence in or near Cardiff. Welsh-speakers in the capital and its surrounding areas in fact show the highest proportional level of interest in the paper.

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