Chapter 8

The Pit Head Baths are Now an Internet Café: The Role of Technology in Transforming Audience, Institutions, and Power Structures among Women in Wales

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ABSTRACT

The coal fields communities in Wales were once one of the most prosperous places to live in the British Isles. Many people flocked to Wales in search of a new life and opportunities for their family. Coal became known as “Black Gold” and the industrialized coal fields became centres of productivity. Media use in Welsh households has generally been controlled by dominating men who saw and in many cases still see themselves as the “heads of the household.” Such control over the media consumption of women was not out of place in the UK as a whole, where men have assumed a place as a de facto media institution who force choices of what to watch on their households. This chapter presents a longitudinal study of three women in Wales conducted between 2000 and 2013 that shows how the media consumption and audience styles have changed over time so that power structures from both men and traditional media institutions have all but eroded.

INTRODUCTION

In its history Wales has experienced two main increases in its product possibility frontier. The first influx of potential labour into Wales was during the Roman conquest of Britain. The native Britons in England fled to Wales for safety, hence the country being named ‘Wales’ by the invaders with the first three letters ‘Wal’ coming from German, meaning ‘people who knew the Romans’. The next major influx was during the mining revolution, when people came from England and other parts of the world to work in the pits to provide a better life for themselves and their family. Wales might be seen as having a power and ideological structure of a perpetual capitalist
hegemony in which members of a community are always seeking the power of the bourgeois and yet have only the competence of an unskilled member of the proletariat. Whether it be down to trade union or socialist party branches that have a chairman or president who is in control over members whom they command the attention of at committee or other meetings, there is never a shortage of persons willing to lead so that they can wield. Many people in Wales will identify proudly as being ‘working class,’ and of being socialist, something which often results in the election of Labour Party politicians who claim to be the party of the working-class, whilst other socialist parties claim the same. Perhaps unfortunately for them, such people do not realize that this form of socialism is seen by media studies scholars as a response to a lack of power and ownership that creates a sense of solidarity in poverty that would not exist if members of that group got the power and ownership they seek ideologically through their calls for nationalization and state-led public ownership in general (Branston & Stafford, 2010).

It has been a generally held view that ‘old media’ such as television and radio have been far more successful technologies than newspapers in terms of how people in Wales interface with the media (Thomas, 2006). However, the post-credit crunch world has seen many surges in apparent disorder from some of the youngest people in society. Whether they are ‘smart-mobs’ as envisaged by Rheingold (2003) or the “thugs” as described by the media following the 2010 UK riots, it is clear that there is a lot of discontent among the young in today’s world. Threats by young users of Facebook to draw the UK riots to the South Wales cities of Cardiff and Swansea may not have materialized, but shows the impact social networking services and other Internet services can have on law and order in communities beyond the screens on which the messages are displayed. Government investment in former coalfields communities, many of which have severe poverty has however assumed that the Internet is the key to reversing poverty and therefore crime. Estimates of the value of investment in community buildings by the Welsh Government ranges from £150,000 to almost £1.5 million for a new purpose-built community centre that include IT suites, community cafés, and Internet lounges (Holtom, 2007). Internet cafes are widespread, relatively cheap and allow individuals and small businesses access to the Internet without the need to own and maintain a computer (Casany, Alier, Mayol, Conde, & García-Peñalvo, 2013).

The common held view that one should not move services online because “what about those who can’t afford it” is nonsense as all communities are now connected to the Internet in some form. Those ‘poor people’ who claim welfare benefits often rely on mobile Internet connectivity as home phones and Internet connections are a low priority due to their often excessive costs. Even with increased access to the Internet, a ‘collective memory’ of coal mining and its tie with the identity of the working classes (of which many young people in Wales still identify with) act to make poverty acceptable (Housley, Moles, & Smith, 2009). This has included an acceptance that the man in the household somehow has the right to control what was watched on a household’s television. As this paper shows, increased access to the Internet has transformed this power structure so that women are able to choose which media to access without interference from controlling men.

**CHANGING AUDIENCES AND DISCOURSES AMONG WOMEN**

When the study of women is usually engaged there are often comparisons made with men. This is not something this paper intends to do as this would commit what the author calls the ‘society fallacy.’ The society fallacy dictates that it is absurd to think that a survey of a small sample of people can be generalized to a wider population. In contrast the ‘ecological principle’ is advocated, which is that studying a group of people is only helpful to