

Audiences' willingness to participate in Welsh-language media

Executive summary

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1. About the research

Encouraging audiences to interact with media content, for instance by phoning or emailing a programme, attending a live event or submitting user-generated content, has many benefits for broadcasters and other media creators. TV, radio and online content producers in Wales say that engaging with users in this way enables them to find out more about their audience, incorporate a greater range of voices and opinions into their content and, ultimately, to serve their audiences better. Yet producers also find that some Welsh speakers can be reluctant to interact with content, in part because they do not feel confident enough in their Welsh to use it in public contexts.

This research project, 'Audiences' willingness to participate in Welsh-language media', investigated both producers' and users' views of audience participation and identified some of the things that producers can do to make audiences feel more comfortable interacting with media content in Welsh. This report summarises key findings of the research and presents recommendations for media production.

About the author

The report's author, Philippa Law, is a former BBC radio producer with substantial experience of interacting with audiences. She currently works with readers and journalists at The Guardian to expand the role of user-generated content in the newspaper's journalism.

Acknowledgements

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Many individuals contributed to the research; thanks are due in particular to the producers and execs at the BBC, S4C and indies in Wales who took the time to reflect on their work with audiences, whether as part of a research interview, or more informally.

Aims of the research

The research project sought to establish:

- (a) some of the things that make audiences feel willing or unwilling to take part in media content in Welsh;
- (b) 'types' of audience, who respond to opportunities to participate in distinct ways;
- (c) what media producers can do to help audiences feel more comfortable taking part in media content.

It is important to note that the project investigated audiences' *willingness* to participate, not their actual behaviour. It has been said that most people do not participate in media content because it simply doesn't occur to them to do so. This barrier to participation can be tackled in two ways: (1) by framing clear calls to action, which let the audience know exactly what is wanted from them, and (2) by approaching individuals and groups directly to invite them to take part. These two approaches are key to encouraging participation; the recommendations in this report should be seen as additional strategies for increasing audiences' willingness to take up the opportunities they are given.

2. Methodology

Producer interviews Background interviews were first conducted with Welsh-speaking TV, radio and web producers, to understand their experiences of audience participation. Their views were collated and used to inform the design of the audience survey.

Audience survey A questionnaire was designed to elicit audiences' reactions to different opportunities to interact with media content in Welsh. Audiences were presented with detailed descriptions of four scenarios, in which they were invited to (1) take part in a phone-in, (2) join a studio audience, (3) take part in an online chat and (4) submit a photo they had taken. Respondents were asked how **willing**, how **competent** and how **apprehensive** they would be in those situations, and to indicate any factors that would affect their decision to participate.

Audience questionnaires were distributed on paper and online in the summer and autumn of 2011. The sample consisted of 358 adults who agreed that they "know some Welsh" and breaks down as follows:

- **Sex:** 46.2% of respondents were male and 53.8% female.
- **Age:** 28.8% were 18-34, 24.1% were 35-49, 28.5% were 50-69 and 18.5% were over 70.
- **Location:** 37.0% lived in north Wales, 32.8% in mid or west Wales, 22.9% in south east Wales and 7.3% outside Wales, e.g. in London.
- **Welsh language proficiency:** 51.6% claimed they were able to speak Welsh completely fluently; 48.4% claimed their spoken Welsh was not completely fluent.

Data analysis Responses from the audience survey were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In order to identify audience types, a cluster analysis was conducted, in which respondents were segmented on the basis of their relative willingness to interact with media content in a variety of scenarios.

3. Summary of findings

The producers While some of the producers interviewed reported considerable success at encouraging audiences to take part in content, **most felt that it was more difficult to get audiences to interact in Welsh than in English**. Producers found that some audiences were unwilling to take part in Welsh-language content, not because they were not interested in doing so, but because they felt nervous or uncomfortable, and believed either that they were not competent enough in Welsh, or that the Welsh they spoke was not as ‘proper’ as the Welsh used by the media.

The audiences The audience survey confirmed Welsh-speaking producers’ observations that many of their audiences lack confidence in their Welsh. Some of those surveyed thought that their Welsh was not fluent enough to take part in media content, while others felt that the kind of Welsh they spoke was not ‘good’ enough compared to the Welsh they heard in the media. Even those who said that they were fluent in Welsh were still prone to occasional dips in confidence, when presented with opportunities to participate in media content. Audiences’ **apprehension was found to be a major barrier to participation** – and was more important than their perceived lack of competence in Welsh.

Respondents cited numerous other factors that impact on their willingness to interact with media content, including: shyness or a lack of self-confidence, a lack of time, the cost of phoning or texting, their previous experiences of contributing to the media (whether positive or negative) and the strength of their feeling about the subject matter.

Welsh-speaking audiences were found to fall into four types:

- **Enthusiasts**, who are relatively confident in their Welsh and willing to interact with media content in various different ways.
- **Avoiders**, who are generally unwilling or unable to take part in any media content in Welsh.
- **Optimists**, who welcome the opportunity to interact with Welsh-language content in undemanding ways.
- **Talkers**, who are happy to take part in phone-ins, but not in other kinds of interactive media.

Enthusiasts, Avoiders, Optimists and Talkers are described in more detail overleaf.

Enthusiasts

"I prefer to use Welsh first in all situations."

Enthusiasts feel at home in Welsh. They're engaged with Welsh-speaking society and are happy to take part in all kinds of Welsh media content.

"If it was a subject I feel strongly about I would willingly take part."

"I'm very often asked by S4C/BBC Wales to take part in interviews."

Typical Enthusiasts acquired their Welsh naturally, grew up speaking Welsh and continue to use Welsh regularly nowadays. Two-thirds are fluent in both spoken and written Welsh and most are relaxed about using Welsh on the telephone.

"I enjoy participating in Welsh events."

Like anyone else, Enthusiasts feel nervous or lack confidence in their Welsh at times, but when it comes to interacting with media content, they're still prepared to "give it a go".

Avoiders

"I wouldn't be watching the programme in the first place because it would be like trying to communicate with aliens."

Avoiders feel uncomfortable in Welsh. They lack fluency in both spoken and written Welsh and are generally unwilling to take part in any kind of media content in Welsh.

"I would probably feel a stranger in my own country."

"Too much Welsh-Welsh programmes on TV."

Although Avoiders understand some Welsh, they feel unable to use their Welsh in public and are apprehensive in situations where they are surrounded by Welsh speakers.

Avoiders are disengaged from Welsh-language society and are unlikely to consume Welsh-language media.

"Audience participation is the bane of the media. Interaction often means the exchange of trivialities."

Some Avoiders are also distrustful of the media or object to participative media formats in principle.

Optimists

"Giving the option to text is far less intimidating than having to converse in Welsh on the phone."

Optimists may not be highly fluent in Welsh, but they're keen to make the most of the Welsh they have.

"As I would not have to speak, I would be more than willing to listen and respond appropriately."

Optimists focus less on the barriers to participation and more on the pleasure they would get from taking part in media content. So, although they don't know enough Welsh to talk or write in the media themselves, Optimists would welcome the opportunity to interact with Welsh-language content in less demanding ways.

"Since moving to Anglesey it has been a privilege to hear Welsh spoken so much."

While Optimists are not engaged in Welsh-speaking society at the moment, they hope to improve their Welsh proficiency and are ready to be nurtured as future speakers.

"The older I have got, the more prominent the language has become in my life."

Talkers

"I'm not used to use typing/chat rooms."

Talkers are very capable of speaking and understanding Welsh, but are less confident in reading and writing the language. Talkers are typically native speakers of Welsh who attended English-medium schools.

Going online takes "effort and time".

Some Talkers feel uncomfortable using a computer or the Internet and would not want to interact with media content online. Talkers generally prefer to use the telephone and are happy to take part in phone-ins in Welsh, if they have something to say.

(Although these characteristics are often associated with older generations, Talkers span all age groups and are no older than other audience types, on average.)

"I am aged 58 years – few people of my age were educated through the medium of Welsh after 11 years of age. That's why people like me are more confident when speaking than writing Welsh."

Table 1: Summary of the relative attributes of the four audience types.

		Enthusiasts	Avoiders	Optimists	Talkers
	% of sample that falls into each audience type	25.9	28.8	30.7	14.7
Audiences were asked to imagine their willingness to take part in specific media scenarios in Welsh	Willingness to take part in a phone-in	High	Low	Low	High
	Willingness to be part of a studio audience (not asked to speak)	High	Low	High	Mid
	Willingness to join an online chat	High	Low	Mid	Low
	Willingness to send a photo to a TV show (no need to write anything)	High	Low	High	Mid
Audiences were asked to imagine their sense of apprehension in specific Welsh-language situations	Apprehension at the prospect of taking part in a phone-in	Mid	Very high	Very high	Mid
	Apprehension at the prospect of being part of a studio audience (not asked to speak)	Very low	Mid	Low	Low
	Apprehension at the prospect of joining an online chat	Low	High	Mid	Mid
	Apprehension at the prospect of sending a photo to a TV show (no need to write anything)	Very low	Mid	Low	Mid
Audiences were asked how able they felt to take part in each situation in Welsh	Ability to take part in a phone-in	High	Low	Low	High
	Ability to be part of a studio audience (not asked to speak)	High	Low	Mid	High
	Ability to take part in an online chat	High	Low	Low	Mid
	Ability to send a photo to a TV show (no need to write anything)	High	Mid	High	High
Self-reported proficiency in Welsh	Ability to speak Welsh	High	Low	Low	High
	Ability to understand Welsh	High	Low	Mid	High
	Ability to write Welsh	High	Low	Low	Mid
	Ability to read Welsh	High	Low	Mid	Mid
Welsh language background	Proportion who acquired Welsh naturally	High	Low	Low	High
	Proportion who attended Welsh or bilingual education	High	Low	Low	High
	Current use of Welsh relative to English	High	Low	Low	Mid

4. Summary of recommendations

1. Let audience participants know exactly what to expect of their role – and stick to it.

The results of the research indicate that producers can **help alleviate audiences' apprehension by clearly communicating what is expected of them** and not springing surprises on them. Producers should be aware of the information that audiences need in order to make an informed decision about participating: whether they will appear on-air or on camera, whether they will be addressed directly, whether they will need to read or write anything, how long their participation will last, at what point they can relax knowing that their contribution is over, and so on. In particular, producers should know that, for many audience members, there is a substantial difference between reacting non-verbally and being asked to speak. Producers should do all they can to protect audience participants from last-minute changes to their contribution.

2. Actively seek out Optimists and invite them to participate in simple activities.

Since Optimists are not core Welsh media users, producers need to go out of their way to find and engage them. Optimists are typically willing to take part in media content if their limited Welsh skills are not taxed too much. Activities that do not involve speaking or writing, such as 'liking' a piece of content, sitting in a studio audience or uploading a photo, are good ways of engaging them.

3. When targeting a diverse audience, particularly in terms of Welsh language proficiency, consider offering *both* less demanding and more demanding opportunities to participate.

While low-barrier forms of interactivity may appeal to Optimists, Enthusiasts may gain more satisfaction from getting stuck into something relatively demanding. It is recommended, therefore, that producers consider offering two alternative ways of taking part that, crucially, differ in the degree to which they tax audiences' Welsh skills. For instance, if a producer wants to hear audiences' views of an issue, they could give audiences the option to either register a yes/no vote or write an extended account of their personal experience.

4. Consider developing innovative formats that cynical Avoiders may not recognise as audience participation.

Some Avoiders are cynical about interactivity, and find familiar forms of participation, such as voting or sharing opinions, intolerable. New, innovative forms of participation have the potential to increase Avoiders' willingness to consume participative media passively.

5. Consider whether it's appropriate to enable audiences to take part over the phone as well as online.

Designing participative media for Talkers is relatively simple: they prefer to take part in content over the phone. It is recommended that producers offer a phone-in option when appropriate.

6. Consider the needs of non-fluent native speakers of Welsh.

Some native speakers of Welsh are not fluent in the language, but feel that content ‘for learners’ is not for them. Producers should therefore consider how to enable this group to consume, enjoy and contribute to content.

7. Don’t assume that opportunities to participate can be tailored to audiences’ age or gender.

In this study, there were no substantial differences between men and women, or between older and younger people, when it came to the types of participation they preferred.

8. When audiences agree to participate, make sure the experience is enjoyable for them!

Many respondents had taken part in TV and radio shows before. Their comments (both positive and negative) suggest that producers, especially those who work with live audiences, should be mindful of the influence they have on audiences’ willingness to take part again in the future.

9. Consider developing proofing tools (spellcheckers and mutation checkers) that can be embedded in Welsh-language websites.

Some audiences insist that their grammar or spelling isn’t ‘good’ enough to participate in content in writing. Enabling users to check their Welsh as they type into an online form might help reduce their insecurity. It is recommended that media companies explore the potential of this approach.

10. Look for new ways of including diverse varieties of Welsh, including learner Welsh, in mainstream media content.

In the longer term, audiences might feel more confident in their Welsh if they heard regional, English-influenced and learner varieties of Welsh on-air more often. Some ‘purists’ may object loudly to the use of non-standard varieties of Welsh, but producers and commissioners are nonetheless urged to continue looking for opportunities to increase the linguistic diversity of the content they produce.

Conclusion

Ideally, Welsh-language media should include something for everyone: opportunities to engage with other Welsh speakers, plenty of scope to react to content non-linguistically, a choice between taking part on the phone or online and, where possible, fresh and innovative forms of participation. Whatever opportunities for participation are offered, it is recommended that producers ensure that potential participants have all the information they need to make an informed decision about participation. By making the audience’s role clear and enjoyable, producers may help reduce audiences’ apprehension and increase their willingness to interact with content in the future.

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