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Back by popular complaint

The fight of the unimaginative logos

The Welsh Assembly has been around for seven years. Somehow, that seems completely unfathomable; it's certainly still finding it hard to establish itself with a clear purpose. A fair chunk of its time seems to be taken up by people complaining about their bins (which is the Council's responsibility, if you live in post-apocalyptically rubbish strewn Cathays), rather than their actual competencies.

Two recent examples have shown that whilst the Assembly can work well (such as the case of Herceptin below), the Assembly's dealings with the *Western Mail's* management in January shows it at its absolute worst: incompetent, impotent and potentially irrelevant.

The *Western Mail* is, for want of a better word, crap. Anyone who's ever made the mistake of buying it will find themselves in ownership of some mighty inky bog roll. But in many ways, it isn't the fault of the paper itself.

The *Mail* is part of Trinity Mirror, the company that completely dominates the Welsh press. But it is also a company that has a habit of milking hardworking hacks, and then providing very little investment in return. It is pretty much solely responsible for the fact that there is no national paper for Wales, with the *Mail* covering the south, and the *Daily Post* dealing with the north. And they are also now responsible for the fact that 38 workers were recently axed from the *Western Mail*, without any consultation with the unions.

When hauled up before the Welsh Assembly Culture Committee about Trinity Mirror's dominance over the Welsh media, the company's management demonstrated what they've done for Wales with a Powerpoint presentation, the real sign of a professional. This included such fantastic highlights as bringing *Trade-It Monday*, *Wednesday* and *Friday* to be

printed in Wales (oooo!), securing the print contracts for the *Bracknell Midweek* AND the *Bracknell Homes Supplement* (wow!), not to mention introducing a four page TV Guide to the *Western Mail* (someone get me a chair, it's all just too much).

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At which point you'd hope that the Culture Committee would jump in with well-prepared arguments for why the company should start putting some real investment into its underpowered Welsh titles.

Unfortunately, few people on the committee had any idea what they were talking about. Trinity management easily dismissed a report provided by Cardiff University that questioned their role in Wales, and no committee members knew enough to contest the move.

A North Wales AM made several offensive statements about the company management and London in general (showing the sort of maturity you'd hope for from a political institution), before getting into an argument with the Chair of the meeting. The Chair, meanwhile, was so inept that she didn't even notice that she'd forgotten to

let the Unions speak until way after time.

There was one sole voice on the committee who asked relevant questions beyond the general standard of 'what's your favourite printing ink?' and 'Poptarts- cooked or cold?'

Culture Minister Alan Pugh rightly targeted the fact that there is little real material in the paper any more, as it's solely composed of lifestyle, Lowri Turner, and local filler material. This obviously didn't go down so well with the editor of the *Western Mail*, given that two days later, Alan Pugh's column was axed from the paper.

Ultimately, the committee's ignorance has meant that Trinity Mirror will emerge with no real change. On the basis of the performance at the Culture Committee, Trinity don't seem to consider the *Mail* a national paper; it barely even seems to register as a regional title. It's instead fast becoming a glorified local paper.

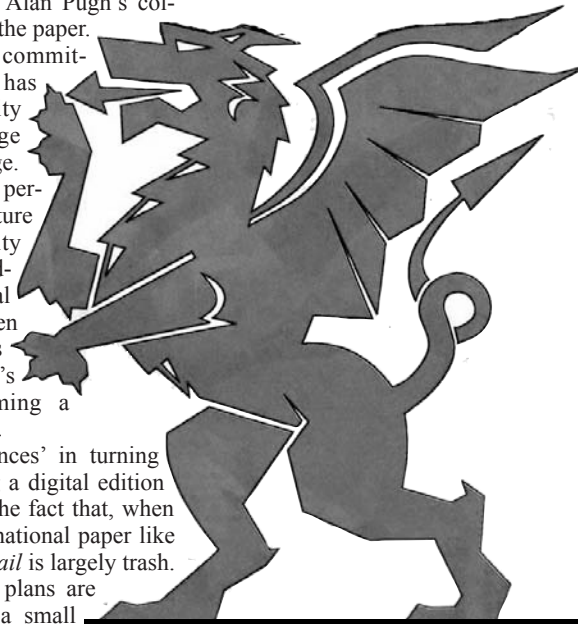
Any 'great advances' in turning tabloid or launching a digital edition isn't going to hide the fact that, when compared to a real national paper like the *Scotsman*, the *Mail* is largely trash. All of the outlined plans are small thinking for a small paper, intended to boost the

company's already bulging bottom line instead of providing some real journalism for Wales.

In the end, it won't be the Assembly that makes a jot of difference to the quality of the *Western Mail*. *Metro*, the freesheet that's provided in about a dozen British cities, is finally coming to Cardiff. Trinity will finally have decent competition that might make them consider investing in their titles, instead of axing workers. But it illustrates how far the Assembly still has to go to prove itself as a real institution.



ASSEMBLY: Scrawny, like a chicken



WESTERN MAIL: Wins in dragon stakes

Making the breast of a bad situation

The Welsh Assembly's relocation into its new chamber also marked the end of Jayne Sullivan's vigil for the breast cancer drug Herceptin to be funded by the NHS (see page four).

The fight for Herceptin has been one of those long, drawn-out battles that has taken on so many dimensions that no-one really understands what's going on any more. To try and understand it takes a bit of detail - stick with me, you can memorise it and wow your friends at dinner parties.

So, let's start with the basics: Herceptin is one of a new range of cancer drugs that whilst being effective, are incredibly expensive. The debate over Herceptin focuses on the role of the fantastically named Nice, a relatively new body that assesses whether or not a drug is suitable for the NHS. It checks both whether it is effective in its potential use, and whether it is effective for the amount of money it costs. Nice has already licensed it for use for advanced breast cancer sufferers, but the current debate is over whether or not it is suitable for

those in the early stage.

Herceptin's current assessment has been surrounded by accusations that Nice is unnecessarily holding up the drug's approval in order to save money. But whilst 'institution withholds drugs from cancer victim' has made a good story on the news, it misses out some key facts.

The much-vaunted effectiveness of Herceptin is based upon studies in America, some of which have been sponsored by drug companies. There is a possible link to heart disease that has yet to be disproven. And in relation to Nice, the accusations of penny-pinching are harsh on a body that's just had one of its key decision making committees axed. In short, the drug has not yet been proven as safe or effective for the amount of money it would take away from elsewhere in the NHS.

Jayne Sullivan is protesting because she wants the Assembly to tell local health boards to provide the new drug on the NHS for early stage sufferers.



As it is, it is the local health boards that decide whether or not they provide funding for the drug, and her board currently does not.

No-one would begrudge her the right to protest; without the drug she's likely to die, and she has consistently ensured that she has never made any grand, sweeping statements about Herceptin.

But that does not mean that the Government should push the local health boards to provide funding. The major problem is that Herceptin is going to be the first of 40 new cancer drugs that are coming up for review by Nice in the next seven years, and all of them are exceptionally expensive. They are effective against cancer in certain forms. But Herceptin alone could swallow up half of the NHS's drug budget by itself. For the first time, we've reached a point where it's

going to be impossible to fund treatments that could save many lives.

And that is going to be the first real test for the Welsh Assembly. The Assembly have voted to look into making the process of drug approval faster. But if this means simply green lighting all of these new drugs, they will bankrupt the NHS.

That is why the economics are important. The Assembly has suggested moving closer to the Scottish model, which is faster than Nice. But I've spoken to someone from there, who tells me that they rely on the economic data of drug companies instead of doing their own research. That simply isn't good enough.

Just screaming 'reform' to sort out Nice will lead to drugs being misused on the NHS. What is needed is for Nice to be given the resources and time it needs to do its job, and for people to realise that drug testing is more than just a bureaucratic hurdle.

Unless the Assembly learns to make this distinction, we can kiss the chances of a responsibly managed NHS in Wales goodbye.