

**INDEPENDENTLY FUNDED NEWS CONSORTIA - WALES**

**PEMBROKESHIRETV.COM BID**

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**Contents**

**Introduction and Background**  
**Why another News Outlet?**  
**Why public money?**  
**What financial structure best serves "independent" news?**  
**Pembrokeshiretv.com**  
**Finance & the Financial Model**  
**ITV Wales News Slots**  
**Wales - Towards A Genuine National Conversation**  
**The Pembrokeshiretv.com Model**  
**Now is the Time**  
**Towards National Independent News**  
**Relationship To The Current Bid**

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**Introduction and Background**

Before any consortium can possibly justify the spending of public money to support "independently funded news" in Wales it needs to ask and answer some fundamental questions.

- Why another news outlet?
- Why public money?
- What financial structure should it employ?

**Why another news outlet?**

In answering this question we are not being critical of that vast numbers of journalists who work extremely hard every day.

Instead, we are criticising the structures in which they work, and proposing an alternative structure. If the aim of the IFNC is to provide true plurality then the first and most vital step is that a new organisation must NOT emulate, or set its foundations upon those tired, and possibly failing, structures. For brevity's sake the failing structures are ones which force journalists to file too many stories in too short a time, forcing on both journalists and viewers / users an over reliance on

PR operations without the time to conduct independent research.

These structures also tend to mirror and reference each other and be highly centralised, with a small editorial team. We've all been in news rooms where "the opposition's" news broadcasts are on and the papers act as source material. This tends to lead to less and less diversification and less and less genuine plurality, *no matter how many news organisations there are.*

Plurality is not two or more voices saying the same thing. Plurality needs *distinct* voices.

The answer to this question then in Wales of "why another news outlet?" is in part the one so far given, i.e. that the BBC cannot be the only broadcast voice in town. But this answer provides only the most superficial justification and unless the question is more thoroughly explored, the adopted remedy is likely to be both expensive and to fail both financially and in its quest to provide a different voice.

Without disappearing into impenetrable academia we first need to address the question "what is news?" Any assumptions about what counts as news need to be visible, and publicly declared by each consortium. It is not obvious.

The best instant access into this debate is the "Accuracy vs. Truth" question at the heart of Nick Davies' seminal critique of British print and broadcast journalism, "Flat Earth News". Davies identifies key problems for any journalist or news organisation if the quest is "to tell the truth" as opposed simply to reporting accurately what people or organisations say is the truth. There is a difference.

Davies identifies absolute needs for the journalist that seeks to tell the truth. She or he must have the resources to follow the trail of truth beyond the press release, to be able to conduct research and crucially to spend time following a story.

In a world where finances are tight this means that not every story can be told. Some stories will be left out. The new consortium must therefore ask itself what, if we are trying to create true plurality, are the public currently short of? Is it news about celebrities? Is it cosy human interest stories? Is it stories about big organisations launching new products? Is it stories about

assembly government departments launching eye catching initiatives?

Or is it proper, investigative, stories that set the news in context and give a truthful account of the processes and organisations currently disposing of vast amounts of public money with virtually no 4<sup>th</sup> estate scrutiny?

Pembrokeshiretv.com firmly believes that it is the latter that the public are short of. So Pembrokeshiretv.com would aim to tell the truth by telling deeper stories, with more time devoted to research and more time devoted to placing the news in its proper context - i.e. its relevance to the viewer / user. Other news outlets cover the soft stories extensively already and cover the hard stories in haste already.

Again, true plurality is not different voices saying the same thing. Plurality needs distinct voices.

### **Why public money?**

It is clear that *public service* broadcasting of the type that Pembrokeshiretv.com is proposing needs initial funding to get it going. Public money for establishing a public service might well be a good use of taxpayers' money, especially if the safeguards proposed below are also adopted.

### **What financial structure best serves "independent" news?**

The successful consortium needs to be a "not for profit" organisation. This is the only way to guarantee that public money is not used to set up the infrastructure for a high level service only to find that down the line shareholders save money / increase dividends by compromising on research time for stories.

The public investment should also not be open ended and financial self-sustainability needs to be the aim within a limited time-span.

Additional profits can be used to provide deeper, broader coverage rather than be siphoned off by share-holders. This is a medium and long term protection for the kind of journalism at the heart of the operation. Again Davies identifies the need for increased shareholder return as one of the key reasons for the collapse of quality journalism.

The public money might also be required to be paid back within a reasonable time period. (See below for more details).

### **Pembrokeshiretv.com**

Pembrokeshiretv.com, version 0.1, ran from early 2005 through to late 2006 - about 18 months in all.

It provided local video news online but with a more investigative edge.

Difficult stories were followed even if this meant that days at a time would need to be spent following a story. It also stuck with long running stories.

Research conducted for Pembrokeshiretv.com led to us breaking stories or angles on stories, later picked up on by everyone from the BBC through to Bloomberg.

Facts uncovered by Pembrokeshiretv.com currently form the background to an EC investigation and a case before the European Court of Human Rights. Although provincial in the truest sense of being based in Pembrokeshire, we saw no reason not to aspire to the highest standards of journalism.

Pembrokeshiretv.com succeeded in going from unknown to over 3500 separate ip addresses using the site every day. At the time this was higher traffic than the Western Mail's website.

It achieved a high level of "brand recognition" in Pembrokeshire and the name still has a reputation.

It did not become self sustaining for a number of reasons. Lessons have been learned.

- 1 Finance. It was funded nearly entirely though the founder re-mortgaging his home. Advertising was only tentatively explored and at the time an understanding of, and familiarity with web advertising was not widespread in Pembrokeshire, which also suffered from sporadic broadband coverage.
- 2 In seeking to become a "daily" service, Pembrokeshiretv.com set itself an ambition far beyond its then means, and was itself sometimes dragged into the world of "churnalism" rather than "journalism".

- 3 It existed only on the internet. A multi platform presence would be more useful in terms of sustainability. This could either be TV or newspaper.

The new model of Pembrokeshiretv.com would have a clear reporting agenda.

Coverage of the local authority in all its many guises from planning through to service provider to the young and the elderly, the courts, the local health board, the local NHS Trust, fire and police authorities and the town and community councils. The National Assembly and the Welsh Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons would also need to be covered.

These are the units of democracy in Pembrokeshire in the simplest sense. They are the places where decisions will be made that affect everyone in Pembrokeshire.

If a citizen is to understand the people and institutions that govern her or his life, then these are the institutions that need, now more than ever, the scrutiny of the 4<sup>th</sup> estate.

To cover these places effectively Pembrokeshiretv.com would employ 9 full-time video journalists, 2 designer / web specialists, and 3 sales staff.

Two journalists would be dedicated to the local authority, one to the courts, four roving reporters, 1 studio based reporter and one reporter covering London and Cardiff based from Cardiff. Journalists will work on rapid rotation between studio and roving roles and on a slower rotation with court and local authority roles.

Each journalist, except the studio journalist, would be required to produce on average over a month, 2.5 stories a week.

This means that there will be 20 quality news stories on Pembrokeshiretv.com each week. These are longer news pieces, 3 - 5 minute packages. The studio journalist will record intros for the day's longer pieces as well as provide a breaking news update through the day, including weather etc. One roving reporter a day will be required to respond to breaking news pieces for that day's evening highlights. Crucially the other reporters will be free to work on longer, more time consuming matters.

In terms of the website's structure, all past stories would be available on a searchable database. There would be a daily news programme available from 6.30 every evening with highlights of the daily news and the day's 3 longer pieces.

Access to original source interviews and source documents for all stories would also be provided on-line (except where such provision compromises sources or breaches legislation).

Highlights and the longer pieces would all be available for a centralised "ITV Wales" type slot.

There will also be a mixture of citizen journalism and opinion pieces available -currently we cannot give hard and fast rules about how this will work as we are entering new territory and need to experiment.

### **Finance & the Financial Model**

The annual operating budget for Pembrokeshiretv.com would be £600,000. This represents an annual budget of a little under £6 per head of population in Pembrokeshire.

Given the above figures, Pembrokeshiretv.com should become a sustainable business, not needing public money, within 3 years.

This is a self sustainable model. Because the ideal model is "not for profit", once it is self sustaining through sales of advertising and other services, baseline profits could be used to refund the initial public investment into a fund used to finance the next region(s).

Once the initial investment is repaid, or whilst it is being repaid over say a 10 year period, money could also be invested in areas that benefit from even deeper and more expensive investigations.

### **Wales - Towards A Genuine National Conversation**

It was the editor of a local paper in the small Welsh town of Tenby who fought and won the battle to get press (and public) access to the meetings of local government in 1908.

Until the 1970s at least, a vigorous local press in Wales took that right seriously and reported in detail on the doings of local government. Reporting of the courts -

ensuring that justice was seen to be done - was another vital role of the local press.

Those days are long gone and there is now a clear 'democratic deficit' thanks to the decline of local newspapers. Now it is often a council-published newspaper which tells the voters what the leaders want them to know about the authority's decisions. Now it is the police who issue ready-made reports on selected local cases of crime. Where are the reporters who can guard the guardians?

A top-heavy, centralised news service will do nothing to address this deficit. But a network of local TV services committed to redressing the democratic deficit can begin to address this problem. That is one reason why the local TV model should be an integral part of a new vision for public service journalism in Wales.

### **The Pembrokeshiretv.com "Federal" Model**

The ideal end position is that a 22 organisation strong, independent and self sustaining, serious news gathering federation exists across each of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

Here is the decentralised, truly regional, truly plural independent news service that a true democracy needs.

Devolution has brought changes to Wales which have not been reflected by a change in the content and delivery of journalism in Wales. The psychology of the nation is beginning to move from one of "provincialism", where we, as a people, accept the dominance of the UK centre and its role as final judge of our needs including journalistic needs.

The way Wales sees itself is at the heart of this whole question of independent news. Wales deserves to see itself honestly, and in detail.

Wales has new political institutions and old political institutions now have more national significance. There is a need to ensure democratic participation around all institutions of power. Informed participation is impossible without knowledge and context. Good journalism should provide for that informed participation which is the life blood of a successful democracy.

Pembrokeshiretv.com will provide that knowledge and context for Pembrokeshire.

Wales is badly served in its print media on Welsh and local level. Unlike Scotland it has not developed a range of institutions which serve a diverse, questioning and pluralistic journalistic culture. Wales is a different place with different needs and as a small, poor country it has not developed a range of outlets which serve the people commercially.

Pembrokeshiretv.com's model of a 22 strong federal news organisation will provide that knowledge and context for all of Wales.

### **Now is the Time**

Coincidentally with political change we have the advantage of technological change which allows the provision of a different kind of service. Pembrokeshiretv.com is a model for the delivery of local news and investigative journalism of high quality and high penetration.

One of the dangers of this kind of process is that public subsidy tends to support failing models rather than adventurous new models which are truly taking advantage of the opportunities that new technology and changing social behaviour offer.

It is our contention that merely to provide another hierarchical, monolithic news gathering and delivery structure similar to that which exists would not serve the best interests of the people of Wales, and would let down the promise this tendering opportunity can provide.

We do not believe that the structure of news gathering should be hierarchical with the purpose of "local" being to serve the "national". There must be full editorial freedom at the local level. This is the logic of devolution and the logic of "You Tube".

Each sub-region must be autonomous and will take responsibility for the material that it feeds to the "national" TV slot and to print media and radio.

There will be a sharing of resource and material but the relationship between the parts must remain fluid so that we provide a diverse range of views. This argumentative and at times difficult relationship between the parts is essential as plurality is at the heart of this idea. If there is no disagreement between the parts then we will have failed. We do not want to merely deliver a version

of the BBC regional news with a bit of local internet tacked on. This must be an internally diverse and argumentative provision.

We also do not agree that the only sub-regional "local" news should be one for south Wales and one for north Wales. This misunderstands the nature of communities and power distribution in Wales.

PTV clearly serves a need as it is based upon the natural community of Pembrokeshire.

### **ITV Wales News Slots**

Such an organisation, when it exists in a federal form across the 22 local authorities of Wales, would provide for a level of reporting and volume of quality stories far in excess of the needs of the current ITV slots for regional news.

The idea would be for a national news bulletin within a standard TV running order to make full use of "red button" technology and beyond to deliver a choice to viewers about what news they see, as well as providing the central editorial's normal TV style running order as an option.

The editorial mantle would be passed around the regions on a rotation basis to avoid a Cardiff, southern bias. This will further fuel a national conversation.

### **Towards National Independent News**

We are proposing that the experiment of PTV should be continued over the pilot period to "prove" and improve the financial viability, nature and reach of the organisation.

After the first year of operation a feasibility study should be undertaken to develop further regional models based upon PTV's experience.

There is no point rushing to establish these super local sub-regions just for the convenience of this present process.

It is clear that the local authority is the unit of democracy upon which the new news structure should be built.

## **Relationship To The Current Bid**

We recognise that we do not fit the proposed profile of the current bid. However we feel that we are a genuinely new voice, proposing a pilot scheme that can surely feed into the level and complexity of the debate over a long term solution for independent news in Wales.

Our ambition is to make this work with links in Welsh print media and into other forms of old media i.e. television. However we do not at this stage wish to be a part of any consortium until the nature of any relationship, and its impact on editorial independence becomes clear.

There is concern that some who are bidding in this IFNCS process may be more concerned with the short term "cash-cow" status of the opportunity rather than a commitment to the detailed, locally based, high journalistic standards that a truly different voice needs to provide.

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