

## CHANNEL 4

### Stuart Hood

In 1982 we shall have a fourth television channel. The prospect has caused a flurry of activity and hopes among people working in the medium who see in the Fourth Channel prospects of more scope for their ideas and talents, or at least the offer of an opening for programmes which up to now have not found a place in the schedules of the BBC or the ITV companies. Viewers, too, have been encouraged to think that the Fourth Channel will provide a different kind of television from what we are used to — which is undoubtedly wedded to old and tried formulas, to programmes which will on the whole tend to maximise audiences. The question is whether these hopes on the part of members of the audience and of workers in the medium are justified.

It is worth recalling in this connection that the Fourth Channel was originally campaigned for by a group of media people who wished it to function as a publishing agency that would take responsibility for the content of programmes in the same way as a book publishing firm would do. That is to say it would see that programmes were not in breach of the law but would not strive for balance in the views presented in the programmes. This model was accepted by the Annan Committee, which had been set up to look at the future of broadcasting, was given a cursory nod by the last Labour government just before it lost power, and was

thrown out by the Tories. The initial and, it must be said, naive hopes that in a time of economic crisis any government would willingly relax controls on broadcasting never looked like being fulfilled in practice. So the Fourth Channel will operate under the constraints of the Television Act which enjoins that programmes must, for instance, conform to 'good taste and decency' as interpreted by the Independent Broadcasting Authority, which has not in the past been a remarkably liberal body.

Undoubtedly the management of the Fourth Channel have good liberal intentions — although it is worth noting that their liberalism extends to statements that extreme right-wing groups have a right to time on the air. What we can expect from them is a widening in the range of programmes, some changes in formats, perhaps more access and the opportunity to hear new voices. But they will work under the terms of the Television Act which while it encourages 'innovation and experiment' on the part of the new channel, also lays down that 'a proper balance of subject-matter' must be maintained. What a proper balance can mean is well illustrated by the case of Ken Loach's television film on the subject of the steel strike, *A Question of Leadership*. The programme took the form of excerpts from the very long discussion of the strike by steel workers and workers from BL; it brought to

the screen the views of the shopfloor and let the viewers hear a voice that is usually heard only over the heads of the police cordons at the factory gates. The programme company for whom the film was made (it was ATV), acting under what Loach believes to have been strong suggestions from the IBA, insisted that 20 minutes be cut from the hour-long film on the grounds that the trade-union bureaucracy, which was heavily attacked by the workers, was not duly represented. There had therefore to be a studio discussion to include Bill Sirs, which conveniently replaced part of the film in which Alan Thornett of BL was prominent. There is no reason to believe, until evidence is provided to the contrary, that the control systems will be any less finely tuned in the case of the Fourth Channel.

The nature of the problem facing those who believe that the Fourth Channel may allow a radical change in British broadcasting is illustrated by the arrangements for news programming. The main feature is to be an hour-long package provided by ITN, which already provides the main news for the ITV channel. Clearly an hour-long newscast in the middle of the evening, will, in one sense, be an interesting new development in broadcasting. It will allow for wider coverage of events, for the treatment of news at present neglected or given scant and irregular coverage — business, industry, science, technology and the arts (in that order it seems); but the news items on these areas will have inherent in them the same assumptions about society as are to be found in the output of ITN today, which passes as being neutral and objective — 'duly impartial' as the Television Act puts it. News judgments about what is interesting and important will be made by the same news

editors using the same criteria; the words used to define groups, parties, political tendencies and individuals will be chosen by the same sub-editors and the pictures will originate from the same agencies and cameramen as today supply the by no means unbiased illustrations that come up on our screens. In other words the ideology of the news will be unchanged. Strikers will no doubt continue to 'demand' and employers to 'offer'; we are unlikely on the Fourth Channel to see a story in which Michael Edwardes is said to have demanded that BL workers accept a cut in wages.

There have been suggestions that alternative methods of presenting news might be attempted. Different formats of news programmes are not too difficult to think up. One format might involve the discussion of the importance and relevance of news items; another might contain news presented by specific groups giving their view of some event in which they had been involved. They might be black people on the subject of Brixton or the Bristol riots; feminists on the coverage of the Ripper trial; trade unionists on the coverage of a strike. But how would such treatment of news conform to the concept of 'due impartiality' — a formulation which accepts the proposition that the present news is somehow, impartial, unbiased, objective and fair. It is a formulation based on the assumption which lies behind most journalistic practice that 'the news' is something neutral and objective waiting to be picked up by the finely-tuned antennae which constitute a journalist's 'news sense' and not something socially constructed (literally manufactured), and given the trademark of approval by the dominant ideology of our society. The danger for groups taking part in the making of alternative news programmes is that they might easily find themselves being neutralised and forced to work within the assumptions of 'the news'.

This dilemma points to the more general question of whether individuals or groups on the Left should attempt to work in and with the Fourth Channel. There is a purist view, which is also a pessimistic one, that says any such attempt is useless and indeed wrong in principle. Another view is that the institutions are not monolithic and that cracks and contradictions in the monolith must be exploited. This is the argument persuasively advanced by people like Ken Loach or Michael Grigsby who, in the field of documentary, contrive to get programmes on the screen which manage to make statements — in Grigsby's case, for instance, about the repressive nature of Indira Gandhi's government and working class resistance to it — which otherwise would not get

on the air. But such achievement very often involves a degree of self-censorship — or indeed the acceptance of censorship from above. The answer probably is that cases have to be fought individually and that the fight for the right to make certain statements should always be documented, for the authorities would prefer their attempts to apply pressure not to be on the record. There will be some successes and some defeats from both of which useful lessons will be learned. What is important to remember is that the process will take place in circumstances where the Government is actively pursuing a strategy aimed at breaking the power of the unions and weakening the working class by an attack on wages and by the weapon of unemployment. The present Tory government is in a very different situation and mood from the Macmillan



government under which — during the 'you've never had it so good' boom — broadcasting institutions in Britain were able to pursue an expansionist policy in terms of programming. Today, as the broadcasters know, the consensus within which debate can take place on the air has narrowed. That is the atmosphere in which the Fourth Channel will take the air.

What is not often discussed is the role of the companies of the ITV network in the management and policies of the Fourth Channel. They have been strongly represented on the Fourth Channel board; they will sell advertising time on the Fourth Channel and will look to advertising revenue from it to reimburse them and to provide a profit. It is one of the curiosities of the present economic situation that there appears to be no lack of money for advertising; the agencies are reported to be delighted at the prospect of a new outlet on the Fourth Channel and for the AB audience which it is expected to deliver. There is, however, a particular logic in commercial advertising on television; that is that the cost per thou-

sand — what it costs an advertiser to expose 1000 viewers to his commercial — must not be too high. It is a logic that normally leads to maximisation of audiences. It may be that the advertisers and the programme companies will be content with a relatively small but up-market viewership, corresponding to the readership of the Sunday colour supplements. But the commercial interests involved will wish to have a satisfactory return on their investment. If the innovatory programmes, which the new channel must provide under the Act, do not draw sufficiently large audiences no doubt there will be pressures for 'innovation' of a kind that does pull in the viewers. There are those who believe that the companies will wait to see whether the new Channel has proved capable of delivering the required audiences and if not will step in to save it; they have already set up 'independent' production companies which could supply the programmes. More pessimistic observers think there may be a danger that they will take pre-emptive action on the ground that the programme policy is unsatisfactory and will apply pressure to hinder radical programme initiatives. Such are the rumours in an industry given to the manufacture of rumours as much as to the manufacture of programmes. But they are rumours which, on the past performance of the big commercial television companies, do not lack plausibility.

What must always be remembered, when considering the possibilities of the Fourth Channel is the relationship of broadcasting institutions as we know them and as they exist in most countries, is that their relationship to the state is a close one. There may be a degree of mediation through Boards of Governors, for instance — but the duties of the institutions towards society are clear and clearly understood by those men and women who are chosen from a very limited sample of the population to run them. Broadcasting is certainly one area in which attempts can be made to challenge the hegemony of the ideology which is used to hold our society together; the Fourth Channel may conceivably provide an opportunity to challenge that ideology at some times and in some programmes; but we should not look to the new Channel for any sustained critique of our society or indeed of our media. Nor must we fall into an error, of which workers in the medium as well as those who theorise about the medium are sometimes guilty — namely that of suggesting that by changing the most widely-used of the media we can somehow change society. Those who approach the Fourth Channel in that belief are likely to learn a sharp political lesson.