



Regulating The Media Maelstrom

The BBC has become a hot political issue. It is under assault from the Right. But we haven't seen anything yet. Television will soon be turned upside down by a technological revolution. **Brian McNair** looks at what might happen.



Broadcasting now and then: a communications satellite and (below) a combined TV and radiogram, 1952-style

Michael Checkland's appointment as director-general of the BBC provides a temporary respite for the corporation in its current difficulties. The hiatus will be brief, however. Regardless of who from the Conservative, Labour or Alliance parties forms a government after the next general election Britain's system of public service broadcasting is about to undergo radical and unprecedented changes in its structure and organisation.

Some of those changes are the inevitable consequence of new technologies in the field of mass communication. Others are being set in motion by a government dedicated to the construction of a free market broadcasting system. These changes are the most important to have taken place in the cultural sphere since the invention of the cathode ray tube and herald a genuine 'information revolution'.

At present, broadcasting in Britain operates within the framework of a *public service duopoly*, run by the BBC and the IBA. The BBC is licensed by a Royal Charter which guarantees its political independence and is funded from a licence fee set by the government. The IBA and Channel 4 companies are governed by the terms of the Broadcasting Act 1981, and funded from advertising revenue. Channel 4 receives its funds from a levy on the profits of the IBA companies (£130m in 1986).

These organisations are regulated by the state. News and current affairs must be impartial; drama must be socially responsible and within the boundaries of good taste. Pornographic material, for example, is banned. And their programmes are provided free to all licence-holders.

The crisis which has overtaken this system is associated partly with the breakdown of the social-democratic consensus and the rise of Thatcherism. The government has broken with the concept of public service broadcasting and the values which it represents, seeking to establish in its place a deregulated media system in which market forces dominate.

Deregulation in this sense is a libertarian notion. It envisages the state's withdrawal from the business of regulating programme content, and looks forward to 'the development of a free market in broadcast services, based on consumer sovereignty'. This market will contain a large number of channels and a system for viewers to register their preferences by direct subscription payment. In short, deregulation means the privatisation of broadcasting.

One could make sense of this in terms of the Thatcher government's well-known aversion to public sector ownership and control of potentially profitable enterprises, but there is more to deregulation than a knee-jerk Tory reaction to state ownership. The Right's

eagerness to deregulate is also a consequence of the bitter rift which has developed between the broadcasters and the government.

The professional values of impartiality, neutrality and balance which have underpinned broadcasting's political independence are no longer acceptable to the Right. The government has become impatient with an organisation which, taking its political independence seriously, occasionally permits news, drama and documentary programmes to criticise the government of the day.

Previous governments, Labour and Tory, often found this characteristic of broadcasting a thorn in the flesh, but nevertheless refrained from overt intervention of the kind witnessed in the *Real Lives* and *Zircon* affairs. The present Conservative government is less bound by such inhibitions. The BBC, as a creature of the old consensus, has become the enemy of the Right.

Like that other national institution, the Church of England, broadcasting adheres to and presents a view of the world not shared by the present government. From Kate Adie filming the corpses of Libyan children killed by British-based US bombers, to the image of homosexuality presented by Colin on *EastEnders*, public service broadcasting undermines the moral assumptions of Thatcherism before a mass audience.

Thatcherism's ideological quarrel with public service broadcasting happens to coincide with a technological revolution in the media. Video, cable and direct broadcasting by satellite bring into being for the first time the infrastructure for a multi-channel broadcasting system analogous to that which presently exists in the printed sector. Cable networks are being laid, satellites launched, and within a few years satellite receiving dishes will be mass consumption items no more expensive to buy than a colour television set.

The keyword here is *choice*, with at least 20 European satellite stations likely to be broadcasting by the year 2000. In the future, audiences will choose from a range of cable, satellite and radio stations according to their interests, tastes and political or religious views, as today they choose from the variety of printed media available.

The vision of deregulation adhered to by the Right sees this as a choice made by 'sovereign consumers' between channels owned and controlled by multinational capital. In Western Europe the struggle for dominance is already shaping up to be a three-horse race between Silvio Berlusconi, Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell.

The government's deregulation strategy has two elements. Firstly, the conditions for the commercial exploitation of the new technologies are being laid. Following the report of the Hunt Committee on cable, the government awarded 12 franchises for networks throughout the country (the largest of them owned by Robert Maxwell). Satel-

lite channels, such as Rupert Murdoch's Skychannel and the recently-launched Superchannel, are already broadcasting through the cable networks of Britain and the rest of Europe. At the same time, the recently-published green paper reveals the government's intention also to expand radio broadcasting outside the public service framework.

The rules as to what can be transmitted through these new channels will be relaxed by comparison with the present public service guidelines. With the exception of politics (trade unions, political parties and public organisations will continue to be excluded) and pornography, the government has adopted the position that the normal workings of the market will be sufficient to guarantee adequate standards of programming in the deregulated future.

Secondly, the government is mounting a full frontal attack on the existing public service system. This offensive takes the form of an orchestrated propaganda campaign against the BBC, using language usually reserved for militant trade unionists and leftwing Labour councillors. Norman Tebbit and others have questioned the BBC's 'impartiality' over a range of programming (though, it has to be said, without great success), hoping to influence public opinion and 'soften up' the institution while at the same time undermining its structure and organisation.

The government has also restricted the BBC's right to increase the licence fee, ensuring that the corporation will be permanently underfunded unless alternative sources of revenue are found. As production costs grow, the gap between what the BBC earns from licence fees and what it needs to produce quality programmes in competition with other broadcasting organisations will widen. The BBC will increasingly be required to earn extra income from commercial enterprise. By such methods as selling programmes abroad and marketing *EastEnders* spin-offs at home the BBC hopes to raise £100m in extra revenue this year.

There are a number of reasons why the Left should resist deregulation. By removing state controls on what can be broadcast, deregulation opens the floodgates to a lowering of programme standards. Some argue that the commercial need to attract and retain viewers will encourage broadcasters to go for the lowest common denominator. If the examples of America or Italy are indicative, the expansion of cable and satellite will be accompanied by more pornography, more game shows, or a combination of both.

Some on the Left also fear the arrival of 'wall-to-wall *Dallas*'. At present, American companies command 20% of the European broadcasting market. With deregulation European operators will be compelled to take even more US output, since in the fiercely competitive

conditions of a deregulated media system it will be cheaper to import a programme from abroad than to produce one of similar quality domestically.

A further objection to deregulation concerns the possible development of a 'two-tier' broadcasting system. Like the housing market in Britain, a quality of service will be available for those who can afford to buy it, with the rest relegated to a broadcasting ghetto run by what is left of the BBC.

These fears are valid, and accurately foresee some of the effects of deregulation if it were to be implemented on the Right's terms. Indeed, similar concerns have been voiced elsewhere. For example, the Peacock Committee's report showed that the establishment in Britain is not completely united around the government's deregulation strategy. Packing the committee with members thought to be sympathetic to its views, the government let it be known that it favoured the introduction of advertising to the BBC, as a replacement for the licence fee. However, the committee displayed an unexpected degree of political independence, eventually producing a series of proposals which fell considerably short of the government's desires.

Consensus-orientated Conservatives recognise that the privileged status of public service broadcasting is something to be preserved. They are aware that the legitimacy of the political system in Britain is partly bound up with a popular belief in the reality of pluralism and 'free speech'.

Neither is the media industry itself entirely happy about deregulation. The BBC's original development as a public service was partly determined by the reluctance of newspaper entrepreneurs to allow a major competitor into the finite advertising market, since this would inevitably reduce rates. The same logic still prevails. A conflict of interests exists between different sectors of the media industry, and constrains the government from proceeding down the deregulation path as quickly as it otherwise might.

These constraints give the Left grounds for at least some optimism in approaching the media debate. They suggest that there is space for an *alternative cultural strategy* which could oppose the vision of deregulation adhered to by the Right. As yet, however, the Left does not possess a coherent, radical perspective on the media comparable with that now being implemented by the government. It has so far shied away from the issues raised by new technologies and concentrated almost all of its attentions and resources on the printed media. Amidst the 'white heat' of the information revolution the labour movement's hopes appear to ride on the *News on Sunday*. The setting up of a new leftwing newspaper is an important development, but the atten-

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tion given to print at the exclusion of all else does not suggest a grasp by the movement's leadership of the changing cultural environment in which the Left will shortly have to operate. 'Leftwing debates about the media', as someone astutely observed, 'seem to lag behind the actually existing technologies'.¹

In making good this gap in its thinking, the Left must separate the issue of deregulation from the new technologies. Otherwise it is in danger of adopting a cultural luddism. As an ideological concept, deregulation should be resisted. The new technologies, on the other hand, should be welcomed and adapted to before the course of their development is irredeemably influenced by the Right.

The development of new information technologies should be seen by the Left as comparable with the invention of the printing press. Rights of access to the multi-channel media systems now taking shape should be a priority, particularly for a future Labour government.

Within the public service framework significant advances have already been made in gaining access to a range of groups previously excluded from broadcasting: the *Union World* experiment on Channel 4 has survived, and *Right to Reply* on the same channel has gone from strength to strength. Ethnic minorities have been granted facilities to produce special interest programmes. In addition, Channel 4 has been permitted to introduce a new concept of

'balance'. Instead of the traditional public service tradition of maintaining balance within programmes, the 1980 Broadcasting Act allows Channel 4 to maintain a balance across programming as a whole. If one edition of *Diverse Reports* is presented by a supporter of apartheid, the next week's edition will be presented by a supporter of the ANC.

These developments are significant, but they pale when compared with the possibilities presented by the new technologies. For the first time direct access to the electronic media for a host of groups presently limited to print is a realistic demand. To illustrate what such a system might look like, James Curran refers to the Dutch example, where 'airtime and the use of publicly owned production facilities is allocated to different groups on the basis of the size of their membership... The result is a broadcasting system that reflects a much wider spectrum of political opinion and cultural values than that in Britain'.²

Immediate hopes rest, of course, with the Labour Party, which has not been entirely silent on media issues. Labour intends to create a new Ministry of Arts and Media if it wins the next election. Jointly with the Home Office and the Department of Trade and Industry the new ministry would set up a wide-ranging inquiry into the workings of the BBC and the future development of

public service broadcasting as a whole. Questions of control and accountability would be addressed, as would the development of community radio.

Meantime, and mindful of the fact that there might well be no Labour government after the next election, the Left should proceed on the following assumption: change *will* come to the media. If the Left wishes to influence that change it must engage in a delicate balancing operation. On the one hand, the free market, libertarian concept of deregulation must be resisted. If implemented it will lead to the marginalisation of public service broadcasting and increase the stranglehold on our mass culture of media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch.

On the other hand, the democratising, communicative potential of the new technologies must be recognised. Strategies must be devised for harnessing the power of cable, video, satellite and the expanding radio network. This implies a healthy public service system, adapted to take advantage of the opportunities which new technology will bring. Despite their dislike of the Right's deregulation strategy, many of those who work in broadcasting are ready for such a change, and they are waiting for a lead. #

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1 'Transforming Television: Part I, The Limits of Left Policy', *Screen*, Volume 25 Number 2 March-April 1984.
2 See the essay by James Curran in *Beading Reality*.

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