

Screen Strife

Even before the government's broadcasting white paper has been published, the ITV system is falling apart at the seams. It seems ironic that the spectre of a future of unbridled commercial broadcasting should destabilise our main commercial channel. But for all its populist facade, ITV has been a cosy money factory since the early 60s.

Now that's over and the pressures are piling on from all sides. The advertising industry thinks that ITV's audience is too old, too female and too working class. They want to reach a different audience: not *Coronation Street's*, but *Hill Street Blues'* (a series that London ITV had before Channel 4, but buried in its schedules).

So, eager to please, LWT's Greg Dyke axed the wrestling coverage, which still got a weekend midday audience of two million, but the wrong two million for the advertisers: older working-class women.

Similarly, Thames' David Elstein recently said that he wants to abolish programmes for pre-school children because 'this is now very hard to justify. It is not a commercially sensible thing to do'. But, he says: 'We will continue to make the [minority audience] *City Programme*. Why? Because it appeals to certain types of viewers. So the programme performs a useful journalistic function and appeals to a target audience no-one else can reach... [we] can't keep selling the same audience to the advertisers.'

The upholders of a more traditional conception of public service broadcasting have hit back from their power base at Manchester's Granada TV. Ray Fitzwalter, the editor of *World In Action*, has publicly attacked both Elstein and Dyke for attempting a London-based anti-documentary *putsch* on the ITV network.

Below Fitzwalter's article was an advert for the grandly-named Campaign For

Quality TV, an old-fashioned liberal group committed to the broadcasting status quo, signed mostly by Granada folk. ITV's internal divisions have never become this public before (if the pages of *The Independent* constitute a 'public'). In the process, ITV's moral and social bankruptcy has also become apparent.

The commercial arrangements between the 15 ITV companies have broken down too. ITV companies are regionally based, covering populations ranging from London to the Channel Islands. Almost all peak hour programmes are provided by one company for the use of all ('the network').

But the system for allocating the costs of network programmes and the share of lucrative network production work given to each company has never worked particularly well. The large five companies dominate at the cost of the rest. Recent reforms have dislodged the big five from some of their pre-agreed production share. This has been offered for open competition between the 15 companies, the so-called 'flexipool'.

The result is bedlam, as the buyers are also the sellers. Somehow, the 15 companies themselves have to decide which programme proposed to flexipool will get made, and most of them have put in proposals themselves. No-one runs the network, it is a coalition of the more and less powerful, all after the money before it runs out.

For in 1993, the contracts of all the ITV companies are up for renewal. All kinds of bizarre proposals have been floated by the government for how the contracts should be awarded, and they have one thing in common: getting as much as possible for the Treasury with scant attention paid to the 'kind of service that might be offered.'

As a result, the ITV companies are trying to milk the system before the 1993 deadline. They are ploughing the proceeds into a rapid diversification into kindred areas. It is even seriously suggested of Thames TV that it might

'dump the burdensome London weekday franchise in order to concentrate on turning into a lean and hungry production and facilities house'. With this diversification comes an increasing competition between the companies in their non-ITV interests.

Equally comes the temptation to use the ITV franchise as just another tradeable asset to be sold, just like Granada disposed of their publishing arm to (Murdoch's) Collins. So far the IBA has resisted this, but the ITV companies are keenly aware that the IBA's days are numbered.

Collectively, the ITV companies have little to say about



Black days in the ratings war

the increasing conflicts of interest between their businesses and the ITV system. Individually, they are pursuing diverse options. In the end, this is the real reason for the current near-collapse of the ITV system: the companies are behaving like separate corporations with different goals.

Nothing in the white paper will reverse this process, so it seems that the multiple compromises that produced the ITV network system out of 15 regional franchises will continue in crisis for the next five years. •

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