

Broadcast Blues

The recent government white paper has overshadowed all other events in broadcasting this year. What do you feel its impact is going to be on television as we know it?

The big impact will be the consequences of technological change, which the white paper describes, rather than prescribes. For donkey's years we've been talking about how the duopoly of British broadcasting would eventually be affected by a dramatic expansion in media. A large part of the white paper simply explains how that is going to happen, and how therefore some of the systems of ownership and control appropriate to a medium of scarcity will cease to be appropriate to a much more widely spread and distributed range of tv and radio channels.

To what extent was the government's thinking influenced by social change - fragmentation in society - and Thatcherite notions of free enterprise in broadcasting?

One can well understand why this government has long objected to the cosy paternalism, as they see it, of the BBC; and to the lucrative commercial monopoly enjoyed by ITV.

For instance, it is inescapable that ITV should have to face competition and should no longer have a monopoly of television advertising revenue. That was extremely distasteful: it was wholly objected to by an advertising industry which felt it was being held to ransom, and which has found a government sympathetic to that plea.

But the government has chosen to go further in two hugely important respects. First of all, the franchise will go to the highest bidder. That lets a certain sort of media mogul into the game and greatly diminishes whatever qualitative test you can apply. Secondly, they say that the Treasury should receive a tax on revenue, as opposed to the profits, of ITV. But the fact is that the levy on profit did have a bearing on program quality. It meant that

For radio and tv, a year of anticipation culminated in the November publication of a government white paper on the future of broadcasting. **Alice Rawsthorn** discusses the implications of the coming upheaval with **Jeremy Isaacs**, chief executive of Channel 4 from its inception until early 1988

ITV companies could make excellent and hugely expensive programmes and claim the cost against tax. The people who win ITV franchises in the future will have far less incentive - whatever the white paper tries to provide by way of safeguards - to make quality programmes at all. They will be penalised financially if they do.

If one comes to the major matter, the future of the BBC, here the door has been left open - just. I understand that the home secretary fought off an attempt to include in the white paper a date by which the BBC was to be asked to rely wholly on subscriptions as opposed to the licence fee. That was a considerable victory in a rearguard action. If you regard broadcasting not as a series of individual programmes - the most attractive of which can be sold and the least attractive of which have to be provided although they can't be sold - but as a continuous service, then the licence fee is already a subscription, and a very effective one. If you ask people what they think about British broadcasting, 90% or so use and enjoy the current services.

Given that popularity, why has the broadcasting hegemony been so ineffective at staving off this political attack?

Nobody likes the sound of people constantly pleading their own self-interest. And there is a sense in which the duopoly is indefensible in the face of technological change. But I don't think they've been terribly ineffective in large matters of defence. The BBC was slow to see that it had to redefine its role as a national broadcasting system, and it could have done more to put its economic house in order.

Also there was something maladroit about aspects of editorial policy over the last few years, but the BBC's essential journalistic stance was never going to endear it to any government.

So do you feel that the furore over programmes like *Death On The Rock* and the climate of censorship that led to the IRA ban, has propelled the government to go further?

I think it has. It's not so much that the BBC isn't able to defend itself, but it has removed possible allies. If you think of the ruckus caused by earlier BBC internal reorganisation proposals, there were people who would have gone to the stake to defend the 9 o'clock news on Radio 4, or the Third Programme. That coherent body of support has fragmented as other media, including Channel 4, have come along, so the BBC no longer has a loyal block of allies in the Tory party to defend it.

One particular criticism levelled at the BBC is that it has failed to create a modern form of public service broadcasting. Do you believe that the BBC is still trapped in Reithian notions that haven't kept pace with changes in society?

It is a bit. But if by changes you mean the fragmentation of society and the notion of catering for different consumer tastes, I would still give our system, including the two BBC channels, a better chance of meeting that variety of needs than an unregulated market. Channel 4 did try - because it had a specific remit from parliament to do so - to cater for particular interest groups, and I think that was a correct perception of the way things were going. But I wouldn't claim it was unique.

You could argue that the

sort of redefinition of public service broadcasting you are suggesting inevitably ends you up in a market where you choose to view, and therefore pay for what you view. In other words I don't believe that the BBC would have been more defensible to this particular government had it said: 'We are going to abandon our notion of editorial control and simply turn ourselves into a bazaar of different sorts of material.'

In the white paper Channel 4 is given its independence. So far its remit has been very much to be an alternative, a complement to the existing commercial service. Will the programming policy of Channel 4 have to adapt to its new independent role?

I hope not. The government is absolutely clear in the white paper that it wishes to preserve Channel 4's remit,



Isaacs: It won't be easy

and particularly the requirement to provide a distinctive service. But the problem for government that runs throughout the white paper is: how do you reconcile that freedom with different sorts of control? If you give people a commercial imperative, will they still foster and nurture a range of programmes, some of which are wholly uncommercial? If you genuinely want consumers to be free to choose what they experience in broadcasting, do you still need powerful central systems of control? The government has completely failed to make its mind up on that. What the white paper does *not* do, is say: 'There's a market, the consumer is sovereign, let the consumer be absolute king in choosing what to see.'

Once there is this diversity of media - with advertising re-

venue diluted among so many different channels - are you confident that Channel 4 will still be able to pay its own way?

Well, I'm less confident of that than I am of the present system. It's actually quite difficult to predict. One of the huge strengths of Channel 4 is its ability in a restricted situation of only four channels, to buy all sorts of programmes quite cheaply, like those American programmes: *Hill Street Blues*, *Cheers*, and so on. Those programmes will be much harder to get hold of when there are six satellite channels bidding for them. So it won't be easy.

Isn't there an irony, in that the success of Channel 4, the structure it pioneered and its work with the independent tv companies, is generally thought to have encouraged the government to make many of these changes?

Yes, that's true. We found quite a different way of creating programmes and putting them on the screen. We eschewed the hierarchical notions of programmes made only in-house imbued with the corporate ethos. We deliberately fostered plurality. One of the planks in the defence of the old duopoly was: 'Only we know how to make good programmes, so it would be absurd to chop all this up and let other people have a go.' We took some pleasure in chopping this down. And we were fortunate in tapping the energies of people who wanted to make programmes independently of the great systems.

What would you have liked to see in the white paper? How could the television system both embrace the technological changes of cable and satellite, and yet preserve the best of the present structure?

Well, one simple thing that the government could have said is: 'It's absolutely essential with all this other new stuff coming on-stream, to preserve a publicly accountable BBC, and therefore we favour the continuance of the licence fee system. We believe that the public will be willing to pay this modest amount of money every week for four radio channels and two television channels, and come hell or high water, we're going to maintain a mixed economy of broadcasting, rather than a wholly market-oriented system.'

Will we need a change of government to bring this about?

No, I think that the white paper has evidence of unresolved arguments about these matters, and that part of the Conservative Party which adheres to older values will see the wisdom

of sustaining and conserving what we've got.

Surely there's a paradox in so much discussion about plurality, choice, diversity, when if anything the structure of media ownership will be even more concentrated. So one could argue that the notion of choice is a delusion.

If that turns out to be the case, then of course it would be a very evident loss. That's why I'm so in favour of preserving the degree of diversity that's represented within the BBC and by Channel 4. In the long run it may be that the sort of freedoms that enable newspapers like *The Independent* to be born or journals like *Marxism Today* to throw their pebbles into the pool, will also obtain in broadcasting. But in the short term they will have to fight far harder to survive. So there will be a narrowing: I think that is a justified pessimism. •



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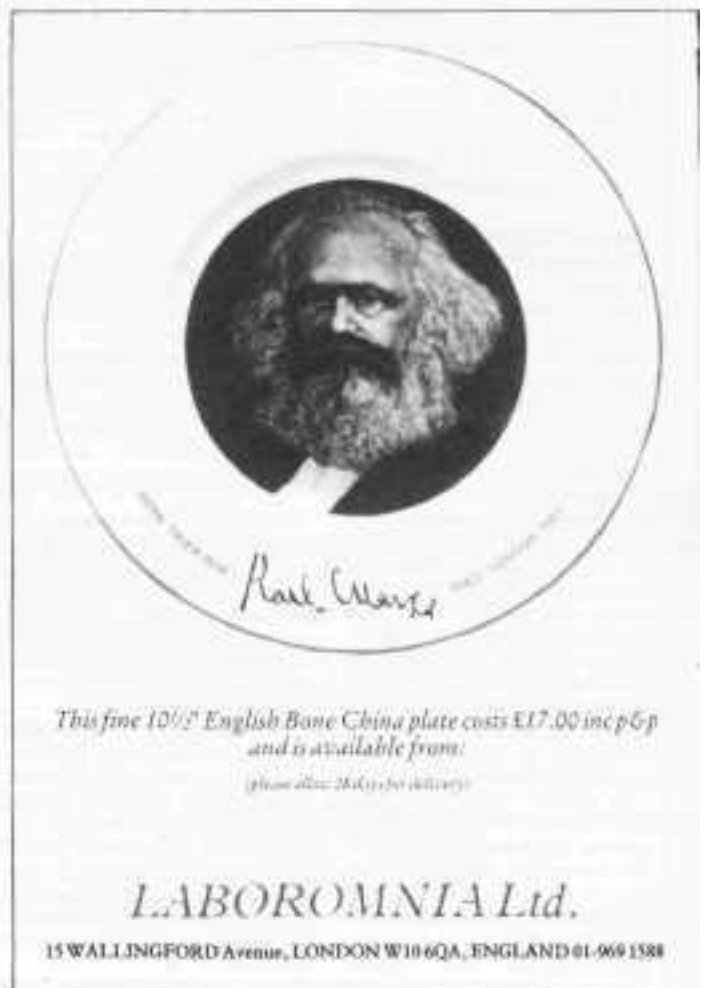
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