

**TELEVISION IN SCOTLAND: A fair day's programming
for a fair day's pay?**

Peter Meech

Peacock has pronounced, ministers and Whitehall mandarins are meditating, and in due course the Government will decide which of the committee's recommendations to implement. But whatever course of action it chooses to take, including the improbable option of "business as usual", television in this country is likely to alter radically in the near future as a result of technological change. The new delivery systems, broad-band cable and satellite, though not widely known here yet, are poised to extend their reach. Both present a challenge to one of the basic justifications for state regulation of the airwaves: the limited range of available frequencies. Over the years the options have increased, but at present the majority of us are still restricted to four channels. However, soon anyone with a dish aerial, of modest dimensions and cost, will be capable of receiving unscrambled television signals from whatever source first "uplinked" them to its transponder. At governmental level, the recent EEC Commission draft directive on future European television policy argues strongly in favour of maximum deregulation of transnational services, subject to such minimum controls as the quota on EEC programming. The sky, it seems, positively eggs on the newcomers to European television, the Murdochs, the Maxwells and the Berlusconi, to extend still further their already huge media empires. But these moguls will have to reckon with determined competition from our existing broadcasting institutions, above all the BBC and ITV, which from early 1987 aim to be "up there" too via Superchannel, providing continental Europe with round-the-clock, UK-produced television fare.

In this futuristic context the set of issues that this essay addresses could appear minor. A concern with regional television policy as it relates to Scotland is in danger of seeming somewhat parochial against the global backdrop of battling multimedia conglomerates and state broadcasting services. But getting the relationships right within the domestic system must be seen as an economic and cultural prerequisite for involvement on the international scene.

In a speech before Easter 1986, the late Stuart Young put forward his views on the EEC draft directive on "television without frontiers". With all the authority of Chairman of the BBC Board of Governors he declared that "the way to reinforce the broadcasting culture of a continent is to ensure that there is vigorous, responsible and diverse national broadcasting activity in every country". As an implicit warning of the threat of insipidity, irresponsibility and sameness of programming that could result from the commercial needs of appealing to a pan-European audience, the statement was timely and met with widespread support. Europe will indeed be better served in its broadcasting by a recognition and celebration of the distinctiveness of its several parts, rather than by appealing to a spurious cultural unity via safe, entertainment-led programming.

Stuart Young's ringing words address a broadcasting system that has yet to be, though Sky Channel (Murdoch) and Cable News Network (Turner) are, for example, by now established satellite channels in Europe. By contrast it is now (November 1986) exactly 50 years since the BBC began transmitting a regular high definition television service to the public. This half-century anniversary, together with a number of recent developments, make 1986 an appropriate year in which to consider Young's recipe for a healthy broadcasting culture against the realities of the current situation, in particular as far as Scottish television is concerned. But before stock-taking of this sort, the term itself requires comment.

"Scottish television" presents something of a problem. Is it programming made in Scotland exclusively for Scots, or, a variant of this, television produced here for United Kingdom audiences? Or, again, is it everything that viewers in Scotland can see when they switch their sets on, guided by the Radio Times and TV Times? For the purposes of this article, the first two definitions provide the focus within a framework set by the third.

Having said that, there remains the additional complication that an individual company arrogated the term as its name in 1960 and has significantly returned of late to using it at all times in its full, rather than abbreviated form. Scottish Television plc has been the holder of the ITV franchise for Central Scotland since commercial television came to Scotland. With a potential of over 3.5 million viewers, it has the largest audience of the three Scottish contractors. Grampian Television, based in Aberdeen, broadcasts to viewers in the North and as far south as Perth and Glenrothes, as well as parts of the East Lothian coastline. Of all ITV companies in the UK it serves the largest geographical area. The smallest and most vulnerable of the three franchise holders, Border Television, is

distinctive in that it serves not only the Scottish Borders but also parts of Cumbria and Northumberland and the Isle of Man.

The franchises are a statutory entitlement to a local monopoly on commercial broadcasting in a specified area and are allocated and monitored by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). Every eight years they have to be readvertised and thereafter either renewed with the existing contractors or awarded to new companies. The next round of franchise reallocation is scheduled for 1988, but there are signs that the Home Office, the ministry with the main responsibility for domestic broadcasting services, may decide to extend the current term for at least two further years, safely beyond the next general election.

Together with the three ITV contractors, BBC Scotland makes up the "comfortable duopoly" (Peacock) that dominates television north of the Border. From its headquarters in Glasgow, it runs both television and radio (the latter at regional and local level) with the help of studios in Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen and elsewhere. Formal control of the policy and content of programmes primarily intended for Scotland lies with the Broadcasting Council for Scotland, whose members are appointed by the BBC and whose Chair sits on the Board of Governors. Effective control, however, is exercised by the full-time management in consultation with the Council.

As yet the coming of broad-band cable has proved less successful than its more enthusiastic supporters in the industry and in government would have wished. Aberdeen Cable Services, the pioneer in Scotland, has made slow progress since it began its service in May 1985, exacerbated by the effects of the fall in oil prices on the local economy. Clyde Cablevision, the holders of the North Glasgow franchise, has also experienced an early short-fall in its customer targets, while Edinburgh's Cablevision (Scotland) has had to postpone its launch till late 1987 at the earliest. Overall, then, the recruitment of subscribers to the new cable services has to date been disappointingly modest, with the result that the overwhelming majority of Scottish viewers continue to receive their television directly from the conventional transmitters of the BBC and IBA.

How do we come to be offered what we are? What are the principal aspects of media politics and economics that determine programme making and scheduling?

For all their many differences of funding, structure and ethos, the BBC and ITV have certain things in common. In particular, both are wedded, as

a consequence of their commitment to public service broadcasting, to the concept of an essentially uniform, UK-wide television service. This is to oversimplify the situation – it leaves out of account the opportunities for regional programming – but the general point still stands. The BBC and ITV both speak of the “network” with reference to their respective UK-wide service and of regional “opt outs”, though the detailed arrangements differ between the two organisations.

In the case of ITV the strategic decisions affecting which peak viewing programmes are made, by which company, and when they are to be screened are made by the Network Programme Committee. This body is composed of the chief executives of all the ITV companies, the editor of Independent Television News, senior IBA staff and the directors of programmes of the “Big Five” (Thames, London Weekend Television, Central, Yorkshire and Granada). With the exception of Yorkshire, which was added to this group in 1968, these companies, or, in the case of London and Birmingham, their predecessors have taken responsibility for determining the network schedule since the start of commercial television in the 1950s. Being first in the field and based in major centres of population, they negotiated themselves an arrangement which has guaranteed them regular preferential treatment as regards access for their own products to the nation’s screens. In 1984-85, for example, the five “majors” made 46.5% of networked or part-networked programmes and the ten regional companies 8.5%.⁽¹⁾ (The remaining 45% comprises ITN bulletins, British feature films, EEC and overseas quota material etc.) In other words, the majors made nearly 85% of home-produced networked programming, or 5 out of every 6 hours.

In justifying the continuance of this system, apologists point out that the Big Five’s substantial investment in staff, studios and equipment requires to be properly used if they are to remain economically viable. Also, large-scale projects entailing massive budgets (such as Granada’s “Jewel in the Crown”) need advance guarantees of network transmission – and hence intercompany sales – before they can go into production. And finally, publicity and promotional work (for example, the “TV Times” and advertisements in the national press) are facilitated by a more or less standardised provision.

The Broadcasting Acts of 1954 and 1981 specify that a proportion of programmes are produced for local consumption by each of the ITV regional companies. As administered by the IBA, this requirement obliges Scottish Television to screen a minimum of 9 hours, Grampian 5.75 hours and Border 4 hours every week. The IBA’s responsibilities extend also to

stipulating the inclusion of educational/factual programmes at peak viewing times and imposing a maximum quota on foreign programming. Such regulatory controls – and there are others besides – help to underpin our system of public service broadcasting, thereby guaranteeing that even in commercial television a concern for maximum audience ratings is not the sole determinant of output. Irksome this may be for some ITV schedulers, paternalistic for some libertarians. Yet there is a real risk that the wholesale deregulation and exposure of broadcasting to market forces alone could lead, for example, to increased reliance on cheap, but popular imported continuous serials and action-adventure series, thereby reducing opportunities for programming other than light entertainment and for the expression of dissenting views.

“Opting out” of the network allows regional companies to go their own way, substituting their individual choice of locally produced programmes (and other material) for that selected by the network. The practice has its obvious attractions for the regions, allowing them as it does the freedom to shape their offerings to the perceived needs and interests of the communities they serve. But the current system ensures that this happens less frequently than it otherwise might. Opting out of the network for reasons that are felt to be perfectly legitimate to a regional company but not to the network planners runs the risk of possible discrimination against the offending company’s future products. In this way regional companies are constrained in the programming policy by the Big Five.

The structure of ITV, a federation of small to large companies, geographically dispersed and commercially independent, contrasts with the huge, monolithic BBC. Nevertheless, the tension that exists between the needs of the parts and of the whole in the ITV system has similarities with the situation at the BBC.

Since its earliest days the BBC has advanced the claim to being a national institution, centred on London, it is true, but providing a service for the UK as a whole. However, there have long been reservations about the implicit assumption underlying the notion of a national culture. The same is true of a perceived metropolitan bias deriving from largely centralised policy making and programme production. The issue surfaced again of late in connection with the BBC’s restructuring of its English regions and, in an impassioned way, at the industry’s own Edinburgh International Television Festival in August. But what exactly is the relationship between the Corporation’s London-based and regional production and how, specifically, does Scotland fare?

Altogether the BBC produced 11,437 hours of television in 1984-85, not counting feature films, Open University and bought in programmes.⁽²⁾ 6,008 hours (or 52.5%) were made in London and the remainder by the English regions, by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In terms of total number of hours of programmes transmitted BBC Scotland is well ahead of most production centres outside London. With 757 hours of output in 1984-85 it was exceeded by only Manchester (867) and Wales (1,066, of which 567 hours were for S4C). The previous year Pebble Mill in Birmingham had beaten Scotland into fourth position in the regional league table. From a Scottish perspective this state of affairs appears on the face of it to be very satisfactory. But is it in reality?

The answer depends on your view of BBC Scotland's role in the UK-wide BBC system. If you think that it should chiefly be producing programmes for consumption north of the Border, then the 544 hours so allocated (out of the annual total of 757) may seem generous when compared with the local output in the South, currently running at about 200 hours per area. If, on the other hand, you take the view that Scotland has at least as much right as Birmingham, for instance, to be making programmes for the network, then these figures tell a sorer tale. For whereas Manchester produced 668 hours for UK-wide screening in 1984-85, Pebble Mill 541 and Bristol 310, Scotland's contribution amounted to 213 hours. Or, to put it another way, the proportion of networked programmes in relation to total output was 61% for Bristol, 73% for Pebble Mill and 77% for Manchester. By contrast, the figure for BBC Scotland was a mere 28%. (The comparable figures for 1975-76 were: Bristol 53%, Pebble Mill 70%, Manchester 70%, Scotland 26%.)

The explanation for this seeming discrimination is that the five English regions have never been expected to produce very much more than a restricted amount and range of local interest programming, typically a 30 minute news magazine every weekday and little besides. This modest commitment has thus allowed Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol in particular to concentrate on developing specialist areas of programme making for the network. However, BBC Scotland, in common with BBC Wales and BBC Northern Ireland, is recognised as having a special responsibility to reflect the cultural identity of the "national region" to its people. To a greater extent than Wales and Northern Ireland, this involves BBC Scotland in an attempt to do justice to the nation's distinctive institutions (educational, legal, church, sport etc), as well as providing a Gaelic language service, in little over 10 hours per week. This severe pressure on resources militates against production for the network in any way commensurate with Scotland's proportion of UK television licence

holders (1 in 12, 1985 figures). However, BBC Scotland's own view is that simply to seek to boost the quantity of network output would be a mistake. Far better to build a reputation by producing high quality programmes and in this way attract extra commissions and resources. For the present it seems as if this cautious strategy has been at least partially vindicated, as will be seen later.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the Annan Report on the Future of Broadcasting was the addition of a fourth, nationally networked television channel in 1982. Annan had recommended five years previously, among many other things, that there should be greater diversity of content and format on British television and that one likely solution lay in increasing the broadcasting opportunities for UK independent producers outwith the BBC and ITV. That recommendation was implemented from the start and continues, four years later, to determine much of the distinctive character of the channel through the 24% of programming acquired from the independent sector.

An ingenious financial arrangement effectively separates the activities of revenue raising from that of editorial decision-making. Channel 4 and its Welsh counterpart Sianel 4 Cymru (S4C) are largely funded by an IBA administered subsidy levied on the ITV companies, which in return sell the available advertising airtime in their franchise areas, in addition to, and often in special packages with, that on ITV 1. The two Fourth Channel companies are thereby assured an important degree of autonomy to commission and schedule their own programmes, without undue pressure to achieve high audience ratings for particular slots such as affects both ITV 1 and the BBC. Initially, viewing figures for the new channel were low and sales of airtime disappointing. Audience ratings have gone up, but more interestingly there is a growing recognition on the part of certain advertising agencies and their clients that Channel 4 audiences have demographic characteristics of interest to them, insofar as they tend to be young, up-market and discriminating.

The ITV companies still pay hefty subsidies (related to their profits) to Channel 4 and S4C - Scottish Television contributed over £9m to the former and £2m to the latter in 1985, with smaller, but still significant amounts from Grampian and Border. But these and other contractors' involvement with the Fourth Channel is not limited to the sale of advertising time and the subsidy. They are also major suppliers of its programmes. These programme sales naturally generate extra revenue as well as gaining very desirable screentime for less mainstream projects. Also, should any of these programmes prove especially popular, there is

the bonus for ITV of having the right to repeat them on the other channel. During the year 1984-85 33.75% of Channel 4 transmissions were of ITV or ITN origin. Not unexpectedly, maybe, a similar though less startling⁽³⁾ imbalance exists here too between Big Five programming (12.5 hours per week) and that of the ten regional companies (6.25 hours). This provides another cause of resentment for some of the latter, who argue that Channel 4 has become more and more metropolitan in outlook and inequitable in its commissioning of work from the regions. Last year, for instance, Grampian paid £554,000 in subsidy and earned nothing by way of programme sales, and even Scottish Television received only £291,000 in return for its £9.1m subscription. To demand an exact match between subsidy and sales⁽⁴⁾ would clearly be unrealistic, especially within the space of a single financial year – Channel 4 needs the guarantee of financial security, yet specific programme ideas may simply not appeal to its commissioning editors. But a substantial and continuing discrepancy between the two is another matter. Allied to this is a sense of grievance concerning the obligatory payment to S4C for its Welsh language programming, which in the case of Scottish Television amounts to over 10 times more than it can find to spend on its own Gaelic programmes.

Discussion of the financing and programme policy of Channel 4 leads naturally to the area of independent production, one of the main justifications for its creation. In 1983-84, the Channel's first full financial year, independent productions accounted for 936 hours and 29.4% of C4's airtime.⁽⁵⁾ By 1985-86, during which period the total airtime had grown considerably, the independents' hours (at 974) had increased rather more modestly, to represent a proportion that has declined to 24.9%. Over the same period there was an increase in real, though not proportional terms of ITV/ITN programming, but "acquired material" (feature films and foreign programming) leaped from 33.5% to 45.2%.

Disappointed with the opportunities presented by Channel 4, the independent producers, or "indies" as they are known, have for some time been lobbying for access to the other channels. In this they have had the support of the Peacock Committee, which, aiming among other things at reducing the costs of television (for which it holds the broadcasting unions, principally at ITV, responsible) has been anxious to further their activities. The Committee took the view that the work of independent producers, free of the restrictive practices associated with in-house production, should be increasingly incorporated in the BBC and ITV schedules. This could be expected to lead to a reduction in permanent staff, especially in London, and a consequent curb on the power of the unions, the ACTT in particular. (Such a proposal has obvious attractions for the present Government.)

Thus the Committee recommended that within a decade no less than 40% of BBC and ITV transmissions should come from the independents, although they themselves, through the Independent Programme Producers Association (IPPA) are currently campaigning for the lower, but still substantial figure of 25%. Even this degree of access, however, is regarded by the BBC and ITV as quite unrealistic and, indeed, counterproductive. David Elstein, independent poacher turned Thames Television gamekeeper, takes a position that is shared by other ITV executives:

"Even the 25% quota for which some of the Independent Programme Producers Association members are currently campaigning means substituting independent production for nearly half of ITV's current in-house effort: a campaign with such an effect will only serve to alienate many of those people who would otherwise be sympathetic to the declared objective of stimulating greater efficiency and creativity in the industry".⁽⁶⁾

Over and above the issue of staff redundancies or increased internal unit costs which would affect both the BBC and ITV companies if such a quota were to be imposed, the latter have another argument: they are already obliged to subsidise Channel 4 (as noted above) to enable it to commission independent productions. Why, they ask, should they have to pay the indies a second time? Be that as it may, the advent of "daytime" broadcasting brings with it the need for additional programming. Clearly this presents the independent sector with an opportunity to demonstrate that it can not only make the kind of programmes that the BBC and ITV are looking for, but can do so at competitive prices.

In addition, the BBC indicated early in 1986 that one of its priorities for the future will be to nearly double the number of programmes made by, or in collaboration with, UK independents, to a minimum of 150 hours per year by 1988. A budget of modest proportions has been earmarked for this purpose and the development has been cautiously welcomed by the independents as a step in the right direction, especially if editorial control is ceded. A less attractive alternative for them, because of reduced autonomy, is involvement on a freelance basis. (The BBC is currently employing increasing numbers of freelance directors and producers for specific projects.)

So much for the broad outlines of the organisation and financing of television in this country. But does the criticism of it that claims that it works to Scotland's disadvantage amount to any more than a form of nationalist paranoia? How could television in Scotland benefit from

changes to the system? And what, if any, are in the offing?

In the first place, greater access to the networks would give Scottish programme-makers the professional satisfaction of a wider domestic audience, a more visible showcase for foreign sales and enhanced career prospects. As it is, one still encounters the claim that a patronising attitude prevails among some network programme controllers and other senior executives towards Scottish output, which accounts for a feeling that it is screened nationally more as a concession than as of right. Despite this, there is evidence of increased self-confidence among Scottish television programme-makers and management, who, resentful of the suggestion of second class status and asserting production values comparable to those obtaining elsewhere, are anticipating a greater UK impact than hitherto.

Enhanced programme sales (ITV) and increases to centrally determined budgets (BBC) would allow production centres in Scotland to grow, thereby providing extra employment and pulling in more of the creative and technical talent that is currently wasted or that has to travel either to the south or abroad to find work. This could either involve additional staffing at existing institutions – not a likely prospect – or it could mean contracting out work to, or more co-productions with, the Scottish independent sector. In either case it would also be of more general benefit to local economies – Grampian Television, for instance, estimates that it currently contributes approximately £8m per annum to the North East.

Over and above the benefits that a “new deal” might have on quantity of output, staff morale, employment prospects and local prosperity, it would create opportunities for a specifically cultural impact both at home and abroad. Structural changes, in other words, could be decisive in helping to promote a more authentic view on television of Scotland and “Scottishness”. Back in 1977 Annan had observed that:

“Something is wrong with the image of Scotland which television projects to the rest of the United Kingdom. The national culture is reflected too much by hackneyed symbols, and too little importance is given to the new opportunities and hopes, the shifts in pattern of industry and occupations, as well as the dour problems and grim realities of life in some parts of Scotland today”.⁽⁷⁾

Part of the problem lay in the perceived need to make programmes that would appeal to television controllers based in England and to English audiences. This involved a heavy reliance on material that drew on a restricted set of representations of Scotland. Such “typically Scottish”

programmes employed what John Caughie has called “the frozen discourses of Tartanry and Kailyard” to suggest “a petrified culture with a misty, mythic, and above all, static past”. Representations of this⁽⁸⁾ kind, repeated and recycled ad nauseam on UK television screens, simply reinforced the old cultural stereotypes that pre-dated the coming of the medium. Demands have often been made that this process be reversed, so that the realities of contemporary – and indeed, historical – Scottish life are more accurately reproduced in all its many-sided and contradictory forms. To date this has mainly applied to domestic television. With the advent of pan-European broadcasting there will be new, enlarged and disparate audiences to appeal to. The danger here is that the goal of international audience maximization could entail playing safe and relying on conventional themes and approaches, a return to a set of discourses that must be resisted in the interests on Scotland’s television culture and image abroad.

In the meantime, there have been recent developments at both the institutional and programme level which hold out the hope of a more vital Scottish television industry, one that is better attuned to current realities affecting the nation and, at the same time, more adept at staking its legitimate claim to international attention.

Drama is flourishing, though such are the high production costs involved that no broadcasting organisation can any longer afford to make plays for screening in Scotland alone. The recruitment of Bill Bryden to Queen Margaret Drive to head the BBC’s Drama department has had a predictable and marked impact. Coming from the National Theatre in London, Bryden is described by a colleague as “noisy” and very, very pro-Scottish”. These qualities plus a formidable reputation as a man of the theatre have already been largely instrumental in securing for BBC Scotland overall responsibility for the “Play for Today” season. Of the 13 dramas in this revival of the Corporation’s commitment to innovative single plays, no fewer than 7 are being made in Scotland. Across at Cowcaddens, Scottish Television has had its own success with single plays for the network, while its mini-series “Taggart” continues to earn not only critical acclaim but also excellent ratings at prime time throughout the UK. A fourth series is, as a result, currently in production.

Gus Macdonald is another Scot to have returned from England in recent months to a key broadcasting post. Of the new Director of Programmes at Scottish Television it has been said that he has a veritable sense of mission to increase the amount, raise the standards and broaden the scope of local interest programming. Certainly, he quickly attracted

journalists of repute from outside to sharpen up local news coverage. Current affairs have also received a boost, as have the arts, beginning with a multi-faceted celebration of the 1986 Edinburgh Festival. All of this has been well publicised in the national press, for a high profile strategy is something that Macdonald believes his company should adopt both within Scotland and beyond. He himself has been prominent in campaigning for a fairer deal for regional ITV companies with the network and is confident of making headway in this. Within Scotland the influence of a revitalised Scottish Television now seems set to galvanise the whole industry to produce programmes that harness creative imagination to technical innovation, treat viewers consistently with respect, and give expression to the rich diversity of Scottish contemporary life.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their previous under-representation on Channel 4, Scottish producers have lately been breaking new ground on the channel. Grampian, for instance, in an enterprising co-production with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation made a series of 8 one-hour documentaries, entitled "Oil", on the industry world-wide, which was screened in Autumn 1986. And of several projects from the independent sector, "Down the Line" deserves mention on two counts. It is the first regular current affairs programme from a distinctively Scottish perspective and a collaborative venture, involving not only the Skyline and Scotquest production companies, but up to ten other local independents. The studio shoot takes place at Picardy Pictures, Scotland's first hire-only facilities house, open in Edinburgh in early 1986, which also has responsibility for editing and post-production. Including such other companies as In-Video, SSK and Scope, the facilities industry has grown over the past three years to the point where Scotland could be said to be self-sufficient for present needs.

It can be argued that a general resurgence of nationalism and demands for a devolved assembly find their broadcasting inflection in the pressures that are building up for a better deal for Scottish television (in the first two senses discussed above). If so, there is obvious political capital to be gained here for a government which, while rejecting devolution proper, might well favour a less centralised BBC and an ITV system less monopolised by five large companies. It is not necessary here to rehearse the likely motives behind the setting up of the Peacock Committee, the appointment of both the present Chairman of the Board of Governors and of his predecessor and the formation of the Conservative Central Office media monitoring unit, to make the point that the government wishes to bring the Corporation to heel. Some structural changes, it is true, have been introduced in recent months by the BBC. But the initiative involving the new English regions,

which, with their modest budgets and no right of opt out, are predicted in the short term to produce only 0.5% of additional network programming, seems more like a sop than a shake-up. Nevertheless, fingers are crossed at BBC Scotland that this move may in the longer term lead to a commitment on the part of the Corporation to increased regional autonomy and opportunities for regional production. In its turn, the IBA has publicly acknowledged the strains in the system it regulates, but has yet to show any apparent willingness to promote effective improvements. Only from Channel 4 is there the hint that Scotland is due for a fairer deal.

Meanwhile, pressure is growing for an overhaul to satisfy the legitimate regional aspirations of today and in the imminent future of trans-national broadcasting. If the BBC, the IBA and the ITV companies refuse to participate constructively in this process, they might yet find that change of a far more radical and less welcome variety is pressed on them.

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