

Response to the Second PSB Review – Phase 2

I was sad to discover that whilst in 2003 ITV, Channels 4 and 5 spent £500m on public service elements; by 2012 it is estimated that this will have fallen to £200m. It raises the question of whether the Licence Fee should be used in part to maintain the traditional ecology of broadcasting we have enjoyed hitherto. I think that that part of the Fee used for digital switchover should be so used. I see that the Gaelic language tv service for 60,000 (sic) Gaelic speakers, launched 2 months ago, is costing £21mpa. BBC Alba is being funded mainly by Government rather than the Licence Fee. The Scottish Broadcasting Commission in September floated the desire for a dedicated Scottish television channel (population of Scotland 5m.) at an annual cost of between £50-75mpa. It is puzzling that ITV must so dilute its local news service (population of Britain 60m.) to save £40mpa. Here, 300 miles from London yet in England, in so many areas of life including broadcasting, we are becoming increasingly conscious that the regions of England are being drained disproportionately compared with spending per capita in the other nations.

I recognise that Ofcom's power is limited. It can determine for ITV the pattern of news, its quantity and whether it is broadcast at peak or off-peak times but cannot say how much money should be spent, how many employees there should be or where the facilities should be located. I am sorry to see that the overall duration of news would fall from 5hrs. 20m. to 3hrs. 45m. per week and that apart from 15 minutes within the 6pm programme and post-News at Ten the joint Border/Tyne-Tees region would extend 170 miles North-South and 170 miles East-West plus the Isle of Man. That cannot be a coherent region with any meaningful sense of identity.

I remain concerned how long any agreement between Ofcom and ITV could hold. With the economic downturn (I think I read that ITV's year on year revenue had fallen by 20%) I suspect that the Executive Director of ITV, Michael Grade, could turn round in a year and make further cuts which, frankly, Ofcom could do nothing to prevent. That might indeed mean that the separate Border/Tyne Tees opts could be merely for a honeymoon period to lure viewers across with familiar faces but by then new Tyne Tees faces would have become known on this side of the Pennines.

Ofcom consultations (through panel discussions held in various parts of the Border region) have, I know shown that people in South Cumbria

would prefer to receive Granada news from Manchester rather than Tyne Tees from Gateshead and that in the Scottish Borders the preference was for the STV Glasgow output. As the franchise map is fixed until 2012 I suspect that if ITV local news survives beyond that, then the map would be redrawn to allow those areas to look in different directions, so leaving just North Cumbria, South-West Scotland and North Northumberland from the former Border region seeing the Gateshead-originated programmes. This would mean that 300,000 people in North Cumbria, half that in SW Scotland and even fewer in North Northumberland would feature little in a programme serving the 3million living between greater Newcastle and Teesside.

It is sad to see the end of an ITV presence in Carlisle which dates back almost half a century and regret that Border did not retain its financial autonomy in 2002. I understand that at current levels of local production Border still makes a profit. I will also be sad that those non-news programmes which instil and reflect pride of place and joy of home will no longer be 'local'. This is an area of regional output from which the BBC withdrew a generation ago. Again, whereas the strength of cultural identity is being increasingly reflected by the BBC in the small nations with growing budgets and more ambitious output, there is nothing comparable in the English regions which are equally distinct from London and the South-East. What's more the BBC is about to increase the political clout by upgrading the BBC national controllers to directors, the Controller, English Regions, post is being abolished. It all seems very unfair when viewed from the perspective of the far North of England beyond Yorkshire and Lancashire.

Can I finally mention religious broadcasting ? What remains on ITV is pure tokenism having been placed in a graveyard slot. It is little short of insulting to place "Advent Act of Worship" at half past midnight on Monday 1 December. At a time when, this past week, we have once again seen the significance of religion in world affairs, television does so little to attempt to understand it. Channel 4, and indeed at times Channel 5, have recently made some effective, interesting and enjoyable religious programmes. Please ensure that they have a continuing interest and involvement in this field even if the glory days of ITV religious output are past. Much against the received wisdom, religious programmes made to high production standards, well promoted and effectively scheduled can gain audience for a given time slot. That should be justification enough for ensuring that they remain in the peak-time schedules.

I would like to thank the Ofcom's staff who have taken the trouble to visit this area and assess the mood in the Border Television region.

Nigel Holmes