

# WHY WE'RE BOXED IN

by Jenny Rathbone, ACTT

Stuart Hood On Television (Pluto Press, £2.95) is, as he says, 'a critical analysis of the structures and functioning of television in our society'.

This clear and concise handbook should be compulsory reading for all television workers and anybody who feels complacent about the 'impartiality' of television.

Television still manages to hide behind a mask of 'balance' and 'public accountability'. While newspapers come under scrutiny and criticism, protests from groups excluded or misrepresented by television have yet to flower into a public debate.

Women, blacks, trade unionists and others who are dissatisfied are confined to struggling for a share of the fourth channel cake.

Yet as the conflicts brought on by the depression become more severe, the pressures on television to conform and distort are increased and the need to assert television's role become more urgent.

How is it that all three existing channels can get away with linking the Brixton riots with a debate about immigration? What is 'balanced' about heralding the Social Democrats as the greatest thing since sliced bread?

Stuart Hood provides the explanation of such coverage. He dissects the assumptions about professional standards which shroud the mechanisms of subtle distortion.

The way in which the camera frames its subject, an interviewee is lit, studio

seating is arranged all convey political messages based on unquestioned values.

An unsympathetic interview is more effective if accompanied by harsh lighting; the views of someone filmed in profile at a distance are less likely to carry weight than someone who is allowed to address the viewer directly, looking straight down the camera without the intermediary of an interviewer.

Such a privilege is confined to senior politicians, heads of state, Church leaders and other members of the establishment who claim to speak on behalf of the nation; it is also the prerogative of newscasters who are imparting 'objective' facts.

Senior politicians are not subjected to close ups which reveal the detail of their emotions; such familiarity does not become their position. However the emotions of ordinary people, grief, pain or joy, are regularly intruded upon in this way.

Newcomers to the industry are expected to adopt the well-tried methods that are the tricks of the trade in the interests of aesthetics, watchability and balance.

The more conflictive the subject, the more obvious the bias. Striking workers are interviewed on the picket line, without warning or consultation, amidst the hubbub of the traffic; their employer is interviewed

in the security of his or her office with at least the time it takes to rig the lighting and camera equipment to discuss questions with the interviewer.

Such practices are rarely questioned by the programme makers. The production staff are carefully selected to fit in with the established image of the BBC or a particular ITV company.

The division of labour ensures the alienation of technical staff from the product of their work; they are moved so rapidly from one programme to another, from light entertainment to drama to news, that they have little opportunity to grasp the nature of the subject.

Their work is technically correct, but they have no control over how it is edited. Television workers are producing programmes just as Ford workers are producing cars and the driving force behind their employers is to maximise their profits.

Hood traces how the present situation has evolved through the history of television, firmly controlled by government since its inception. He points to some of the technological innovations already in use in the United States which could either improve or worsen the situation.

Today television remains an exclusive product, financially prohibitive, technically bemusing and outside the control of most people. All the more reason why what is included, as much as what is excluded, should be thoroughly examined.

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millionaires' take-over bids mean for the press, and those behind publications like the *East End News* and radio stations like Cardiff Broadcasting tell about the alternatives.

*Free Press* is not short on ideas and analysis — about what lies behind media bias, and what can be done about the Press Council, how the monopolies which distribute the press can be challenged, the whys and wherefores of a labour daily, and why we have to put an end to official secrecy.

The action is there, too! *Free Press* is helping to build the Campaign for Press Freedom, and it

reports on the local and national activities which are letting thousands of people know that they can take on the media moguls and win.

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## CRITICAL VIEWING AND LISTENING

THE TUC has published a brief guide for trades unionists, which, in the words of Moss Evans, "is intended to be a practical companion for the concerned news and current affairs consumer."

"It is vital," he added, "that the views of trade unionists about the way their affairs and their concerns are covered by the broadcasters be determined and registered and that is the reason we have published this document."

The guide mentions that forms for monitoring radio and television are available from the TUC. Moss Evans, who is chairperson of the TUC's Media Working Group, commented: "Monitoring the broadcasting media is one way of gathering in a much more systematic way views about the strengths and weaknesses of our radio and television output."

The guide is available from: Press and Information Dept, TUC, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

It provides information on how the right of reply can be demanded and won. It challenges the existing forms of media ownership and control.

Trade unionists on papers such as *The Times* and *The Observer* give the inside story on what the

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# FREE PRESS

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SUPPLEMENT ON TV

10p

# CHANGING TELEVISION

## NEWS FLASH

This supplement to *Free Press* presents a radical programme to deal with TV bias. It is edited by Thames TV director-producers GREG LANNING and ALAN HORROX following discussions with 15 other broadcasters in the BBC and ITV companies, together with others involved in investigating media bias.

Where we start from

THERE IS increasing criticism of the coverage of industrial, economic and political affairs by the media in general and by television in particular.

Many trade unionists and Labour Party members have complained about the coverage of the 1979 public sector pay dispute; the 1980 Labour Party conference; and the establishment of the Social Democratic Party.

These complaints have been substantiated by a series of detailed academic and trade union studies. There has also been sustained criticism of television and the media from the women's movement, from ethnic minorities and many other groups such as claimants, young people, and the old.

For many the solution to these complaints is simple. Since the media are seen as presenting a distorted picture of the real world, then all that is required is a change of control to substitute a 'real' picture of the 'real world'.

This point of view avoids the central problem. However fair and even handed the programmers or the programming, the problem remains that all media will inevitably be biased, whoever controls and operates them, because media represent the world through a process of selection, rejection and creation.

The problem then is not 'how to represent the real world in a real way', but rather 'how to represent and recognise the different, often conflicting, views of the "real world" which exist within society and within the mass media themselves'.

Equally important, how can these different views and interpretations be brought into the open rather than masked by a mythical cloak of impartiality?

Understandably, most recent criticism has been directed at news and current affairs programmes because the coverage of industrial, political and economic affairs is seen as central to the political process. But the problem is more widespread than the 'bias in the news' debate recognises. All television programmes — drama, comedy, light entertainment and children's programmes — represent society.

News and current affairs programmes cannot be separated from the total context in which they operate. Other programmes confirm and endorse the view of society given by news and current affairs and they legitimise each other. Thus, for example, stereotypes of workers, women, and blacks recur in different forms throughout television programming.

The problem of unfair representation of society by television cannot be resolved by seeking changes only at the level of programmes and programme makers.

Any structure for broadcasting must therefore recognise that no single individual or organisation can fairly represent society, and instead must build on the recognition of the different interests and biases in society and in the media themselves.

Proposals to reform the broadcasting institutions must involve greater democracy to ensure that the differences in society are fairly represented and must be addressed to three basic

aspects: the aims, the control, and the access to the media.

A minimum package of measures should at least seek to implement reforms under each of these categories within the existing structure of the main broadcasting institutions.

A longer-term aim should include the revision of those structures in order to break down the centralised control of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Broadcasting Authority and replace it with a more democratic and accountable structure.

Our proposals for reforming the structure and operation of the broadcasting institutions are outlined in detail here, but we believe that the principles of democratic control and public access on which they are based, should also apply to the emergent information technologies based on micro-electronics.

We also believe that the proposed reforms of the laws of contempt, libel, and the Official Secrets Act, as well as the proposed Freedom of Information Act, should clearly apply not merely to the existing print and broadcasting media, but also to these proliferating video and computer-based information technologies.

*Democratic control of information in all its forms is essential to a healthy democracy.*

## The aims of the broadcasting authorities

THE AIMS of both the BBC and the IBA are defined by Parliament, yet it is clear that those aims do not give sufficient recognition to the differences and conflicts that exist in society.

The BBC Charter and Licence: 'requires the BBC to refrain from "editorialising"; that is to refrain from expressing a point of view of its own on any matter of public controversy or public policy . . .

'For the BBC to take sides in any controversial issue would in any case be contrary to its own long-established policy of impartiality. . . . The essence of impartiality is balance. . . .' (*BBC Handbook*).

The IBA Act (1973) orders that: 'It shall be the duty of the authority to satisfy itself that . . . due impartiality is preserved on the part of persons providing the programmes as respects matters of political or industrial controversy or relating to current public policy.'

The problem with the notion of balance and impartiality as a suitable guideline for the broadcasting institutions is that it is difficult to define *what* is to be balanced and to determine *where* the central balancing point is to be placed.

More fundamental is the assumption that there is some balanced point from which society can be surveyed in a neutral fashion. This assumption is shared both by those who accept the present situation and those who argue that this point of balance is in the wrong place and produces a bias against certain groups in society.

In practice, the problem of balance is solved by a homogenous social, educational, and economic background of the individuals who control and operate BBC and ITV. This broadcasting establishment favours and enforces a version of British society in which the norm is harmony and balance and in which conflict is an aberration.

Those who recognise and represent the differences and conflicts in society are viewed by the broadcasting establishment and professionals as troublemakers who disturb the harmony and are, therefore, generally denied media coverage except when portrayed as troublemakers who disturb this natural harmony.

The second major problem with the guidelines laid down by Parliament for the broadcasting institutions is that they do not establish ways in which the broadcasting institutions may be effectively challenged by those who feel that their views are not being fairly represented.

Challenges and complaints are invariably ignored or judged as unreasonable in the light of the existing BBC and ITV consensus. The Broadcasting Complaints Commission proposed by the 1980 Broadcasting Act will merely institutionalise this consensus in a more limited form.

Three people appointed by the Secretary of State will consider and adjudicate only on complaints of 'unjust or unfair treatment in sound or TV programmes actually broadcast . . . ; or unwarranted infringement of privacy in, or in connection with, the obtaining of material included in, sound or TV programmes actually so broadcast.'

*Legislative proposals.* We propose a new definition of the aims of the broadcasting institutions, which recognises the conflicts of interests and groups within society, and would lay a duty on broadcasters (and other media for that matter):

*'To represent fairly and accurately the differences within society, and to produce programmes from the different perspectives in society.'*

Along with this duty, the legislation would require:

● Positive measures to combat racism, sexism and class bias.

● An explicit commitment to investigate and report the affairs of state, financial and corporate institutions together with other issues of public concern.

*Comment.* If these proposals were made law, they would protect and extend the access of a much wider range of social groups to broadcasting time.

A fairer distribution of air time, while an advance on the present state of affairs, is not sufficient, because who the participants are, what the issues are, and what is important and what is not, will remain in the hands of the professional broadcasters.

The rules which apply at election time between the political parties are not simply applicable to industrial and economic and social affairs.

The only true safeguard against misrepresentation is that 'news' and assumptions about news and other programmes should not only be defined by professional journalists and broadcasters.

There should be extensive facilities for people and groups to put their views direct to the viewing public. Also the new guidelines would enforce the production of news and other programmes from a variety of different perspectives. In this way strands of programming would develop which are clearly authored and produced from as wide a range of perspectives as are found in society, given always the requirement to report with accuracy.

These reforms would extend access to broadcasting to groups and perspectives currently excluded, and would operate within the existing framework of legislation on race relations, sex discrimination, defamation and contempt of court.

Recently the IBA has extended its jurisdiction to include the print materials produced by companies, as well as the programmes they produce. This form of control and censorship is unacceptable, and if necessary Parliament should clarify this point.

## The question of control

The tight central control of the BBC and the IBA, along with the power of private capital in the British broadcasting industry, is unique in West Europe. It does not recognise the political pluralism of modern society.

In West Germany, Italy, Holland and Scandinavia the controlling mechanisms of the broadcasting institutions recognise in varying degrees the existence of political diversity.

We suggest the dismantling of the

strong central and state control of the BBC and the IBA, within the general framework of a declared aim to remove the media from private ownership and to democratise the controlling bodies of various sections of the media.

In order to establish this structure across the whole of the industry the BBC should be instructed to pursue a policy of regionalisation, and the IBA should award franchises to non-profit making organisations, and not only to private companies.

*We make the following legislative proposals:*

*Loosening state control.* As a first step the existing controlling boards of the IBA and the BBC should be required to be broadly representative of the ethnic, class and sex composition of society.

All deliberations, franchise applications and other board meetings, should be in public.

*Democratic control.* A system of public representation via local, regional elections to local broadcasting boards would be established to judge whether the programmers carry out their obligation to represent fairly the differences within society.

These local and regional boards would provide delegates to a national conference which would act as the supreme authority in broadcasting policy. The national and regional broadcasting councils would sit in public, and they would supervise editorial appointments and financial matters.

These councils would also provide a forum for hearing complaints about programmes which have been broadcast, or the absence of programmes representing certain perspectives or groups. These councils would have the same financial and personal powers to enforce their decisions as the existing boards of the BBC and the IBA.

*Industrial democracy.* Within the industry there should be worker participation with elections at least to departmental head level, with union representatives on the boards of each organisation.

*Advertising.* The sale and allocation of advertising time should be removed from the ITV contractors, who currently sell it. A new public institution should be responsible for collecting and disbursing advertising revenue.

Advertising should not be allowed to interrupt programmes but should be confined to the gaps between them, or to special advertising breaks.

*Comment.* There are several possible models for a democratic system of control. One might adopt the model of the US system where many local offices in the community are elected.

Alternatively an extended and more powerful version of the model provided by Community Health Councils could be introduced. Some form of proportional representation may be necessary to ensure adequate representation of minorities.

It is important to stress that the role of these boards is to supervise and implement the policy laid down by the new Broadcasting Act. At present these functions are carried out by officials who are appointed rather than elected.

In another significant respect they would be different from the existing regu-

lators of broadcasting, in that they would not have the power to censor programmes before broadcast. The onus would be on the broadcasting organisations to justify their programmes and programming as a whole.

The broadcasting councils would have a range of financial and personal penalties which they would use to enforce their decisions. In the last resort they could withdraw the franchise.

## Extending access

IT IS essential to establish much greater access to the broadcasting industry in general, as well as greater access to the programme production.

At present the narrow social and educational base from which professional broadcasters, particularly in the higher echelons, are drawn inevitably produces a narrow representation of society. Only the immediate implementation of positive measures in recruitment and training can correct this social imbalance.

*Access to the Industry. Recruitment.* There should be positive discrimination and quota systems to make recruitment broadly representative of the plurality of society as a whole, rather than a predominantly white, male, middle class élite.

The lack of either formal educational or technical qualifications should not of itself be a bar to recruitment.

At present such requirements effectively bar many applicants to the industry when in fact most training is given on the job and the rapidly developing new technologies require a constant programme of training and re-training.

In technical areas in television there are very few women or members of minority communities. However these new criteria would apply to all areas of broadcasting: technical, programme production and administrative. There should be an end to vetting of recruitment by the Special Branch.

*Training.* There should be an intensive scheme of pre-service training. Particular attention would also be given to the recruitment and training of individuals with



special skills and expertise which are at present generally lacking — experienced economists, trade unionists, scientists etc.

There should also be a programme of in-service training to increase the level of expertise and understanding of economic, industrial and international affairs by staff members of the broadcasting institutions and to encourage the development of and access to differing perspectives on society.

*Access to broadcasting.* Greater access to the programme-making machinery should be seen as part of the overall aim to make the broadcasting institutions 'represent fairly the differences within society'.

*Franchises.* Licences to broadcast should be allocated to non-profit making groups and non-commercial broadcasting organisations should be encouraged.

*Access programmes.* The broadcasting institutions should recognise the claims on broadcasting time by minority groups and those groups should have editorial control.

Access programming should be applied to areas of conflict in making available air time to different groups involved in controversial matters as a permanent public forum.

These programmes should have available the same level of resources as other programmes and not have to work on the shoe-string finance which is customary at present.

*Non-professional sources.* A certain proportion of broadcast material could be supplied from non-professional sources, such as interest groups, community groups, and unions. A machinery should be established to encourage and solicit material from such groups. Close involvement of the trade unions would be essential to the operation of this project.

*Coverage.* The representative bodies should hold public hearings to assess complaints about insufficient coverage of subjects or groups. In other words, it should continuously examine broadcasting output for absences as well as presences.

*Right of Reply.* The representative structure previously established should consider appeals for a right of reply, and should if necessary deliver a post-broadcast judgement on programmes. There would be no pre-broadcast censorship.

*Transcripts.* The public should have automatic access, on request, to complete transcripts of broadcast materials.

*Monitoring.* Specialist groups should have access to evaluate the values and methods of current affairs, news, industrial, science coverage, and so on. The studies of the Glasgow Media Group and others should be part of a continuous monitoring of broadcasting output, and of gaps in the coverage.

*Archives.* Television programmes would be preserved and the archives would be open to the public, using the new technologies the programmes produced would be a permanent resource for the community.

## Dealing with new technology

WE ARE anxious that existing proposals for Freedom of Information legislation be broad enough in scope to cover not just government and corporate institutions, but also the new technologies that are emerging, such as Prestel, Viewdata satellite trans-

mission, video disc and cassette, and computer information banks.

*Information technologies.* The same principles of public access and democratic control should also apply to the new technologies of information and data transmission; there should be public access to Prestel, for example.

The technology should not merely be open to those who can afford to buy the hardware or software, or to input and access data, but to different groups within the community, and should come under similar control as the major television and radio institutions.

*Satellite transmission.* The same principles as we have outlined for British broadcasting should be applied to satellite transmission currently controlled by powerful multinationals like ITT, IBM and RCA.

Britain should work towards an international body to control and regulate satellite transmission, and these transmissions shall be subject as far as possible to national control. Companies and individuals based or operating in Britain should be barred from unauthorised participation in satellite broadcasting.

*Libraries.* We recommend that public libraries be used as the framework for providing access and retrieval facilities for the new technologies, just as they have fulfilled the function for books and the printed word in the past.

Local libraries should provide Prestel, videodisc and cassette facilities, information retrieval linked to computer networks, other data services, and video facilities.

## MINIMUM DEMANDS

*PROPOSED LEGISLATION on freedom of information and related matters affecting access to information and freedom of expression should apply to companies as well as state institutions; to the new technologies, as well as existing broadcasting media.*

*Funding. State broadcast income should be indexed linked. ITV companies should be required to spend a defined minimum proportion of their revenue on programme output — to prevent the use of revenue for diversification, parent group support, and the like.*

*Aims. Definitions of the aims of the BBC and IBA should be altered to reflect the diversity and plurality of groups and interests within society.*

*Control. Existing boards of control should be made representative of society. Pre-broadcast censorship should cease.*

*Access. Recruitment and training programmes should be implemented to make the industry more representative of society.*

**The Changing Television Group plan to hold a conference in the autumn 1981 to discuss the ideas in this document. Comments on the document and further proposals should be sent to the group, at 14 Rosaville Road, London SW6.**

**Free Press would also like to know your views. Send them to: Geoffrey Sheridan, 116 Cazenove Road, London N16. Day tel: 01-359 8189.**