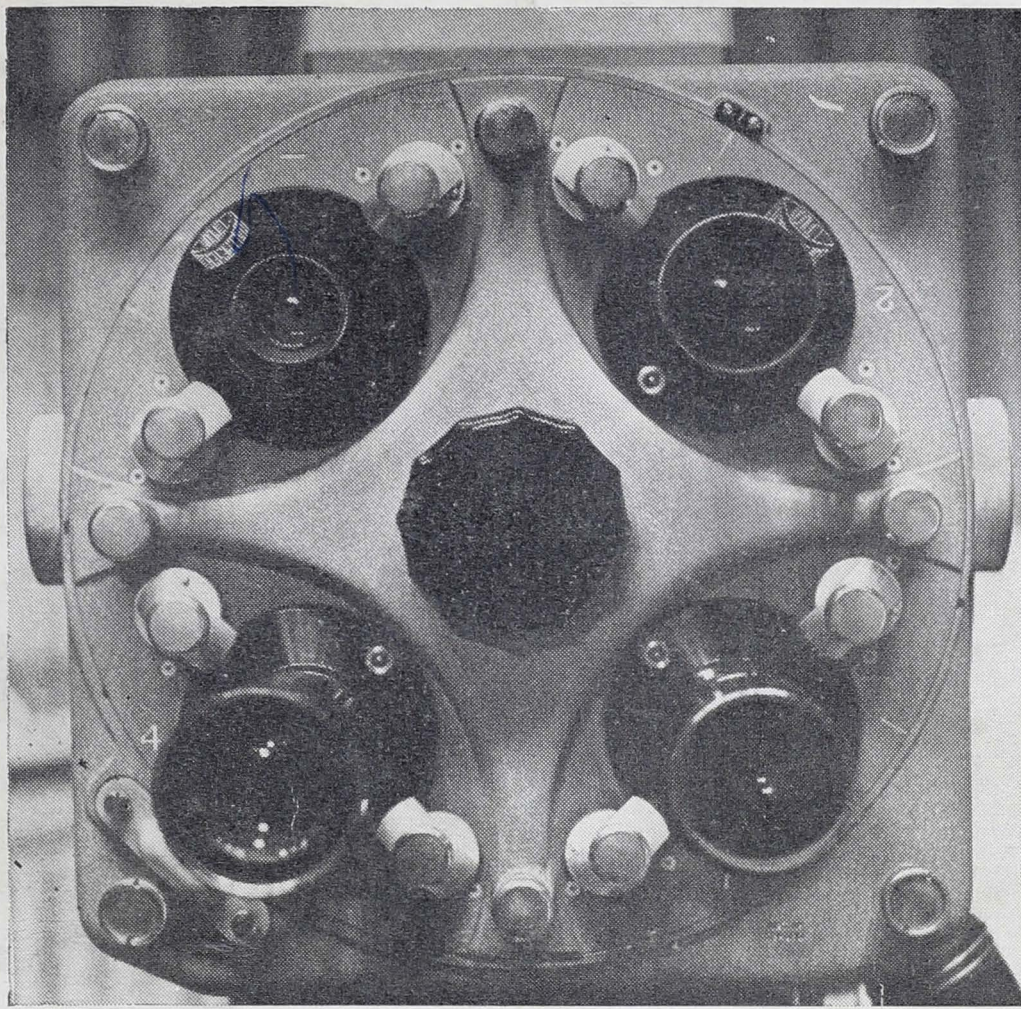


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CHRISTOPHER MAYHEW

**COMMERCIAL TELEVISION
— WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**



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Parliament for Woolwich East

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September, 1959



I. First Principles

WHAT should the Labour Party do about commercial television? Should we give it our blessing and allot it more channels? Keep it as it is? Abolish it?

A Labour Government would not be able to dodge these awkward questions indefinitely. Immediate decisions would be needed on whether (or how far) to reform ITV before the Television Act expires in 1964, and whether or not to start a third channel without delay. Eventually (no doubt after a commission of enquiry) decisions would be needed on the number of new TV channels to be opened, and the way they should be run.

In due course a Labour Government would also have to decide its policy towards the BBC. The present Charter runs out in 1962, and there is much to be said for some drastic changes in the BBC's constitution, to make the television service more independent of sound and less burdened with top-level pressures of various kinds. But reform of the BBC raises fewer questions of principle for socialists. A Labour Government should simply extend the present Charter until 1964 and decide the BBC's future then, in the light of the commission of inquiry's report.

This pamphlet is therefore mainly about commercial television — about Labour's policy towards ITV over the next five years, and the principles and practice of commercial television as they appear in the light of experience.

May I make it clear at this point — since I have often been attacked by the commercial lobby as an 'interested party' in the television controversy — that I stand to gain no financial or professional advantage whatever, directly or indirectly, by criticising commercial television. It is in the other camp — among the newspaper proprietors, radio and television manufacturers, advertising agencies and programme contractors — that we find the true vested interest.



In past controversies about commercial television much of the argument has been about whether a democratic television service should simply 'give the viewers what they want'. Some people said that it should; others that it shouldn't.

The surprising thing, in retrospect, was the assumption on both sides that commercial television by its very nature was bound to give the public what it wanted. Arguing on abstract principles which would have delighted Adam Smith, the commercial lobby maintained that since the only test of whether a programme was wanted was the number of people who watched it; and since the more people who watched, the larger would be the advertising revenue, a television system whose main aim was to raise advertising revenue would automatically give the public what it wanted. There

would be a perfect identity of interest between programme contractors, advertisers and viewers.

This pamphlet challenges this view. It suggests that the interests of programme companies and advertisers conflict with the interests of viewers at so many points that the whole theory of a self-regulating system breaks down. It maintains that the urge to maximise advertising revenue, so far from ensuring that viewers 'get what they want' is a serious obstacle to their ever getting it. It attempts to explain why the viewing public, though preferring ITV to BBC programmes in the proportion of two to one, has little real respect for the commercial system and would overwhelmingly prefer the public-service principle as a basis for a third TV service.



The next five sections describe how this comes about. Section 2 shows how the profit motive, so far from 'giving the viewers what they want' robs them of many of their best-liked programmes. Section 3 shows how it robs them of a genuine choice of programme. Section 4 shows how the profit motive gives viewers more American programmes than they want. Section 5 shows how it results in a far larger amount of advertising being broadcast than viewers want — or than the Television Act or Parliament intended — and in this advertising being broadcast at the most irritating moments from the viewers' point of view. Section 6 shows how the profit motive debases children's programmes.

In Section 7 it is shown how the programme contractors form a very tight monopoly, and constitute an excessive concentration of power in our society. Section 8 deals with the problem of reforming ITV; and Section 9 with the question of the 'third channel'.

Fortunately, of course, we do not have pure commercial television in this country. Thanks largely to pressure from the Labour Party, safeguards were written into the Television Act in 1954 to protect viewers from the automatic working of the profit system. Even the Tory Government did not altogether trust the programme companies. As its 1954 White Paper put it:

'It would be necessary to introduce safeguards against possible abuses, and a controlling body would be required for this purpose, for regulating the conduct of the new stations, for exercising a general oversight of the programmes, and for advising on appropriate matters.'

The 'controlling body' which emerged was, of course, the Independent Television Authority, a non-profit-making public-service body appointed by the Postmaster-General to supervise the activities of the programme contractors; to protect the interests of the viewers; and to ensure that the safeguards in the Act are properly observed. As we shall see, however, the Authority has never seriously challenged the power of the programme companies, and on the rare occasions when the companies' activities have been curbed in the viewers' interest, this has been in response to pressure from Parliament and public opinion.

2. How Popular Are the Programmes?

THE theory that commercial television 'gives the public what it wants' breaks down at a dozen points. First and foremost, it ignores the distinction, which has come increasingly to the fore in recent years, between the programmes which viewers want as *individuals* and the programmes they want as a *mass*. The first category includes programmes which, though not necessarily high-brow, appeal to individual tastes and interests, such as programmes on science, cricket, greyhound racing, gardening, cooking, horse racing, local affairs, table tennis, football, psychology, current affairs, athletics, ballet, opera and religion. These programmes, though naturally appealing to smaller audiences, all have a strong and enthusiastic following. They are almost always British in style, content and production, and tend to be of a higher standard in Britain than in other countries. But since they attract less-than-maximum audiences, there is no financial incentive whatever for the programme companies to broadcast programmes of this kind. Indeed, if raising advertising revenue were the sole motive for a television service, they would probably never be seen by viewers at all.

Programmes of the second type are those which appeal to viewers not as individuals with special tastes and interests, but as units in a mass. These programmes are deliberately designed, for commercial purposes, to appeal to everyone at once — young and old, bright and dull, male and female, Scots, Irish, Welsh, English and American. These programmes consist of Westerns, thrillers, variety, low-brow and middle-brow plays, serials and quiz games. They too have a devoted — and much larger — following. Programmes of this type are produced best and in greatest abundance in the United States, and tend to be American in style, content and production.

It is often assumed that the first type of programme is less keenly enjoyed by those who watch it than the second type. In fact, however, exactly the opposite is true. This can be seen from the reports of BBC Audience Research, which gives figures not only for the size of the audience attracted by a programme, but also for the 'audience reaction'. This last figure — the Appreciation Index — is compiled by asking the panel of some hundreds of viewers to declare whether they thought the programme 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad', or 'very bad'. A programme which was well liked might get an Appreciation Index of 75; one which was disliked might score 55.

Now if the programme which attracted the largest number of viewers was also the most keenly enjoyed, there would be a positive correlation between the 'Appreciation Index' and the 'size of audience' index. The better the programme was liked, the larger would be the audience. In fact, however, such correlation as there is works in the opposite direction. It is those programmes, whether high-brow or low-brow, which attract the *smaller* audiences, which tend to be the most keenly enjoyed. And this is, indeed, what might be expected. A tailor-made suit will naturally be better liked than one bought off the peg.

There is thus a plain contradiction between 'giving the viewers what they want' and striving at all times to get the largest possible audience. To the extent that ITV is motivated by the urge to maximise audiences and advertising revenue — and this is its essential characteristic — it robs viewers of many of their most keenly enjoyed programmes.

This glaring defect in the commercialisers' case was dimly recognised by the Government when the Television Act was being framed. It lies behind the provision in the Act which lays on the non-profit-making Independent Television Authority the duty of ensuring

'that the programmes maintain a proper balance in their subject-matter' (Clause 3 1(b)).

This provision of the Act has been of some value to viewers. Without it, the programme contractors would probably, like their American counterparts, have banished minority programmes from their schedules altogether, apart from an occasional prestige programme. Certainly this policy would have paid them well; and even as it is these programmes are virtually banned from normal viewing hours, *i.e.* between 7.0 and 10.0. But pressure from Parliament and public opinion — and the possibility of retribution from a Labour Government — has persuaded programme companies to broadcast minority programmes at least *in off-peak hours* when the financial loss is smallest. The BBC recently made a comparative analysis of BBC and ITV programmes between 7.0 and 10.30 daily during 1958. It showed that the proportion of 'serious' programmes (a rather narrower term than 'minority' programmes as we have defined them) broadcast by the BBC was 34 per cent and by ITA only 10 per cent.

Though mass audience programmes on ITV seem consistently better than on the BBC, commercial television lags behind in the minority programmes — including sport, documentaries, and current affairs. And though Independent Television News has a good reputation, the advent of commercial television in due course had the effect of cutting down the proportion of time allowed to news broadcasts in normal viewing hours.

The programme companies' defenders argue that their striving for maximum audiences is 'democratic' and portray those who wish to have minority programmes broadcast at normal viewing times as 'authoritarians'. They apparently believe that a society where tastes and interests are decided by majority vote and then imposed on everyone is more democratic than a society where everyone is encouraged to develop their own individual tastes and interests.

In fact, of course, the opposite is true; and so far from being democratic, commercial television is, in the long run, a threat to democracy. It fosters, and thrives on, uniformity of tastes and interests; and steamrollers minorities. A genuinely democratic television service would cater for viewers *as individuals*, and within the limits of what is practicable give the *individual* viewer the programme he wants at the time he wants it.

In Britain, commercial television is compelled by law and public opinion to make some gestures towards viewers' individual tastes. In the United States, where there is no such compulsion, it makes virtually no gestures at all.

3. How Much Choice ?

COMMERCIAL television fails to 'give the public what it wants' in another important respect. Even where several commercial systems are competing, it fails to give viewers a genuine choice of programme, and instead broadcasts similar, or even identical, programmes simultaneously. The process is well described by an American observer as follows:

'What the networks want is, simply, to maximise the total audience watching their programmes, and in pursuing this aim they have followed with remarkable thoroughness Professor Hotelling's classic prescription for "duopolistic competition" (monopoly means one supplier duopoly two). The standard case in economics deals with a street twenty blocks long containing a single grocery store on the down-town corner of block five. A second grocer comes along: where shall he place his store? Public interest calls for placement in block fifteen, guaranteeing that no resident of the street will be farther than five blocks from a grocer. But the new grocer can secure the biggest market by placing his store on the up-town corner of block five, right across the street from the competition, which will make him the more convenient of the two stores for the residents of fifteen blocks.

'Operating to maximise advertising revenue rather than serve the public interest, the television networks have often followed this model, programming Phil Silvers against Milton Berle, Robert Montgomery Presents against Climax, Steve Allen and Guests against Ed Sullivan and Guests. The habit of identical programming is ingrained in the networks.'¹

Even in Britain, where one of the competitive channels is non-commercial the same process takes place, though to a limited extent. On one occasion this summer, British viewers were not only shown tennis at Wimbledon on both channels simultaneously — they were shown identical matches simultaneously; and on at least one occasion, both channels interrupted the same exciting tennis match to broadcast simultaneously the same unexciting interview with a tennis personality.

Since it is not the BBC's overriding aim to attract the largest audiences, British viewers are spared the worst defects of the commercial system. But when half-a-dozen different channels, under the spur of private financial profit, broadcast identical or very similar programmes at the same time, it is ridiculous to claim that commercial TV 'gives the public what it wants'.

Aware of the growing exasperation of viewers, supporters of the programme companies are suggesting that the BBC should devote itself entirely to broadcasting minority programmes, thus relieving the companies of the moral and legal responsibility of doing this themselves. Earl de la Warr, who was Postmaster-General when the Television Act was passed, said in the House of Lords recently:

¹ Martin Mayer, *Madison Avenue U.S.A.*, p. 195: The Bodley Head.

'After all, I had some responsibility for initiating commercial television, and what the Government always stood for from the beginning was the maintenance of one set of programmes which was entirely uncommercial, with a guaranteed revenue. Why the BBC should feel that they have to degrade (*sic*) their programmes in order to compete with another system, I just cannot see. It seems to me a great pity . . . I cannot see why there cannot be some discussion and some overall planning with regard to programmes so that a real choice can be given to the public.'¹

The programme companies know that millions could be added to their profits if they were allowed to broadcast only the mass-appeal programmes. With a generosity that deceived nobody, Associated-Rediffusion recently offered to subsidise a 'cultural' third channel to the extent of millions of pounds a year.

Experience shows that if television is to be expanded in such a way that viewers get the programmes they want, there must be deliberate planning to ensure a genuine choice of programme. This is incompatible with the *laissez-faire* approach to television, and with the aim of maximising advertising revenue.

¹ *Hansard, Lords, Vol. 218, No. 78, 3rd June 1959.*

4. Americanisation

MANY American mass-audience programmes are widely and deservedly popular. Light entertainment television is produced better, and in far greater abundance, in the United States than anywhere else. The characteristic contribution of ITV to British television has been the popularisation of Westerns, thrillers, serials, variety and quiz shows produced in the United States or based on American ideas.

The question is — how much American material do viewers really want, and how much is merely pushed on to them because it suits the financial interests of the programme companies?

ITA's official figure for the amount of American TV material broadcast is 14 per cent, and from the point of view of British artists and technicians, this figure is satisfactory and has been accepted by the TUC. But from the standpoint of the viewer, the figure needs closer examination. 14 per cent is the proportion of the *total* output of ITV, including morning and afternoon programmes, religious services, etc. More important to the viewer is the proportion of American material broadcast at times when he is actually looking-in — between 7.0 and 10.0 in the evening. This figure is probably not less than 30 per cent.

And this 30 per cent would exclude 'mid-Atlantic' programmes, *i.e.* programmes produced in Britain and shown to British viewers but tailored for American tastes and primarily intended for the American market. In these 'British' films, when a man takes a taxi it is called a 'cab'; when he dresses for dinner he puts on a 'tuxedo'. Hybrid commercialised films of this kind are of growing importance in British television.

Mr. Val Parnell, Managing Director of Associated Television, apparently takes pride in this development. He writes:

'Television has broken through national boundaries and is now the recognised popular world medium. It is because of this fact that ATV has staked a major claim in the field of American TV film-making and distribution The substantial Anglo-American resources now linked in the Independent Television Corporation provide opportunities for co-operation in the production and distribution of television films which will be of direct benefit to Britain and the United States and through world-wide distribution will foster the growth and maturity of international television. *London can become a second and perhaps more lasting Hollywood.*'¹ (my italics)

Mr. Parnell is an admirably clear exponent of the ideals and standards of 'Admass'. He holds Hollywood up as an example for London, and apparently sets out to liberate Londoners from their provincial habits of speech, manners and dress, and from their backward and insular culture.

¹ *ATV's Partners in the USA*, Associated Television Ltd., 1959.

Unlike Mr. Parnell, however, most British people regard American television not as an example, but as a deadly warning. While welcoming a fair ration of American television programmes, they regard with horror the possibility of creating in Britain a hybrid mid-Atlantic culture based on the approach to television which Mr. Parnell describes. Moreover their dislike and distrust of American television is shared by most intelligent Americans. Mr. Ed Murrow, for example, speaking at Chicago in October 1958, had this to say about the American television industry:

'If there are any historians about fifty or one hundred years from now, and there should be preserved kinescopes for one week of all three networks, they will find there recorded in black and white or colour, evidence of decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live.'

Nobody doubts that there are millions of pounds to be made by linking up British and American television in the manner recommended by Mr. Parnell. Vast fortunes can be made by those who can show on British screens programmes which have already paid their way on the American market. But those who care for television standards and for the British way of life will do their utmost to put a quick end to the kind of developments Mr. Parnell describes.

5. The Commercials

ANOTHER respect in which commercial television fails to 'give viewers what they want' is that it gives them far too many commercials, of the wrong type, at the wrong time.

Under pressure of the Opposition, the Tory Government wrote a number of provisions about the amount, content and placing of commercials into the Television Act. And they made the Postmaster-General as well as the Authority responsible for ensuring that these provisions were carried out. In practice, however, weakness and indolence on the part of the Authority and successive PMG's have allowed the programme companies to make millions of pounds at viewers' expense by evasion of the Act. The two principal evasions concern the 'natural break' clause and the 'six minute average'. It is worth examining both of these in some detail, as they illustrate clearly the excessive power of the programme companies vis-à-vis the Authority, which is the fundamental weakness of ITV as a whole.

THE 'NATURAL BREAK' CLAUSE

The Television Act lays down that advertisements shall not be inserted 'otherwise than at the beginning or end of a programme or in natural breaks therein' (*Schedule 2 Sec. 3*). Parliament's intentions were clear. Advertisements would be allowed not only between programmes but also in breaks in them *provided these breaks were 'natural'*. A 'natural' break — so MP's were led to understand — was *a break which would have happened anyhow*, irrespective of a programme contractor's urge to fill it with commercials. There could be commercials between acts of a play, or at half-time in football matches, or between races at race meetings, and so on. The chief government spokesman during the debates, Lord Kilmuir, then Home Secretary, explained what was intended:

'Suppose there is a two-act play and there really is a natural break between the acts. I cannot myself see any harm in an advertisement coming in there, especially if the first act had lasted for an hour and a half.'

It was on the strength of assurances like these, which now seem merely grotesque, that a suspicious Parliament was induced to pass provisions in the Act which led to vast fortunes being made by the programme contractors.

Today, of course, the natural break clause is virtually a dead letter. To the great irritation of viewers, and the great profit of programme companies, breaks are made in programmes of every type — current affairs, science documentaries, children's programmes, half-hour plays and feature films. A film classic like 'The Treasure of the Sierra Madre', specially constructed to create a steady accumulation of tension from start to finish, is ruthlessly broken up into four parts to make room for commercials. Distinguished speakers are interrupted in mid-sentence. The Leader of Her Majesty's

Opposition is faded out prematurely. Always, the programme gives way to the commercial; never the commercial to the programme. The situation was described with admirable clarity by the programme contractor who declared:

‘As far as I am concerned any break which brings me in £10,000 is a natural break.’

What is ITA’s defence? They argue that the breaks improve the programmes — even the serious programmes. In a formal interview with Sir Robert Fraser in January 1959, I asked what positive gain there could be in interrupting Dr. Bronowski’s science programmes. The Director-General replied — in the words of the agreed record of the meeting — that

‘a pause was an advantage in exposition just as chapters were an advantage in a book.’

It is sad that so many scientific books have been written without the advice of the Director-General of ITA. Much might have been gained if the authors of ‘The Origin of Species’ and ‘The General Theory of Relativity’ had interlarded each chapter, for greater clarity, with advertisements for toothpaste and detergents.

Perhaps wisely, the Postmaster-General has not defended the unnatural break along these lines. He has argued that viewers *do not object to the breaks*. On one occasion he even gave his blessing to the theory that viewers actually *liked* the breaks.¹ Shortly afterwards however, when a Gallup poll was published in the *News Chronicle* showing that only five per cent of ITV viewers liked the breaks, and 81 per cent were annoyed by them, the Postmaster-General abandoned this line of defence.

In February 1959, I introduced a Bill into the House of Commons to prohibit all interruptions of programmes, and to prevent programme companies recouping themselves by artificially shortening the programmes. According to a Gallup poll, only nine per cent of ITV viewers were opposed to the Bill and 69 per cent — perhaps as many as eighteen million viewers — supported it. Though warmly backed by the Opposition, the Bill has been obstructed by Tory backbenchers, has not been debated, and has no chance of reaching the statute book.

THE ‘SIX MINUTES AVERAGE’

Even more profitable than stretching the ‘natural break’ clause is the practice of broadcasting excessive amounts of advertising. The Act lays down that

‘The amount of time given to advertising shall not be so great as to detract from the value of the programmes as a medium of entertainment, instruction and information.’

¹ Supporting Mr. Geoffrey Gorer. *Hansard* Col. 1240, 11th March 1959.

Introducing the Bill into the House of Commons on second reading, Lord Kilmuir explained what the Government had in mind. After stating that the decision would rest with the Authority, he said:

'I ought not to prophesy, but the sort of thing I envisage — I may be wrong — is five or six minutes to an hour.'

Parliament undoubtedly thought — and it is the most reasonable interpretation — that what was meant was five or six minutes 'to any hour'. But the phrase could doubtless be interpreted as meaning that viewers would see six minutes in the hour *on the average* — e.g. one million viewers would see seven minutes one hour and five the next.

But neither of these interpretations satisfies the programme contractors. They can make their biggest profits if they are allowed to crowd their advertising into the hours when the largest numbers of viewers are watching, from 7.0 to 10.0. At this time advertising can fetch £1,000 per minute or more instead of £100 per minute or less.

The programme contractors' wishes are thus met by ITA's disingenuous formula, 'six minutes spread over the whole day'. This simply means, in effect, that programme contractors may broadcast much more than six minutes during the evenings, when people are watching, provided they broadcast much less during the mornings and afternoons, when they are not.

A glance at the records shows that this is precisely what is happening. Though the amount of advertising averaged over the day is six minutes an hour or less, viewers in fact see seven, eight and nine minutes of advertising at the times they actually switch on. Between 7.0 and 10.0 in the evening, the average is $7\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. If advertising magazines are counted in (government spokesmen excluded them from the 'five to six minutes' formula on the erroneous assumption that they would have some intrinsic documentary value), then the average amount of advertising between 5.0 and 11.0 is $8\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. On three or four evenings a week there will be hours in which more than twenty minutes of advertising is broadcast.

All this means vast additions to the already excessive profits of the programme companies. A simple calculation shows that by systematically exceeding an average of six minutes an hour at normal viewing times, one programme contractor alone — Associated-Rediffusion — is making a fraction under £2 million a year. If the whole period between 5.0 and 11.0 is taken, excluding advertising magazines, the figure is approximately $\pounds 1\frac{3}{4}$ million. Including advertising magazines, the figure is about £4 million a year.

The Authority's defence of this state of affairs is fantastic. It argues that the maximum of six minutes is exceeded *because of the nature of the programme being broadcast*. In the record of our meeting already quoted, Sir Robert Fraser stated:

'At the outset it seemed to the Authority that ten per cent of total time would be about right for advertisements, and the question then arose whether it should be spread evenly over the day or related to the

capacity of various types of programme to bear advertising. The Authority had decided on a policy of flexibility operated by reference to defined categories of programmes. It was very rare for advertising to exceed eight minutes in a clock hour. He asked Mr. Mayhew whether it did not seem sensible to let advertising time out over a day in this way. Mr. Mayhew asked whether Sir Robert was implying that the concentration of advertisements at the more profitable peak hours was simply a coincidence. Sir Robert Fraser agreed that, of course, the factors which determined so-called peak hours were often also factors which determined the capacity of particular programmes to bear advertising.'

But this explanation does not make sense. If it were the nature of the programme, and not the time at which it is shown, that decided the amount of advertising, then the same type of programme would carry the same amount of advertising at whatever time it was shown. A glance at the records shows that this is simply not so. Light programmes carry a great deal of advertising at peak hours and little or none outside them. Serious programmes carry just as much advertising in peak hours (on the rare occasions they appear then) as light programmes.

The real reason why more than six minutes advertising is broadcast at peak hours is simply that the programme companies make more money that way, and the Authority is too weak to stop them.

The Authority now seems to have abandoned its defence of current practice, and there is some evidence that it may demand stricter observance of the Act in the future. But at the moment of writing, viewers are still seeing seven, eight or nine minutes of advertising an hour at the time when they habitually switch on; and the programme companies are continuing to make excess profits at the expense of viewers and in clear violation of the Act and of the intentions of Parliament.

Some viewers, it is true, actually like the commercials; but they are a small minority — between one in twenty and one in four, depending on when the commercial is screened. A Gallup poll published in the *News Chronicle* on 10th March 1959 gave the following results:

'Do breaks for advertisements in between one programme and another annoy you at all, or do you like them?

Annoy	46%	('a lot' 24%, 'a little' 20%)
Like them	27%	
Indifferent	27%	

How about the breaks for advertisements in the middle of programmes?

Annoy	81%	('a lot' 61%, 'a little' 20%)
Like them	5%	
Indifferent	14%	

During the interview with the ITA chiefs already referred to, the follow-exchanges took place:

'Mr. Mayhew said he assumed it would be agreed that the public would prefer six minutes an hour rather than eight minutes an hour. Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick replied that this assumption was not necessarily proved; and was disproved if one took the criterion of whether the independent television programmes had lost viewers because of the alleged increase in the volume of advertising.'

Early in 1959 I introduced a Private Member's Bill limiting advertising to six minutes 'in any hour' into the Commons without opposition; but obstruction from Tory backbenchers successfully destroyed the chances of this Bill, just as it destroyed the chances of the 'natural break' Bill. In both cases, the Bills would simply have enforced the intention of existing legislation, and were supported by an overwhelming majority of public opinion.

UNLIKELY CLAIMS

I once submitted an idea to BBC Television for a 3-minute feature in Panorama on the following lines: a commentator would appear in a studio containing fifty newly washed pillowcases. He would then simply read out the names of the Chairmen of the detergent companies and their advertising agencies who had declined his invitation to come to the studio to pick out which pillowcases had been washed by their detergent. (A window would be provided in the studio so that the representatives of Daz could subject the pillowcases to the famous 'Daz window test'.)

Disappointingly, the BBC turned down the idea. It would have illuminated a widespread and just criticism of much television advertising—that millions of pounds and vast resources of scarce talent are squandered in the utterly worthless task of switching viewers' tastes from one branded product to another. The techniques used are sometimes brilliant, but often dishonest. Film shots are faked (a seemingly delicious 'breakfast food' may well be made of rubber) and slogans are usually poised somewhere between the half-truth on the one hand and the downright lie on the other.

False claims in television advertising are merely one aspect of the general problem of false advertising claims, and need not be pursued in detail here. As in the case of the campaign on 'natural breaks' and the 'six minute average', Parliamentary pressure has secured minor improvements in ITV's standards.

On 11th March 1959, for example, the Postmaster-General was questioned about certain toothpaste advertisements which were drawn to the attention of the ITA Advertising Advisory Committee on 20th October 1958. Mr. Marples stated that one advertiser, on being asked to substantiate his claims or to revise his script, withdrew his advertisement as from 1st January 1959. Another, asked to amend his script on 27th January agreed to do so but continued broadcasting it in its original form until the middle of March. (The Postmaster-General subsequently agreed with criticisms in Parliament that ITA should have had these advertisements withdrawn sooner.)

Under Parliamentary pressure the Postmaster-General also asked ITA for a special report on claims made for three products on ITV. One was for Hovis bread (whose advertising agents are John Haddon & Co. Ltd. and A. W. Newton Ltd.) claiming that 'it is exactly eight times more good for the viewer than any other bread'. Another was B.P. Energol motor oil (whose advertising agents are S. H. Benson Ltd.) that 'it reduces engine wear by exactly 80 per cent'. The third was for Maltesers (whose advertising agents are Masius & Ferguson Ltd.) claiming that they are 'seven times less fattening than ordinary chocolate'.

The ITA Advertising Advisory Committee, which has the task of advising about the principles and practice of television advertising, has failed to prevent abuses. It meets very seldom (only twice in 1958), and is composed to a considerable extent of advertising people themselves.

6. Children's Programmes

‘ONE thing I will say for ITV’, declared a harassed parent, ‘the more unsuitable the programme, the quieter it keeps the children.’ This was a just comment on the first two years of children’s broadcasting on ITV. It is the bad children’s programme which makes the most money; and the programme companies began by screening an endless series of American thrillers and Westerns during Children’s Hour, winning away a staggering proportion of the BBC’s viewership, and doing nothing whatever to develop children’s creative interests.

After two years of financially shrewd, but otherwise execrable, children’s broadcasts, ITA’s own Children’s Advisory Committee at last became disturbed, and in its annual report for 1958 ventured the mild criticism that there was ‘rather too high a proportion of drama in which the solutions were found only by physical conflict’.

This comment, which followed widespread public criticism, helped to produce an improvement in ITV’s standards. Associated Television appointed a new Director of Children’s Programmes and announced that *in future* a number of programmes would be broadcast with the aim of stimulating children’s creative activities.

Meantime, however, clear proof had been given that undiluted commercialism in television produces a lack of responsibility towards children and a debasement of children’s programmes.

It is unfortunate that the admirable survey of the impact of television on children produced by Dr. Himmelweit for the Nuffield Trust could not deal with commercial television. Until a full survey has been made, any opinion on the impact of ITV on our children’s minds must be tentative and provisional.

But it seems certain that ITV does have an impact on children’s minds and actions. (If nothing else proves this, it is proved by the sales figures of sweets manufacturers!) Until someone proves the contrary, it is quite reasonable to suppose that a child’s mind is influenced for the worse by a diet of American films of violence.

And apart from the question of programme standards, is it ethical to advertise on television for children? Where children are concerned, the ethical difference between ordinary advertising and subliminal advertising is largely academic. Both make money by exploiting a child’s natural suggestibility. Mr. Vance Packard, in his interesting and disturbing book *The Hidden Persuaders*, quotes an advertisement which appeared in an American trade journal on the value of TV commercials for children. It read:

‘Where else on earth is brand consciousness fixed so firmly as in the minds of four-year-old tots? What is it worth to a manufacturer who can close in on this juvenile audience and continue to sell it under controlled conditions year after year right up to its attainment of adulthood and fully fledged buyer status? It can be done. Interested?’

Exploiting a child’s suggestibility on television in order to sell commercial products must be about the lowest form of activity open to a British citizen short of actual crime.

7. Monopoly Power

SUPPORTERS of commercial television sometimes describe it as being 'democratic'; but the 'big four' programme companies — Associated Rediffusion, Associated Television, Granada and ABC — are now so powerful as to be a threat to our democracy. They have an unhealthy amount of influence vis-à-vis the Authority, the smaller programme companies, Parliament, the press, the literary and entertainment worlds, and the general public.

These companies are a monopoly. Lord Boothby has expressed this well: '(ITV) . . . is at the moment a monopoly. Four companies in one of the tightest rings ever devised run the show from the contracting and programme point of view. London is carved up between Associated Rediffusion and ATV, the Midlands between ATV and ABC, and the North between Granada and ABC. The hold of the 'big four' if I may so call them, over the so-called independent provincial stations is complete, in the sense that the latter are dependent upon them for at least 80 per cent of the programmes.'¹

The Television Act declares: 'It shall be the duty of the Authority to do what they can to secure that there is adequate competition to supply programmes between a number of programme contractors independent of each other as to finance and as to control' (*Clause 5 Sec. 2*). This provision of the Act is a dead letter. So far from competing in the supply of programmes, the programme companies supply virtually all programmes in normal viewing hours — and many outside — by joint decision in their 'networking committee'. The procedures and practices of this committee are secret; but it is here that the companies decide which of each other's programmes they will broadcast in their own schedules — *i.e.* which they will 'network'. Networking is vastly profitable, and it has become the established practice for the companies to show the same programmes at normal viewing hours.

Though profitable to the companies, the activities of the networking committee are unprofitable to the viewer. The chosen programmes are not selected by the processes of competition, nor deliberately picked out by a disinterested body, anxious to accept the best and reject the worst: they are selected by a process of log-rolling between the companies. A programme will be screened not because it is necessarily thought the best, but because the companies accept it as a *quid pro quo* for getting their own programmes networked. There is thus often a direct conflict of interests between the companies and the viewers — and, as usual in ITV, the voice of the viewer goes unheard. If anyone supposes ITV to be 'democratic' it is probable that the minutes of the networking committee, if published, would do much to disillusion him.

¹ *House of Lords*, Vol. 216, col. 553, 3rd June, 1959.

Quite apart from the monopoly position of the 'big four', these companies wield immense influence as a result of the enormous patronage they dispense. They can offer (or deny) fame and fortune on an unprecedented scale to M.P.s, actors, sportsmen, playwrights, broadcasters, musicians, journalists and variety artists. The prize is not merely a few appearances on the screen: ITV's smile can bring success in other fields—in newspapers, theatres and cinemas under ITV's control and influence.

The financial links between ITV and other media are so many and varied that no comprehensive picture can be given. About one-quarter of the issued share capital of the companies is held by newspapers. The *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* own between them 20 per cent of the equity of ATV. Mr. Roy Thomson, controller of a chain of Scottish newspapers, and now also of the Kemsley Press, controls Scottish Television Ltd. The *Daily Mail* group has a one-third holding in Southern Television. Amalgamated Press Ltd. has another one-third holding in the same company. *News of the World* Ltd. holds 20½ per cent, and the *Liverpool Daily Post* 14½ per cent, of the shares of Television Wales and the West. The *News Chronicle* (Daily News Ltd.) holds 21 per cent of the shares of Tyne-Tees Television Ltd. Norfolk News Ltd. and the *Guardian* hold a substantial proportion of the shares of Anglia Television.

It is difficult to discover any reason, in the public interest, why commercial television should be linked up with sections of the press in this way. Both media are quite powerful enough by themselves for the health of democracy; united in a single empire the extent of their power becomes thoroughly objectionable. National and local newspapers should stand apart from national and local television services, with both sides criticising each other's output vigilantly and objectively. In many cases, however, they are simply in each other's pockets. The most devout and reverent treatment is accorded to ITV by the *Daily Mirror*, with its substantial financial interest in ATV; and the *Mirror* booklet 'Spotlight on Television' is absurdly biased. A solemn concluding chapter of this booklet asks who should get the third television channel. After judiciously ruling out, in turn, the BBC, a new public service corporation, and the ITA operating its own service, the booklet concludes 'that leaves the programme companies . . . Britain's third television programme should go to commercial television'. That is to say, a large part of it should go to the *Daily Mirror* itself.

In the same pamphlet, the *Daily Mirror* complains, with breath-taking hypocrisy, but with considerable truth, that newspapers which have *no* financial interest in ITV are prejudiced *against* it:

'Lord Beaverbrook's newspapers, along with others, were interested in the prospects of commercial television in the early days, but did not apply for a contract when it came to the point. The Express papers have since been heavily committed to an uncompromising and rancorous policy of proving, often at great cost to their own reserves of ingenuity, that commercial television does not work. If the Express group did go into television there would at any rate be an interesting exhibition of editorial backpedalling.'

The *Daily Mirror's* financial interest in ITV presents a special problem to the Labour Party. There is a definite danger that if the Party is too critical of ITV, the *Mirror* will turn against it. But this should encourage the Party to reform, rather than discourage the Party from reforming, ITV along the lines suggested in this pamphlet: one of the reforms suggested is to break all financial links between the programme companies and the newspapers.

The programme companies' excessive power is buttressed by their excessive wealth. In a survey of the fortunes made by leading men in the industry, the City Editor of the *Sunday Express* recently stated:

In 1955 Mr. Lew Grade put £1,250 into commercial television. Today that £1,250 is worth about £275,000 Mr. Littler put £900 into commercial TV. And today it is worth £200,000 Mr. Val Parnell invested £1,000 when commercial TV prepared to come on the air. Its value today? About £220,000.'

Much — possibly the greater part — of the profits of the programme companies comes from evading the intention of the Television Act described in previous Sections of this pamphlet. The profits of the smaller companies are also very substantial, and are also due in large part to similar evasions. In the case of these companies, moreover, no plea can be made that they took risks in the early years. Once they had been lucky enough to be granted contracts by ITA, huge profits were certain.

The programme companies' wealth enables them to spend vast sums on straightforward public relations. Huge advertisements appear in the national newspapers: those in the serious newspapers featuring the serious ITV programmes, and those in the popular newspapers featuring the popular programmes. M.P.s and others are showered with beautifully produced verbatim transcripts of documentary programmes (often well below BBC standards) carrying the suggestion that these are characteristic of ITV's output in normal viewing hours. Amid great publicity, a small fraction of the programme companies' excess profits is paid as conscience money in grants to universities, art galleries and drama schools.

In spite of this, and in spite of the large audiences attracted by their programmes, public respect for the programme companies and the Authority remains — deservedly — at a low level.

8. What Is To Be Done ?

WHAT should a Labour Government then do about ITV? Should it leave it as it is until the commission of enquiry reports and the Television Act runs out in 1964? Or should it go ahead and make interim reforms?

The main defects to be remedied are — excessive advertising; abuse of the 'natural break' clause; failure to ensure programme balance and a sufficient proportion of British programmes in normal viewing hours; failure to provide a genuine choice of programme; and the excessive power of the programme companies in general and of the networking committee in particular.

Reform could be approached in two ways. The first possibility would be to make a series of specific amendments to the Television Act to remedy each of these defects in turn. For example:

1. Excessive advertising could quite simply be prevented by laying down a maximum of 5 or 6 minutes of advertising in any hour (or perhaps 10 or 12 minutes spread over two hours).
2. Evasion of the 'natural break' clause could be stopped by amending the Second Schedule of the Act so as to prevent all advertising except at the beginning and end of programmes. To forestall the possibility that programme contractors would then shorten the programmes, the Authority would be given power to lay down, in agreement with the Postmaster-General, the number of advertisement-free periods to be broadcast each week.
3. A ceiling — say 15 per cent — could be laid down for the proportion of American material broadcast at normal viewing hours.
4. The excessive power of the programme companies could be reduced by prohibiting the holding of shares in ITV by newspapers.
5. The Authority could be given a powerful say in the proceedings of the networking committee.

These reforms would be easy to carry out and would be widely popular. But another approach to the problem is possible. All of the defects we have noted in ITV spring from the same basic cause — the fundamental weakness of the Authority *vis-à-vis* the programme companies. It might therefore be possible simply to strengthen the Authority *vis-à-vis* the programme companies and then leave the required reforms to be carried out by administrative decision by the Authority.

A beginning could be made by strengthening the personnel of the Authority. Then the Act could be amended so as to give the Authority, instead of the programme companies, the right to sell advertising time and to plan the network programmes. The Authority would then receive all the adver-

tising revenue itself and would simply contract for the network programmes from the companies.

In this way the choice of programmes in normal viewing hours would no longer be decided solely by advertising considerations and log-rolling between the companies. The Authority would be free to schedule popular minority programmes in normal viewing hours; to enter into arrangements with the BBC to prevent the worst programme clashes; to end the interruption of programmes by advertisements; to limit the amount of advertising; and to ensure a proper proportion of British programmes in normal viewing hours. Many of the objectionable features of the programme companies' excessive power would be automatically removed.

Another advantage would be the ending of the present expensive and bureaucratic system of selling advertising time, whereby each programme company negotiates separately with each advertising agency, even though the commercial in question will probably appear simultaneously and in identical form on all twelve services.

Programme companies could remain responsible, as at present, for planning and producing regional broadcasts, covering about 15 per cent of total output; and they could be paid by the Authority the advertising revenue attributable to these regional programmes. The main source of income of the programme companies would, however, be their sales of programmes to the Authority and to overseas buyers; and they would also be free to sell programmes to the BBC and to any new television service that might be set up in the future. They could, and doubtless would, still make immense profits.

9. A Third Service

MANY people feel that there is not enough good programme material today to sustain two television services, let alone three.

But this will not always be so. Over the last few years, the number of skilled TV playwrights, commentators, producers and performers has grown enormously. The range of programmes has increased steadily, and so has the size of TV audiences.

These trends will surely continue, and the demand for third — and fourth and fifth — programmes will grow.

If the technical problems allowed it, there would be every reason for beginning to plan at least one new television service now, without waiting for the report of a long-drawn-out commission of enquiry. But the technical difficulties, arising mainly from an acute shortage of wavelengths, are very serious. At the time of writing, the Postmaster-General's Television Advisory Committee's report has still to be published, and it would be profitless to discuss these difficulties in detail meanwhile. The main problems are these:

1. **Line standards.** Do we want to change our present 405-line standard? A higher standard — *e.g.* 625-line, as used in most European countries — would produce better pictures and have other advantages. But since broadcasts on 405-lines would have to continue until existing sets became obsolete, two precious new channels would probably be required simply for the purpose of repeating existing BBC and ITV programmes.

2. **Colour.** This is technically practicable and extremely enjoyable. But it is still expensive and unreliable. And if we are to have colour, then for practical purposes we should have a higher line definition as well.

3. **Ultra-high frequencies.** To sustain more than three (possibly more than two) TV services, use must be made of wavelengths known as Band 4 and 5. These have not yet been developed for broadcasting in Europe, and existing sets could not receive programmes in these bands without being adapted, at a cost of perhaps £10 to £15 per set.

4. **Subscription television.** This is a very promising and revolutionary idea. There are three main variants of 'Pay-as-you-view'. Common to all of them is the principle that the subscribing viewers pay only for the items they want to see, and non-subscribing viewers cannot see these items.

The great attraction of the idea is that very large sums could theoretically be raised for broadcasting particular types of programmes not broadcast on other channels — *e.g.* new feature films, outstanding sporting events, a complete opera with an international cast, or indeed any programmes with a strong minority appeal — from greyhound racing to specialist educational courses — which for one reason or another are not broadcast on other channels. Obviously, a PAYV system would be extremely careful not to show programmes similar to those being broadcast on other channels. The

system would have a built-in guarantee against programme clashes. At the same time, if only one million viewers could be tempted to part with — say — one shilling to see a particular programme, very large sums would be made available to the broadcasting authority.

Further experiment is still needed to test the practicability of the three variants of PAYV, and to choose between them. But if the tests are successful, there may be an extremely bright future for this project.

It is clear, however, that unsolved technical questions of this kind leave the future of broadcasting rather obscure. Until the Television Advisory Committee's report has been studied and carefully digested, no detailed conclusions can be reached as to whether or when new television services should be started.

But something can be said about the principles on which the new services should be based if and when they are begun.

1. The conclusion which emerges most strongly from this survey is that the motive of maximising advertising revenue, even when somewhat restrained by law and a public service authority, works against viewers' interests at many points, and should not be extended. This is also the view of the public, according to the poll published by the *Daily Express* on 3rd September 1958, which is believed to be confirmed by private surveys made by the television industry.

Question: 'If the third service is introduced would you prefer to see it allocated to the BBC, to ITV, or to some other organisation?'

BBC	43%
ITV	21%
Other organisation	24%
Don't know	12%

There is no possible argument — political, technical or ethical — for letting 'Admass' loose on new TV channels.

2. A strong section of public opinion feels that the third channel should be given to the BBC. This would have the advantage that the two BBC programmes could be planned on a co-ordinated basis, so that viewers got a genuine choice of programme at all times. This would be an immense gain. But one of the defects of BBC television today is that it is too centralised and cumbersome. This is partly due to its links with sound broadcasting, which could be broken, but partly also to the vast size of the job it already has to do. Its existing defects would be magnified if it were to undertake a second TV programme.

3. There is a strong case for decentralising control of British television as much as possible, on grounds of administration and good democratic practice; and a commonsense solution for the third service would be to give it to a new public service corporation.

It is sometimes argued that it would be wasteful to build up an entirely new organisation, with a fresh governing board, planning staff, transmitting services, and so on. But this underrates the importance of such

an organisation in terms of money, influence and the number of viewers likely to be served; and it overrates the difficulties of starting and maintaining the service. The new corporation would not need to produce more than a small proportion of programmes itself since, after the proposed reform of ITV, existing programme companies (and others to be formed) would be able and willing to sell programmes to it themselves.

Two main problems are raised by the idea of a new corporation:

First, how are viewers to be assured of a genuine choice of programme? If three independent services compete for audiences, their schedules will tend to match each other, programme for programme, at any given time. This will apply to a limited extent even if two of the competitors are public service organisations.

If, on the other hand, the public service systems concentrate on minority programmes, their schedules may still clash badly with each other; and they may also relieve the commercial system (to its immense profit, and to the disadvantage of viewers) from the obligation to screen popular minority programmes at all.

The best solution seems to be to reform ITV along the lines suggested, so that the Authority is able to schedule popular minority programmes and to discuss programme co-ordination with the other two systems; and then to set up a special programme timing committee for the purpose of avoiding major programme clashes. The committee might consist of independent persons appointed by the Postmaster-General assisted by representatives — including regional representatives — of the BBC, ITA, and the new corporation. If the BBC and ITA can co-operate to the extent of ensuring that their simultaneous broadcasts of the same tennis match are simultaneously interrupted by the same live interview, they can surely co-operate in similar fashion to ensure that this kind of thing never happens again.

The second major problem presented by a second public service corporation is the problem of finance. Where is the money to come from?

If further tests of PAYV systems are successful, there is a very strong case for allowing the corporation to finance itself in this manner.

If, however, these tests fail two further possibilities remain. The corporation could be required to finance itself from advertisements. It would then find itself in much the same position as the reformed ITA — a non-profit-making organisation receiving large sums of advertising revenue and buying most or all of its programmes from outside bodies. This would break ITA's advertising monopoly.

The difficulty, however, is that advertisements are not liked by most viewers, who also realise increasingly that they have to pay for the advertisements and the programmes when they go shopping; and they are, from the national point of view, fantastically expensive, wasteful and inflationary. The production of the commercials themselves draws off and sterilises large numbers of scarce TV technicians and 'ideas men' who might otherwise be improving TV programmes.

It is therefore worth considering whether, in return for allowing its fabulously profitable advertising monopoly to continue, ITV might not be taxed a substantial sum in order to finance the third corporation in whole or in part. Similarly, if the new corporation adopts PAYV, and thus also perpetuates ITA's advertising monopoly, the same tax should still be levied, and used to reduce or abolish the BBC's £4 broadcasting licence.

The tax could be levied either by increasing the rents charged to programme contractors by ITV for the use of transmitters (these rents are absurdly low and were recently strongly criticised by the Select Committee on Expenditure) or — perhaps preferably — could be raised in the normal fashion in the Budget.



If the main arguments in this pamphlet are accepted the two major tasks for a new Labour Government will be:

1. Reform of ITV, in order to subordinate the interests of the programme companies to the interests of viewers through a strengthened Independent Television Authority; and in particular to put an end to monopoly practices and profiteering by the companies.
2. A rapid expansion of television along public service lines, starting with a new corporation to take over the 'third channel'.

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