

News from the Global Village

—Elihu Katz on the structure of television in developing countries

There are few countries in the world where television is thought to be fulfilling its potential for the communication of culture and the illumination of public affairs: least of all is it doing so in new and small nations. Yet there is a tendency for people in each country to think that their problems are indigenous problems, that television is much better elsewhere. In some countries it is assumed that the ills of television are the result of commercial sponsorship; in some, television's cultural problems are said to be related to political domination; in some, blame is assigned to inadequate funds, or to inadequate talent, or to the colonisation of television by the vested interests of radio. While each of these diagnoses has some substance, there is also something generically wrong.

To get a proper perspective, one has to analyse the similarity of the problem as it occurs in different countries rather than examine national differences. Consider a mythical new nation. After debating the pros and cons of the introduction of television, the government decides to go ahead. The prime minister announces to the legislature that television is being introduced, despite its high cost, for three primary reasons: 1. to unify the nation, and help to overcome tribal and regional particularisms; 2. to revive, or create, or stimulate, indigenous cultural creativity; 3. to spur economic development. Six months or a year later, the broadcasts begin and the programmes are *I love Lucy*, *Bonanza* and *Mission Impossible*: there is very little, if any, evidence of programmes which reflect the goals originally proclaimed by the prime minister.

Why does this happen? Since a large proportion of developing countries have yet to introduce television (while others have so far confined their television service to the major city and its immediate precincts), the question is not merely of academic interest. And to show that I am not being patronising about new nations and their underdevelopment, I will cite Israel and Ireland as examples. Dowling, Doonan and Quinn's account of the development of Irish Television in *Sit down and be counted* sounds very familiar to those of us who established Israeli Television, and if I am right, it will sound equally familiar to our counterparts in other new and small nations. The common difficulties, as I see them, are, first, bridging the gulf between talking about Irishness (or Jewishness) as a principle of programming and the willingness, ability and cash to produce such programmes; and, second, establishing the freedom to experiment with the organisational conditions conducive to creativity: that is to say, conditions in which the risk of error—including political error—is preferred to cautious establishmentarianism. Of course, neither Israel nor Ireland, even in their weakest moments, were in serious

danger of handing over their television service to a foreign contractor who offered to establish and operate the station. But certain new nations have done that, asking only that 15 minutes be set aside each day for the government-produced News and that provision be made for transmitting important national events and government proclamations. Even for the most developing of developing countries, however, this is a rather extreme course of action. Much more common is the pattern I described earlier, where the societal, cultural and economic goals held up for television are quietly displaced by *I love Lucy* etc.

When the prime minister of the mythical new nation has finished his speech about the goals of television, a technical expert—usually another broadcasting company—is engaged. The number of broadcasting hours is set, a date on which broadcasting will start is announced, a budget is provided, and training begins. These interdependent elements often bear no relationship to each other. The budget, typically, proves inadequate to the number of hours agreed upon. It rapidly becomes plain that while there may be some talent in the country, it is hardly enough to sustain a continuous broadcasting schedule, however minimal. Nor is there a basis in theatre or film on which to build good television: radio is hardly enough. Moreover, minimal broadcasting schedules are unseemly for a new nation that respects itself, just as they are unseemly for old and large nations that respect themselves. In short, the three prerequisites for good television are missing: adequate budgets; adequate talent; and an infrastructure in the performing arts. Telefís Eireann's advantage over Israel lies, I suspect, in Ireland's strong theatrical tradition.

At this point, the director-general and the director of programmes reconcile themselves to the idea of importing material: indeed, they begin to think it's a good idea and they may be heard to say that what their country needs is 'to open a window on the world'. And, of course, this sounds like a positive virtue. So the DG or the controller of programmes goes off to London or to New York, and, remembering his student days at Columbia University or the London School of Economics, sets out to find the programmes he used to watch—which, after all, were very good. He soon finds, to his dismay, that they are unavailable, or, if available, do not meet his need. It is likely that the programmes he remembers best were one-off programmes, 'specials', whereas he now has to think in 13's or 26's or 52's. He obviously cannot look at that many single programmes, or he would find somebody else in his job when he returned home. There is no alternative but to buy series and serials. Unfortunately, there are no good series or serials—or, at any

rate, very few. He buys the ones the salesman tells him have proved popular throughout the world.

These are not the only constraints which lead him to make these choices. First of all, it is unlikely that he has heard of, or knows how to contact, any but the three or four best-known distributors: indeed, they have probably been around soliciting him. Secondly, he will learn that in order to get certain programmes which he considers appropriate, he must buy others which seem less so. He will also learn that the world is divided in such a way that certain programmes which he would like are 'unavailable' to him because the regional royalties for the participating artists have yet to be paid. If Israel wants to buy a programme from the United States, the distributor must look to see whether Australia has already bought it, since Israel and Australia are in the same region and all the performing royalties must be paid on the first showing of the programme in each region: only a large country—paying a large-country price—can cover the cost of royalties. If Israel wants the programme, badly enough, it can get it, but it has to absorb the whole of the cost of the royalties.

The procedure for news programmes is not very different. The new station has signed contracts with one or more television news services, who will deliver every day 30 seconds of film on the war in Vietnam, 30 seconds on Pakistan, 30 seconds on the American Presidential Primaries, and so on. These items will be used to build up a conventional television newscast in which an announcer—dressed in the latest London fashion—will read out his text over a disconnected series of half-minute events which will leave the viewer, as recent research has shown, remembering very little of what he has seen and understanding even less. The director-general and the broadcasting authority will think long and hard before authorising a team to go to another country to cover a story. It is very hard to explain to the Minister of Finance that news must be made meaningful both in the gathering and in the presentation, and that very different societies ought not to be homogenised in this respect.

Steadily but surely, our new station is becoming like all other stations. It may even be proud of that. Furthermore, and for the same reasons, it will probably have an organisational structure much like that of its older sisters, with the same inevitable conflicts between financial personnel and creative personnel and among producers, management, trustees and government. Some people take the view that the checks and balances implicit in such conflicts are healthy, but I would argue that they are not: the parties are often unevenly matched and the result is that the creative spark is extinguished. The organisation will soon be pressured into commercialisation. While not inherently evil, the danger of commercial broadcasting is that it increases artificially the demand for more hours of transmission, and hence the proportion of imported material as well as perpetuating the anti-crea-

principle that every programme must reach everybody.

Television is put on a plane or a ship in New York, London or Paris and disembarks, prefabricated, in the global village. Unwrap it and out come the cowboys, commercials, comedians and commentators. Beware of looking inside, reads the warning on the back panel: you may get a dangerous shock. Yet that is precisely what needs to be done: the structure of television in developing countries has to be taken apart and reassembled to serve indigenous needs. This means asking heretical questions about how television actually might be different. In some countries, non-continuous broadcasting might be preferable to striving for the professional ideal of sun-never-sets television. Some countries might find a more 'festive' model for its television service in theatre rather than radio. What would happen if a nation decided to leave today's news exclusively to radio, while television concentrated on the effective visualisation of yesterday's news—or last week's? Might there not be situations in which the investment in mobile equipment for outside broadcasting should be given priority over the building of well-padded studios? Perhaps there is a society somewhere which really prefers educational broadcasting. The problem is to open up the options and to identify the hidden choice-points before it is too late.

I have deliberately emphasised what I consider to be the generic problems that affect creativity and culture, as seen on television, rather than focusing on the specific problems which afflict this or that

Moshe Dayan is interviewed on Israeli Television

television system. I have intentionally ignored the very difficult obstacles to mobilising the resources—financial, technical and organisational—which are a prerequisite for the introduction of television in new nations. In assuming a single national service, I have totally ignored the role of competition, both within and between countries, and the question of local and regional broadcasting. And I have paid no attention to the political motives which lead countries to acquire the programmes of other countries, or to reject them. What I have tried to do instead is to propose a set of hypotheses to explain how it comes about that the creative role which television might play in the moulding of a national culture is abdicated.

Elihu Katz, who is now engaged in research on television and national development at Manchester University, was founding Director of Israeli Television.

Call Don Moffat by Frank Gillard

Consumer protection is likely to become an even bigger theme in Britain over the next couple of years than it is already. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, our lone Ombudsman, will probably be joined by at least nine local commissioners, in England alone, to take care of complaints against local government. Mr Heath has appointed a shoppers' Minister, with a Director-General of Fair Trading and a Consumer Protection Advisory Committee. The Labour Party's lawyers are talking about the creation of a Citizens'

Rights Commission. We need all the support we can get when we find ourselves obliged to resist blind bureaucracy, or when we have to fight to get a square deal over some commercial transaction, but the armament might seem a bit heavy to be invoked for everyday use. There is a need, alongside the official set-up, for more informal channels of investigation to which people can turn when their exasperation is of a relatively minor nature. An ombudsman does not need to be appointed by Whitehall, or to have Government backing, to be effective in such cases. A community could very well appoint its own man to deal with local complaints. All he would need is responsible sponsorship and reasonable access to channels of publicity. Publicity, rightly used, is a powerful instrument in an ombudsman's hands and provides a sufficient sanction for most of his purposes.

The State University radio station, WOSU, in Columbus, Ohio, has shown how citizens can set up and operate a local do-it-yourself ombudsman service. WOSU, a non-commercial station, launched its project a couple of years ago. The station was providing, among other programmes, about six hours of news broadcasting a day, grouped in two-hour blocks around the breakfast-time, lunch-time and late-afternoon drive-home periods. These newscasts were known to enjoy large and influential audiences of concerned citizens. The WOSU staff decided to enlarge their news operation at peak hours to include what they described as 'subjective journalism'. Their aim was to improve, if only to a small extent, the standard of consumer services and domestic commercial practices in their area by means of short programme items concerned with consumer protection and education. Beyond this immediate practical target, they envisaged the possibility of using radio to awaken the social conscience of the community, and to stir people into action when the need arose.

So WOSU set up an Ombudsman Unit. At its head, as Executive Producer, is Keith Smith, a young, energetic and experienced journalist, who came from television. He has a staff of six researchers, two of them part-time. The ombudsman—the voice of the unit and the personification of all it is trying to do—is Don Moffat. He is a former soldier and teacher, a man of middle age who sounds exactly right for the part: patient, reasonable, approachable, solid, but nobody's fool. Just the man to arbitrate in an argument, dedicated to good works, but with plenty of common sense in dealing with them. The procedure worked out by Keith Smith and his staff is straightforward. If you have a complaint to make—a gripe about a product which fails to live up to its maker's claims, or unsatisfactory service on the part of a firm or public institution, if you think you are being unfairly pushed around by local or central government—you call Don Moffat at WOSU on a special line. His recorded voice asks you to tell him what it is all about, assures you that what you say will be recorded and studied, and that you will then hear further from the unit.

Thirty-five such calls come into WOSU on an average day, and the number remains

