

Comment

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COMMENT

AUTHORITY AND THE MASS MEDIA

Radio and television are in a totally different position from other news media because they impose themselves on their public. We can choose which newspaper we will buy and withhold a magazine from the sight of children, we can skip over an article and throw away a paper without reading it.

Not so with the "telly". Its sequence of programmes are thrust on viewers who in their millions must share only three channels, whereas they have the choice of a multiplicity of publications at any newsagents. Although the situation is different in America and Japan, where TV viewers have far more channels at their disposal, the distinct situation of television and radio is that it is shared by a wider public than any newspaper and that they stand alone.

The consequences of this are apparent in news programmes, which are seen by readers of *The Times* and the *Mirror* alike. Thus people with widely differing political ideas usually reading newspapers of opposing style and tendencies have to watch the same news programmes on TV. This is why programme editors may not slant towards any particular side (which does not mean that they don't) and are deprived of the freedom of expression enjoyed by Press journalists. A writer in *The Times* must write something to suit the book of his prestigious daily, likewise a writer in the *Mirror* must please its working class readership. The BBC commentator must please both, which means that he must be entirely objective, or in other words,

repress any urge to say something personal. This is also the ploy of news agency writers, who must satisfy papers of every tendency and concern themselves with giving news and nothing but the news.

But a public broadcasting corporation may not slant either way in its rendering of the news. It has to aim at a public service, towards the better good of the society which it serves and this is illustrated in the strict charter of the BBC. There is no limit to the variation of programmes as long as they satisfy some moral and perhaps ideological criteria adopted by society. The late Lord Reith was the embodiment of this concept. He impressed his autocratic personality and lofty views into forging the BBC into something which would inspire a better society. These standards have been imitated by other broadcasting associations. They are probably tighter than those followed by the Press, as the Wilson-Dimbleby ruffle shows. There is indeed no doubt that a Press reporter would have got away with the actions for which David Dimbleby was criticised.

The problem of objectivity is particularly important with Swiss television as it relies so much on information, owing to its small means. There are separate television broadcasting systems for German-speaking Switzerland, French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino with a total of ten times less viewers than the BBC. They cannot hope to compete with larger TV organisations. They wouldn't dream of making films on the scope of, say, the "Forsythe Saga" or weekly series like the "Avengers". In fact, Swiss viewers enjoy series made by the BBC, such as "The Saint", and films made by French and German television. They can't even afford comedians and variety shows.

On the other hand they get plenty of sports, because it is cheap to produce sports programmes. They also have more Eurovision viewing than the British public. However, Swiss television can compete with the great in objective news coverage. In fact, the small televisions of Switzerland pride themselves on their achievements in this field. Information is considered as the mainstay of the reduced viewing hours of Swiss television and it is therefore essential that they should be good and objective. The particular political awareness of the Swiss is an additional factor demanding objectivity and the apparent failure of TV newsmen to comply to this led to some excitement.

Television was troubled by two sackings last April and much talk of incompetence, baleful influence from interested groups, tied hands and lack of freedom of expression followed these well publicised events.

The head of Swiss Radio and Television, surrounded by all the TV

chiefs of the country, held a tense press conference at the end of that same month in which he explained what exactly the relations between the political authority, namely the Federal Council, and the broadcasting organisation were.

Six years ago Mr. Schaffner, then head of the Department of Public Economy, made a brilliant speech on television in defence of the economic measures he had put before the electorate, with the result that they were accepted with an important majority. Mr. Schaffner's opponents were, however, badly irritated and the Swiss broadcasting organisation had to make the decision not to allow any more such interventions from the government.

But when Mr. Nelio Celio asked for a slot on television to defend his financial programme and was faced with a stern refusal, he was publicly annoyed. This made it necessary to reach a permanent agreement between Television and the Federal Council.

Federal Councillors may now use television on a number of different cases. They may use it on the eve of a federal election, on the understanding that the "Corporation" is not associated with their opinion, and on the condition that the opposition may be given a chance to express its own views immediately after in a programme from which the federal councillor will be absent. Another kind of programme featuring a federal councillor are conversational interviews with TV reporters on general policy. They would be programmed four times a year.

In the case of dramatic events or national catastrophes, an internal arrangement has been made, whereby the attitude to adopt with respect to these events is agreed upon in a telephonic conference between the heads of the various local studios and the central administration of the Swiss Broadcasting system in Berne. The accent is to broadcast the truth, and not sensation, with the awareness that what the mass media says can have a great impact on the public in such circumstances. It can increase its nervousness or make the maintenance of law and order more difficult, for example.

But these revelations have helped to dispel the fears, quickly raised after the small internal troubles at Zurich TV, that the Federal Council might somehow be meddling with the freedom of expression of this vital mass medium.

Television is after all a vital part of life. More time is spent by most people in watching TV than in eating and drinking, communicating, reading and indulging in a hobby. It is the intellectual food of the masses. Its vivid pictures can be a vital instrument in moving the conscience of a nation.

(PMB)