

Broadcasting

Pine Maunster

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Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

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THE HUNT REPORT ON CABLE TELEVISION

1. I think this is an admirable, liberal-minded document which is sensible without being timid. The report rightly points out that television does intrude more into the sitting-room than books do, and some form of control is necessary.

The proposed cable authority would surely be no less effective than the IBA in controlling undesirable material, without inhibiting the growth and diversity of cable services.

2. In meeting the objections of the BBC and the IBA, the report makes, but only in passing, an important point: the BBC and IBA claim above all to be anxious to protect the right of the public to see major sporting events such as the Cup Final. With the advent of cable, they fear they would be outbid by the new companies and non-subscribers would be denied the "right" they have traditionally enjoyed (paragraphs 68-70).

On the other hand, the report mentions that it has "some sympathy with those who suggested to us that television at present secures sporting coverage on the cheap".

There are, indeed, those who think that television is killing football, racing and no doubt other sports too. It may be that the true market value of the television rights to many sporting events is far higher than either network is at present prepared to pay. If so, there is no moral compulsion on the FA to offer the Cup Final to television as a subsidised social service. The same goes for the LTA and Wimbledon - and other events where the television revenue is the major source of income for the future of the game. Contrary to the argument usually put, the competition from cable in bidding for rights to sporting events is to be welcomed.

3. The BBC's argument that only a national public-service network can afford to make high-quality programmes depends on accepting the BBC's ludicrously high costs. These are now beginning to mean that the BBC itself can make major series only in collaboration with

overseas television companies, usually American ones (who, incidentally, often attempt to vulgarise the production in order to make it more saleable in the US).

Non-union, independent, small cable companies might well be able to make programmes as good, if not better, at half the cost. We must not let the ruinous practices of the television trade unions get a grip on this new area of employment.

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