

PRIME MINISTER

LIAISON COMMITTEE

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MEDIA  
EXPANSION OF TELEVISION

The next few months will bring a substantial expansion in television services in Britain with the launching of Channel 4 on November 2 and breakfast television in the New Year.

This note briefly outlines these developments and discusses the implications for Ministers and their staffs. The new services are explained in more detail in the Annex.

Channel 4

Broadcasts start on November 2 with a single national (except Welsh language) programme, from mid-afternoon (early afternoon at weekends) to late night, seven days a week.

Apart from a number of current affairs programmes, the Government's interest will focus on the daily (but not weekends) news programme, broadcast from 7.00pm to 8.00pm. This schedule falls between the early and late news programmes on existing channels and at a time when there is much popular competition on other channels.

With minor exceptions the news programme will be produced by ITN but with an entirely separate news gathering team. Thus from November there will be a third demand for television interviews and another set of broadcasting journalists seeking a different angle. Channel 4 news may however go both wider and deeper than existing television news journalism though it will attract only a minority audience.

Contributions to the news programme from outside ITN are as follows:

- (1) a short 3-4 minute slot from Monday to Thursday for an "alternative voice";
- (2) a full half-hour (7.30-8.00pm) on Fridays for different groups to present an aspect of news that they regard as not having been adequately covered during the week. In extremis Departments could try to use this if they felt that the Government had been unfairly represented on an issue.

Breakfast Television

There will be breakfast television of the "Today" kind of mixture on both BBC and commercial TV from early 1983 with the BBC intent on starting first. BBC will transmit only 5 days a week but TV (AM), the commercial venture, will broadcast at weekends as well. BBC plans to run from 6.30-9.00am and TV (AM) from 6.00-9.15am.

Commercial breakfast television will finance itself with advertising and will have a heavy investment to recoup. This will intensify the competition within the media and not merely between television companies but also between television and radio and between the electronic media and the press.

TV (AM) is a separate company and, like ITN Channel 4, regards itself as a separate news gathering organisation. Thus Ministers face the possibility from early in the New Year of requests for at least six radio and television interviews on major stories - BBC radio and tv, IRN, ITN, Channel 4 and TV (AM).

IMPLICATIONS

The advent of Channel 4 offers at least the possibility of more serious and in-depth treatment of policy issues and measures than is normal in news programmes.

Their declared objective, while giving a news service, is to deal substantively with three or four issues in each hourly programme and to seek to produce light rather than to generate heat and so to eschew confrontational formats. They attach considerable importance to live interviews. There is a strong female bias in some programme production teams.

Channel 4's audience will, however, be a minority one. Its news programmes hopes eventually to achieve an audience of some 3 million - roughly one-third of the established BBC1 and ITN bulletins. The audience profile may well prove to be biased towards the younger, more intelligent viewer.

Breakfast TV is likely to give a much sharper edge to competition within the media. If it follows the American pattern, it may well seek to set the political agenda for the day, as it were, especially while Parliament is in session. It brings the prospect of a very early start to the day for Ministers. But it remains to be seen what size and nature of audience it can attract.

Similarly it remains to be seen how Channel 4 will live up to its declared objectives and how its sober and earnest approach to broadcasting stands up to advertising pressures. It seems reasonable to suppose that breakfast TV will be lighter-weight and that BBC radio's "Today" programme could become more popular in format and content.

Both Channel 4 and breakfast TV will need to be closely monitored both for their own quality, balance and audience numbers and profile and for their effect on existing channels.

Neither development will achieve the size of audience enjoyed by the established main BBC and ITN news and news magazine programmes. They will therefore rank lower in order of Ministerial priority unless they offer - as they may well do - specific opportunities to argue a case in some depth or, with breakfast TV, to secure a better balance to the overall presentation of sensitive issues. Ministerial appearances will of course have a publicity spin off in other sections of the media.

Cabinet Ministers are accordingly recommended to adopt a pragmatic approach to Channel 4 and breakfast TV, judging whether a programme has specific advantages or value for them and the Government.

#### Support

The greater demand on Ministers' time from this substantial expansion of television is likely to go beyond the proportional increase in airtime because of the greater competition. This argues for some development of existing Departmental practices.

Ministerial team

All channels make an initial bid for a Cabinet Minister and have often to be persuaded to transfer their invitation to a junior Minister. If, however, the Government is to do itself justice on a greatly expanded television output, and to ensure its arguments get through to minority audiences, especially on sensitive subjects, greater and more flexible use will have to be made of a Department's Ministerial team.

The organisation, through Parliamentary Private Secretaries, of an expert support team of helpful Backbenchers to deploy the Government's case when Ministers are not available is also suggested.

Officials

One further consequence of the expansion of television, and particularly of Channel 4, may well be increasing pressure from radio and television for Government officials to give interviews to expound the facts behind a particular issue.

Officials in the provinces, the police and the Army in Northern Ireland, for example, appear regularly on radio and television to set out the facts of an incident or the details of specific measures. Whitehall officials may run a greater risk of being dragged into a discussion of the merits of policy and Ministers will wish to adopt a cautious though not exclusive approach to requests for interviews with them.

Press Conferences

Ministers will often not find it possible for want of time to respond to all radio and television requests for interviews in connection with a major announcement or event. They will find it helpful both in minimising calls on their time, and in getting over their point, to have their press conferences recorded and filmed and to start them with a prepared statement which summarises the essentials for the viewing and listening public.

Increasingly they may feel their interests are best served by moving to the type of news conference common in other countries, recognising that these require firm chairmanship and crisp, clear and simple answers to be effective on radio and television.

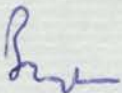
Official back-up

Information Divisions are examining the implications of these developments for dealing, round the clock, with additional demands for briefing and the handling and co-ordination of requests for interviews with Ministers. Arrangements are also under discussion for monitoring the output of Channel 4 and breakfast TV and their effects on the existing media.

SUMMARY

Ministers are recommended to:

- (i) approach Channel 4 and breakfast TV pragmatically recognising that they may offer useful opportunities, notwithstanding their minority audiences, to argue a case in depth or to achieve a better balanced presentation;
- (ii) make greater use of Departmental Ministerial teams to exploit the opportunities offered by a major expansion of television and to organise a support group of helpful Backbenchers to supplement Ministerial efforts;
- (iii) adopt a cautious approach to requests for expository interviews with officials which may result from this expansion of television;
- (iv) move towards televised press conferences common in other countries, starting with a prepared statement setting out the points they wish to get over to the public through radio and television.



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Channel 4 is funded by the IBA from levies on the existing ITV companies. Therefore there is no direct and short term commercial influence on programme content. Total editorial control resides with the company and its output is broadcast nationally through existing IBA transmitters. ITV companies sell time on Channel 4 and keep the revenue. In principle, it provides them with a complementary medium for minority audiences, thereby increasing their total potential audience at any time and offering a medium for minority market products.

All Channel 4's material is to be bought in from outside, mainly from independent producers. Most of the news programmes come from a separate ITN team.

Apart from the one-hour daily news, the following current affairs programmes are planned:

Weekly

- 30-minute current affairs programme produced by women (probably Wednesday);
- 45-minute programme on politics (probably Friday or Saturday);
- 30-minute programme on industry (Sunday);
- 30-minute programme on health (probably Thursday);
- 1-hour quasi religious programme "Good News" (Sunday).

'What the Papers Say' and 'Face the Press' transferred from Granada and Tyne Tees.

Monthly

Monthly Report to the Nation - A two hour presentation of a nationalised industry, including an opportunity for "experts" and consumers to question the chairman of the board.

TV AM

An independent company with use of IBA transmitters from 6.00am to 9.15am daily, including weekends. Although they may occasionally use other material, they will essentially produce and edit the programme with their own staff and crews. They have total editorial control over what goes out; and what goes out will be mainly national news, with only small regional variation.

They differ from Channel 4 in two important respects. They regard themselves as a separate (the third) television newsgathering organisation. And they have to sell time to live so they will be the more aggressively competitive.

Initially, they expect to start transmitting at 6.30am with a "Day Break" show until 7.00am, providing a service of national news and information to specific audiences. The main show will be "Good Morning Britain" from 7.00am to 9.15am, broadly analogous to the radio "Today" programme. They have lined up five nationally known presenters - David Frost, Anna Ford, Angela Rippon, Michael Parkinson and Robert Kee to ensure initial audience appeal. They anticipate reaching a million or so homes in aggregate each morning.

#### BBC Breakfast Television

The producers seek to get in first by starting in January. They are part of the BBC current affairs department and will call on these facilities. Thus newsgathering will be part of the overall BBC news arrangements.

The programme will be on BBC1 with a single national programme from 6.30am to 9.00am five days a week (not weekends). It has as yet no name but will be of the BBC radio "Today" programme format with at least half-hourly news bulletins interspersed with light-to-medium current affairs items and interviews.

The producers will prefer interviews and discussions in the Lime Grove Studios but will send out ENG teams as required.