# Chip, Chip, Chip

Half of Britain’s broadcasting system having been put into turmoil by Mrs Thatcher, the newspapers now seem bent on demoralising the other half. The tabloids, with a few posh papers grotesquely choosing to lend them dignity, have lately been attacking the BBC in such a concerted manner that you would think Fleet Street still existed in the one place, with all its feature writers drinking at the same pub. The attacks are mainly based on the hasty interpretation of ratings, which are useful tools only if you accept that they are not tea leaves. But the proprietors, and below them the editors, want to hear a story about the BBC in disarray.

So on every paper a journalist poises himself over the tea cup, and in the course of time discovers, for example, that although the huge audience watching the BBC voices little dissatisfaction, this is only because the people who would voice dissatisfaction are not watching, and that the BBC is therefore no longer popular. Then he calls up as many BBC bigwigs as he can get hold of, asks them what they intend to do in the face of the imminent collapse of their entire organisation, and notes down any comment which sounds defensive. When the piece is published it sounds like the same piece in the other papers. This is not surprising, since they all quote each other as evidence, but it can be alluded to as a consensus when a follow-up article is commissioned. ‘A lot of people are saying ...’ says the journalist on the phone, and if you reply that the only people saying it are a lot of people like him, he has secured from you a usefully defensive comment, which scarcely needs to be misquoted. He will probably do that anyway, but not necessarily out of malice. The chances are that he couldn’t get it right if he tried.

The journalist given the job of sniffing around the edges of the media is usually either some freshly hired young bright spark with terrific ambitions and no information, or else the office dunce completing a long career as the man chosen to pursue ambulances of secondary importance. If television is already at one remove from reality, then writing soft news about it must be at two removes at least. There is no point, however, in despising the scriveners. The proprietors are envious of television. Its partial deregulation is not enough for them, and not just because most of them would like to buy some of the fragments. They are simply envious of what they see as its power, and so give free rein to their editors, who are envious of what they see as its glamour. Since even the better tabloids largely live off a diet of television’s leavings, there is humiliation to make the envy worse.

The Daily Mail got some of its own back last week when Lynda Lee-Potter, their sob-sister who knows the stars, took Terry Wogan on her knee while he complained, as well he might have done, that just because his show was coming off was no reason to treat him as a failure. The talk show for star guests on the plug circuit can have only a limited life and the Wogan version had remained a steady ratings-puller well beyond its allotted span, but none of the tabloids was interested in admitting that the BBC had got good value out of it. They preferred to use the word ‘axed’. The Mail allowed Wogan to explain that he had not been ‘axed’ but forgot to add that it agreed with him. Later in the week it had another scoop, when the magician Paul Daniels turned up to file some complaints of his own. Without benefit of Lynda Lee-Potter, Daniels accused the BBC, in his own resounding words, of a whole string of crimes, the worst of which, as far as I could tell, was that the Television Centre security staff had failed to recognise him at the gate. There was also a lot of stuff about smut encroaching on family entertainment in prime time, but it was hard to avoid the impression that his idea of prime-time family entertainment placed heavy emphasis on card tricks, doves up the sleeve, and the mysterious bisection of a girl in spangles.
The Mail had a marvellous week at the BBC’s expense and would probably have enjoyed itself just as much even if Viscount Rothermere had not already signalled his deep personal sympathy for deregulation by stumping up real cash instead of silly stories. He had a stake in New Era television and was in a consortium for one of the ITV franchise bids. The first project was a victim of the BSB débâcle and the second was a non-starter, but who knows what the future will hold?

Meanwhile to goad the BBC is a rewarding sport in itself. It makes a tabloid feel like a heavyweight. If the other tabloids get in on your story then a hazy notion may aspire to the status of a talking point, and all concerned can almost convince themselves that they are dealing with facts. Jonathan Powell, controller of BBC 1, replied to the Paul Daniels piece, which gave Peter McKay in the Evening Standard the chance to lard his uniquely somnolent column with the opinion that Powell would be wise to remain silent, and the further opinion that the BBC ought to be shrunk to a tenth of its present size. All the evidence suggests that Peter McKay writes his whole column on an intravenous drip, yet he must retain, if only barely, the strength to swallow, because a story which was already chewed to purée when it reached him he still managed to convert into a whiff of gas.

But I don’t want to be cruel to Peter McKay. He is just a weather-vane. The truth is that the not very gifted feature writers and columnists who are always infringing on the regular TV critic’s preserves would gladly do so from no other motivation but the overtaxed marksman’s urge to shoot a sitting duck. Television is easy to prate about. There is also the matter of the journalist’s annoyance about the television person’s supposed salary. The journalist imagines that his reader shares this annoyance, but in my experience the reader would do better to be annoyed about what the journalist is getting, and the journalist to be enraged at the proprietor. Journalists who write soft news about television work a short day compared to the people they are disposed to pillory, and take little risk. Wogan is well paid but my own price for handling Oliver Reed or his equivalent three times a week would be ten million pounds for the first year, plus danger money.
My own fabulous BBC salary of £355,000 p.a., by the way, is just that — a fable. The figure was made up out of thin air by some woman at Today who later transferred herself to the Independent, where I hope they know which one she is and what she is capable of. I don’t deny that I get the market price — it would be a foolish performer who took less, and no employer would negotiate with him again if he spilled the details — but it isn’t mad money, and has to be worked for. No print journalist who has the peculiar abilities to do television is debarred from doing it by anything except his reluctance to engage in the long task of breaking in, of creating the conditions in which he can continue to work, and of taking the risk that anyone takes who sets out to make money by pleasing the public: that he might displease it. If he is unwilling to do that, he has no right to envy TV performers their take home pay. They are, after all, taking it to a home into whose front door the journalist cherishes the right to insert his foot. The journalist’s proprietor, meanwhile, is exempt from speculation about his emolument, unless he is Robert Maxwell, who lumbered on without faltering until tiny Nisha Pillai ofPanorama put a bolt into his shoulder, and he began to crash.

Maxwell was a minus billionaire, which ought logically to have made him one of the poorest men in history, but he paid himself well enough to gamble away in an hour at the tables more money than Wogan has made out of a selfless career of saving Hollywood film stars from the consequences of their own egos. There is a danger that Maxwell, because he borrowed money and then stole it, will make Rupert Murdoch, who merely borrowed it, look public-spirited. And indeed Murdoch, though at one time an even more poverty-stricken minus billionaire than Maxwell ever was, is a man of principle; but I doubt if anyone British-born, even his friend Mrs Thatcher, really appreciates what his principles are. For instance, he regards the very idea of public service broadcasting as an offence. Mrs Thatcher would have been prepared to live with the broadcasting system after what she thought of as the clear wind of market forces had been allowed to blow through it. Mr Murdoch dreams of that same wind blowing it away. He believes that Britain will be a better place when Sky attains break-even point, which will apparently happen when a big enough proportion of homes have been ‘penetrated’ — a polite way of saying shafted.

Sky will probably make it. First of all it has developed and successfully applied its own wonderful special branch of the accountant’s language, by which if the weekly loss is halved it becomes a profit, even if it is still in millions. Second, the man in charge is Sam Chisholm, one of Murdoch’s true assets. If the banks ever decided that Murdoch’s total burden of debt had shrunk to the extent that they might risk closing him down, Chisholm would be one of the components worth bidding for. In Australia he used to head up Channel 9 for Kerry Packer, one of Australia’s few plus billionaires. Chisholm ran Packer’s channel as a bright, loud supermarket which perennially out-shouted Murdoch’s Channel 10. Murdoch’s channel never matched Packer’s except in the year that Murdoch bought the Olympics. (If it turns out in the near future that you can’t watch Wimbledon on the BBC, that will be the signal that Sky is making its big push for final penetration.) Chisholm has an appetite for efficiency so mighty that he has even been able to digest the awkwardly shaped, sharp-cornered fixed assets of BSB. He also has the advantage of being backed by Sky’s great weapon, the Murdoch press.

The Murdoch tabloids, while never ceasing to fill their pages with stories in which real life and television soap operas are inextricably confused, hammer away at the BBC with all the envy of their rivals plus a more virulent element: self-righteousness. Suddenly every think-piece writer and philosopher on the Sun, the News of the World and Today becomes an expert on ratings and a tribune of the people’s rights. Disgracefully, theSunday Times has joined in the campaign. Andrew Neil, its editor, would probably resent the implication that he is a creature of Murdoch’s will. He would like to think that he has a mind of his own. But the pilot-fish, though it might feel that it is leading the shark, is just riding in its pressure wave. In the issue before last theSunday Times carried a story about the BBC’s ratings which Andrew Neil would probably not have published if it had not suited his prejudices, and if his prejudices, alas, had not suited Murdoch’s. It took two reporters to write the piece, with ‘additional reporting’ by a third. Ranking mercifully low among those quoted, I was cold-called by the third, who politely listened to the same line of argument which you are reading now. I also said, in passing, that I thought there was an industry-wide lack of sitcom writing talent, mainly because of the distorting influence of Hollywood. This was the bit that got into the article, but by the time it did the industry-wide deficiency had become the BBC’s deficiency. I found myself attacking the BBC, in quotation marks. After years of making speeches defending Britain’s classic broadcasting system from ideologues and hucksters, I had managed to enlist myself among its attackers.

Let me strongly advise my fellow talking heads against falling into the same trap. Watch out for the third man, the one doing the additional reporting. If he doesn’t misquote what you said, the other two will scramble what he said you said, and somehow your voice will join the consensus.

There are criticisms to be made of the BBC, but the critic must first wipe his nose free of wet tea leaves. BBC 1 and BBC 2 badly need a combined strategy. There was a time when formats could be tried and tested on BBC 2 before they were switched to BBC 1 to take the heat. That strategy, or something like it, needs to be re-established, and made mandatory. The matter might almost be described as urgent, if the tabloids weren’t wasting to pounce.

It could be said — Paul Johnson has said it, in this paper — that Britain’s classic broadcasting system is defended by those who stand to gain from it. They do, but not necessarily in cash. ITV pays better than the BBC, and deregulated television pays better than anyone. In America, the preposterously senatorial Dan Rather’s price goes up as his network’s audience-share goes down, because the size of the audience he does pull comes to matter more. Sam Chisholm of Sky, with Keith Chegwin at his disposal, will probably never call me up, but if he does then I am sure the salary he mentions will be dazzling. What I am after, though, is the audience: the whole audience, or as much of it as I can pull into the tent. That might sound like arrogance but there is a sly modesty which is more arrogant still.

Rupert Murdoch despises the mandarins who presume to decide what the people ought to have. He thinks there is a clear distinction between that and giving the people what they want. But you don’t have to be a mandarin to be confident about giving the people what you think they ought to have. All you have to be is one of the people. The deregulators who want nothing but niche marketing call it democracy. If it is, it is a mean conception of it. It has been said that satellite and cable channels don’t broadcast, they re-broadcast. This is far closer to the truth than anything their champions say about the classic system. The first series of the BBC serial The House of Elliott was not only not the ratings failure some of the papers mocked, it was more than a ratings success. It pulled a huge family audience while the satellite and cable channels were screening stuff a decade old, and even ITV was showing a movie.

The BBC as it has always been, and ITV as we hope it will be again once it gets itself back together, constitute a productive force which is beyond markets, and can be assessed only as part of a culture — perhaps even the most important part, because although we can’t be sure that values are transmitted by a good book, we are somehow certain they are traduced by a bad programme. Of the duopoly’s two components, the BBC is currently the more vulnerable. Until its charter is renewed, it must plead to be appreciated by the least fair-minded yet most influential minority in its audience — parliamentarians without time to watch it and press executives who would like to see it whipped. At the rate the press is going, the question will become not whether the BBC needs to be broken up, but how. This growing capacity of Britain to attack its own institutions is beginning to look suicidal.

Those institutions consititute, after all, the main reason why some of us came here. Rupert Murdoch is here on his way to America, the centre of his world, which is commercial pure and simple. But there are those among his fellow expatriates who are here for what Sir Winston Churchill, when he saw it threatened, called the life of Britain, her message and her glory. Your broadcasting system is part of what holds you together. Pull it to pieces and you tear at your own heart. Having lived here for thirty years I can’t plausibly invoke the visitor’s privilege of saying that I hate to see you doing this to yourselves, so all I can do is just feebly wish that the tripe might be confined to the comic papers. Serious ones, including Murdoch’s if their editors are brave enough, should cut out the nonsense.

(Spectator, December 14, 1991)