# Serious Brain Operation

In the week of my fiftieth birthday, after twenty years spent either writing about or appearing on television, I still wouldn’t feel entitled to pronounce on the current state of the medium, if it were not for a certain document which has recently fallen into my hands. This document, I believe, blows the whole debate about British television wide open.

The document is called ‘World’s First Official The SunNEIGHBOURS Collection Sticker Album PLUS EXTRA FREE POSTER PULL-OUT OF JASON AND KYLIE.’ A flimsy pamphlet which describes itself as being ‘published by EUROFLASH (Sticker Collections) Ltd’, it works on the principle that its purchasers must not only fork out for the album, they must fork out again for the stickers to fill in the blanks.

Apparently there are hundreds of thousands of copies of this sticker album in existence, but I am assured that a completed example, with all its stickers in place, is more valuable than the Mappa Mundi. The precious copy in my possession was discovered in the split-level hutch of one of my daughters after she was taken away to a detox unit where Neighboursis forcibly withheld. She had got well beyond the point, standard among addicts, of taping each episode and watching it three extra times. She and her little friends had been found studying wiring diagrams so that they could couple up their VCR machines and go into business bootlegging the Kylievideo on an industrial basis. My faith that I will one day get my daughter back is unshakeable, but if anything was going to shake it, the ‘World’s First Official TheSunNEIGHBOURS Collection Sticker Album’ would be a strong candidate.

‘It wasn’t long ago,’ says the caption for a sticker of some character called Lucy, ‘that she was fighting for her life after a serious brain operation.’ Boy, do I know how she feels. The album’s solitary ray of hope is that one of the stickers of Craig McLachlan is missing. Craig — statistics overwhelmingly suggest that you won’t need to be told this, but I insist on believing that there are still a few normal people out there — plays a character called Henry. Billed as a fabulous specimen of young Australian manhood, Craig has a face whose bottom half consists entirely of bared teeth. Ice-blue eyes shine triumphantly out of the top half. The complete assemblage is surrounded by an eruption of straw stuffing, as if he had just won a bodybuilding competition by ramming his head through the back of an old sofa. There are meant to be seven stickers of Craig, but there are only six. It isn’t much of a relief, but it’s something.

The relevance of this touching publication to the current debate about British television should be obvious. After making allowances for the various percentages due to the Neighboursproduction company and EUROFLASH (Sticker Collections) Ltd, all the profits go to the Sun,whose proprietor is my erstwhile compatriot, Rupert Murdoch. It is very hard to see, then, how Rupert Murdoch can plausibly argue that British television, as currently constituted, is unresponsive to the public. When he contends that British television is not sufficiently led by the market, the only possible answer is: how much harder could the market lead it than it is being led now?

Scientists predict that Neighbourswill eventually affect the whole world, like the hole in the ozone layer, subjecting the human species to the cerebral equivalent of global warming. Masai warriors want Kylie posters. Elusive Jivaro Indians of the upper Amazon have already been heard, although not seen, singing ‘I Should Be So Lucky’. But so far the United States, Rupert Murdoch’s great example of a market-led television area, is comparatively Neighbours-free.Britain is where the market has spoken loudest. More so even than in its country of origin, in Britain Neighbourshas a direct connection with its viewers. They watch it until they pass out. They buy stickers. Mr Murdoch’s editors, who sell the stickers, are aware, even if he isn’t, that when he talks about British television being out of touch with the times he is talking through his hat.

Mr Murdoch has been talking through his hat for some time on this subject. Most conspicuously, he talked through it when invited to deliver the James McTaggart Memorial Lecture in Edinburgh. As has been insufficiently noted, James McTaggart devoted his life to the sort of public service broadcasting which Mr Murdoch, to the small extent that he understands it, loathes. Inviting Rupert Murdoch to address a serious gathering of television professionals was like inviting Evel Knievel to address a road safety conference. Yet Mr Murdoch was listened to with respect. The British are polite. If the positions had been reversed — if a British tycoon had gone to Australia to tell the locals that their most cherished institutions were an offence to his economic precepts — he would have been instructed to pull his head in.

But all the heroic Australian men from Rod Laver to Merv Hughes, and all the heroic Australian women from Margaret Court to those powerful female warders in Prisoner:CellBlock H,have established a climate of opinion in which even the loftiest and most worldly-wise British mandarins are in awe of Australian energy. Like the Roman senators in Cavafy’s poem, they wait almost longingly for the barbarians to stride in and shake things up. Rupert Murdoch fills the bill exactly. Like a Goth swaggering around Rome wearing an onyx toilet seat for a collar, he exudes self-confidence. Bleach his thatch and he could even be Jason. Not Jason of the Argonauts: Jason of Neighbours,described by the ‘World’s First Official TheSun NEIGHBOURS Collection Sticker Album’ in Homeric terms: ‘Dishy Jason sparked a stampede among his followers when he visited Britain earlier this year. After all, there’s no home-grown talent to compete with those healthy, blond all-Australian looks.’

That’s just what Rupert did: he sparked a stampede. The home-grown talent was left apologetically asking if it might dare to suggest that his analysis of the current situation was not perhaps slightly inclined towards the simplistic. What they should have said was that he was full of bull.
This is not to say that Mr Murdoch is stupid. He isn’t: far from it. But he isn’t seriousabout anything except business. The only thing he really knows anything about is newspapers, and he knows about those only to the extent that they are merchandise. He is a merchant. In many ways he is an impressive one, although he would be a more convincing multi-millionaire if he had not been born a multi-millionaire. Though I have never met him, I find him personally attractive, but that might be because I see him in the shaving mirror every morning. Rupert Murdoch is the man I might have been if I had been born rich, and thus felt obliged to spend my life proving that I was a self-made man. I would have had fun building empires, toppling governments, launching satellites to unleash Keith Chegwin on a helpless world. But by a stroke of luck I was given serious work to do.

Good television is serious work, even when — especially when — it looks most frivolous. Only someone with something to say can say something funny, unless you are the kind of person who laughs at nothing. I try to get the market price for what I do — the best guarantee of being able to go on doing it — but beyond that I don’t make deals. I make things. Most people in British television take the same attitude. Rupert Murdoch, who makes deals, is talking a different language.

He is talking the American language. He always has. As with his newspapers, so with his television companies, he has spent his life matching the product to the market. In television he has seldom been successful even on his own terms. In Australia his Channel 10 was forever limping far behind Kerry Packer’s Channel 9, which had senior executives who knew what they were doing. Murdoch always behaved as if it didn’t much matter who ran the show as long as the right people owned it. The opposite, of course, is true: it doesn’t much matter who owns the show as long as the right people run it. Even if Channel 10 had been a success, however, it would have been a success only within the framework of Australian commercial television, which is an American-style supermarket. The commercials come every few minutes at a level of noise that you can’t turn down except by kicking in the set.

The real story of Australian TV is not of the commercial channels competing with each other to provide ‘choice’ (a word perpetually on Murdoch’s lips), but of the commercial channels ganging up to compete against the ABC, which would be Australia’s equivalent of the BBC except that it is chronically under-funded and has no prestige except with the educated public: the newspapers, nearly all owned by the same men who control the commercial television companies, vilify it on principle. It is important to remember that Rupert Murdoch grew up in an atmosphere where business ethics were the only ethics and public service broadcasting was despised out of conviction, with religious fervour.

Similarly, in the United States, Murdoch’s Fox channel, which is fighting bravely to establish itself as a new network alongside NBC, ABC and CBS, can succeed, if it succeeds, only as part of the total failure of American television to provide a watchable service for people who can’t stand being constantly shouted at to buy something. Once again, the real story is not of competition between commercial channels, but of their combination to stifle public service broadcasting. In the US, poor, embattled PBS is so starved of funds that a good proportion of its screen time has to be taken up by celebrities who have donated their charisma so as to help beg for money. Watching them panhandle is nearly as bad as being strafed by commercials.
For anyone who wants to avoid a serious brain operation, there can be no question of sitting down to watch American network TV for an evening.

Those who praise the best products of American TV should be reminded of this fact, because if they omit it they are putting a sharp weapon in the hands of hustlers. The best American sitcoms aregood. What’s more, they are readily intelligible in Britain, whereas some of the best British products — AufWiedersehen,Petfor example — might as well be in German as far as the Americans are concerned. But the point to make is that the best place to watchAmerican television is in Britain. If you love Cheers,don’t watch it in America. It takes longer. There are commercials between the opening titles and the first scene. There are commercials between the last scene and the end roller. There are commercials between your heartbeats.
How did things getlike that? Because business ethics were allowed to prevail over any other kind. Why is British television so much more civilised?

Because American television was taken as a dreadful example. It should continue to be taken as a dreadful example. In Britain, television is central to the culture. In America it is inimical to the culture. American television can be exported in a relatively benign form because the countries who buy it, knowing what their markets will take, take only what they want. But the Americans themselves must take what they get. Their sovereign power of choice is exercised amongst infinite similarity.

If Britain wants a taste of how that feels, all it has to do is go ahead with the current proposal to auction off the commercial franchises to the highest bidders. The highest bidders will have the lowest foreheads. Worse, they will be clever people pretendingto be stupid. It’s already happening. When the ITV jingle for the autumn season came on the air, you heard a portent of the new age. ‘Sahd bah sahd, get ready for ITV’. It was all done in an American accent. You can imagine the recording session. ‘Sahd bah sahd’ wailed the singers, going for another take: ‘Get ready for ITV.’ Silence. ‘I thought that one sounded all right, didn’t you, Julian?’ ‘Yes, Martin, but I still think they should pronounce it AhTV. It makes no sense to say ‘sahd bah sahd’ and then say ITV.’ ‘They haveto pronounce it ITV. People would think RTV was something else. Rotten TV or something. Sorry, love. Nothing we can do about it.’ ‘OK, everybody, it’s a wrap.’ And so we took another step towards the edge.

We don’t have to go over it. All we have to do — and I don’t hesitate to include myself in this, because even if I didn’t feel that I belonged to British television, I would still feel that British television belonged to the world — is remind ourselves of what has been achieved. Murdoch has helped to remind us, by his sublime incomprehension. His masterpiece, the true expression of his creativity, Sky Television, is up there like an orbital garbage disposal grimly warning us of everything Britain can still manage to avoid — so long as it remains proud of what it’s got.

Pride should never have faltered. That it did can be explained only through weariness. There is an analogy with the Weimar Republic, which, precisely because it was a functioning democracy, was attacked simultaneously from the Left and the Right so savagely that it gave up. Ever since, charges have been pressed against the victim. British television is likewise held to account for its own bruises. True, it is being kicked now only from the Right. But that’s only because the Left’s leg grew tired.

Twenty years ago, before I became a TV critic, left-wing commentators were employed practically full time in denigrating the broadcasting system. These weren’t the mentally underprivileged types who came along later to make the Labour Party unelectable. These were the well-turned-out young intellectuals of the Free Communications Group, drawing salaries from the broadcasting system as they toiled to bring about its radical alteration, a burning necessity proclaimed by no less a panjandrum than Raymond Williams, who was taken to be an expert on mass communications despite, or because of, a style so turgid that he could barely communicate with his most abject worshippers.

Williams himself never let up on how the television channels were reinforcing the tyranny of a consumer society. Strangely enough, on the face of it, the BBC was somehow even more insidious at doing this than its commercial rival. He would go on BBC television in order to say these things. He droned on about the ‘flow’ of the television schedules, their allegedly remorseless hammering in of the consumer ethic. For ten years, as a TV critic on this paper, I tried to do my share of pointing out that he was talking hooey, and that British television had a tremendous, unsummable variety. But the more you protested that the public showed every sign of being satisfied with what it was getting for the price of the licence fee, the more the left-wing intellectuals insisted that the public had been deluded. This last point was proved when the public unaccountably allowed Mrs Thatcher into 10 Downing Street, whereupon the left-wing intellectuals washed their hands of politics altogether, the proletariat having failed them.

Unfortunately, the television executives had been softened up by those long years of calumny. They had been called a mandarin caste for so long that they started to feel shy about it. Also they had grown so accustomed to fending off high-flown arguments that they had no armour against low-flown ones. The Free Communications Group had at least tossed in the odd mention of Gramsci. The Media Monitoring Group eschewed such frills. It just made outright accusations of treason. Nor did Norman Tebbit waste any time analysing the ‘flow’ of the schedules. He simply operated on the assumption that the BBC, because it wasn’t controlled from Whitehall, was out of control altogether. It was historically unfortunate that the BBC, at that time, was short of top-echelon executives capable of telling Mr Tebbit to go jump in the lake.

Those in charge of the duopoly’s commercial half, if not precisely glad to see the BBC sweating, were certainly not sad to escape censure. Then it was their turn to be caught flat-footed. The moguls wanted a piece of the action. The moguls and the Government were in cahoots. It wasn’t fascism: nothing so intellectually challenging. It was just business. The television executives were paralysed by the shock of hearing their vocations questioned in such infantile terms. Nothing wears you out like arguing at an elementary level. A one-sided debate started, strident ignorance versus a pained silence. Filofax-minded Saatchi executives held the floor while people who had given their lives to public service broadcasting hung their heads. The discrepancy was already grotesque before Rupert Murdoch showed up in Edinburgh. We should thank him for demonstrating just how grotesque it was. The wolf had come to lecture Red Riding Hood on how to find her way through the forest.
Neighbours,one need hardly say, is not alone. All the world’s best-loved soaps, and mercifully few of their pale imitators, are bought in by and screened on British television as it now is. They are there by public demand, so to that extent the contention that the public isn’t being served is obviously wrong. The contention that the home-grown talent hasn’t come up with anything except turn-of-the-century snobbery is obviously wrong too — a lie so big that it took away the breath of those who might have countered it, so that all they could stutter was Brideshead Revisited, The Jewel in the Crownand, after some thought, Fortunes of War.
There has always been, and if a workable system is allowed to go on working there will continue to be, a lot more than that: more, as I found in ten years of saturation viewing, than any single human being can take in. Ideally, the popular programmes have been well enough done to seduce the highbrow into wondering if popularity is something he ought to scorn, and the more demanding programmes made with a gift for lucid explanation that discourages the less-prepared viewers from believing that these things are not for them. And in between — the area where I myself like to operate — there has traditionally been the twilight zone where the eccentrics roam and rumble: Joseph Cooper and his silent piano, David Bellamy and his talking facial hair — weirdos, yes, but people, not specifically bioengineered television life-forms.

It took confidence to put all that together. If there has been a weakening, it has been because frightened executives have become too responsive to the accusation, levelled at them first from the Left and now from the Right, that they are elitists foisting on the public their unexamined notions of what is good for it. But theyarethe public. There isn’t, or shouldn’t be, a conflict. Good programmes are made out of belief, by people to whom it doesn’t occur to doubt that they are part of the same community as the people watching. If that faith has been shaken, it needs to be restored.

G. K. Chesterton said of Dickens that the question never crossed his mind of writing what the people wanted: he wanted what the people wanted. He was not a snob. Rupert Murdoch would like it to be thought that he is not a snob either: but he is. When he self-righteously talks about giving people what they want, he is really talking about the commercial desirability of giving them what he, personally, doesn’t want, and wouldn’t have in the house: he is talking about the people as if they were a market, whose desires, however base, were some sort of moral imperative. But the Roman people wanted gladiators, and that didn’t make it right. A large number of British people want the News of the World,but that doesn’t make it good. Hardly anybody seems to want Sky Television, but that isn’t what makes it bad. What makes it bad is that it has had scarcely any programmes worth watching. As Andrew Neil and his subordinates are now discovering the hard way, the idea, relentlessly propagated by both Left and Right, that the broadcasting system has been repressing a wealth of potential creativity, is moonshine. Talent is rare, and the talent to handle talent is rarer still. Only a certain number of people are capable of making a watchable television programme, and Mr Murdoch will not be able to acquire their services merely for money. People who want to make good television are working for much higher stakes than that.

They aren’t, in short, just making merchandise. They are contributing to a culture. Proponents of deregulation like to soothe us by saying that culture will be taken care of for those who want it. But a living culture is much more than just some people watching ballets while everybody else watches game shows. It can’t be catered for by niche-marketing. A living culture is the whole thing. British television covers everything that the country does. It brings the country together like nothing else. It gives, or should give, all the people something to share at a time when they are being otherwise encouraged to split up into separate income groups and fend for themselves, the well-off behind high walls and the losers outside shedding litter. This latter process is one the Saatchi brothers are understandably keen to encourage. Why waste time screening grand opera to people who can’t afford Porsches? The last stage of fitting the product to the market is fitting the market to the product.

There are real criticisms to be made of British television as it now stands. It has been far too inclined to co-operate in the long, bloody massacre of the English language which already threatens to leave not a single grammatical English sentence alive. Czeslaw Milosz once said that the King James Bible must be preserved in use because it is the only thing believers and atheists have in common. Similarly, grammatical English — the only kind which can express meaning with full freedom — should be fostered by broadcasters, not frustrated. It is all right for the EastEndersto speak as they do as long as the linkmen don’t join them. Luckily the linkmen are now speaking better again. One or two controllers have done what they should do: control. In other words, they have resumed the task of carrying the can; being responsible to the public as if they belonged to it; administering a valuable institution which, above capitalism as it is above socialism, helps to define and maintain a democracy.

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