

Media Ownership Consultation Paper

I would like to comment on the Government's Media Ownership Consultation Paper. I confirm that I am an ITV viewer and am not representative of any organisation.

In particular, I am writing with regard to the proposals set out at paragraph 6.2 of the Paper in respect of the proposals to remove the rules that

- (i) prohibit the single ownership of the two London ITV Licences and
- (ii) impose a 15% limit on any company's share of the television audience.

I propose to deal with both these points together.

My primary concern about the removal of these limits on the ownership of the ITV Licences is that it will lead to a decline in regional broadcasting. The Consultation Paper states that the consolidation of ITV that has taken place over recent years has benefited the industry. These industry benefits aside, and it is noted that no examples have been given, have I believe not benefited the viewer in any way.

Over recent years since the consolidation referred to took place, has resulted in a lack of commitment from the main ITV companies to spend money on regional programmes. This has been particularly true during the current advertising recession.

For example, it was noted that after Granada took over the Meridian franchise from United, some of the regional programmes that used to be broadcast in the tea time 5.00 pm slot were quietly dropped. Furthermore, in many other local franchises regional programmes that used to be broadcast during prime time have now been replaced by the rescheduled Tonight programme. Similarly, after Carlton took over the Westcountry and Central franchise, there has been a distinct erosion of the strong regional identity of those stations. In most ITV stations, the regional news is now often broadcast at 11.20 pm and no longer follows News at Ten.

The association of independent broadcasters that make up the ITV network is immensely popular with viewers as it means that we have a local television station, producing local programmes for local viewers, with each station having a strong regional identity which connects with viewers in that region. Indeed, this arrangement had never been more relevant than it is today's multi channel age since it is the sole factor that distinguished ITV from the numerous other national stations that are available for both analogue and digital viewers.

I believe that if the limits on ownership referred to above are removed, then past experience suggests that there will be a decline in the standard of regional broadcasting. These concerns are not reflected in the Consultation Paper which seeks to reassure us by stating that there will still be regional licences (para 6.2.5) although no details are given as to how these licences will work in practice. Indeed, the Consultation paper leaves many unanswered questions such as will it be possible to revoke a licence from a single company that owns the entire ITV network and if not, how will the commitment to regional broadcasting be monitored? How will the standard of regional programmes be maintained? What happens if only part of the ITV network consolidates (ie Carlton and Granada). Will there be a two tier ITV with strong regional broadcasting only being available for viewers in Scotland, Ulster and the Channel Islands?

Over the last ten years since Thames Television lost its franchise, viewers have seen the continued erosion of the standards of ITV programmes and complete lack of commitment to public service broadcasting. For example, the Sunday evening "God Slot" was repealed and this has resulted in ITV now screening religious programmes in the early hours of Sunday morning in an effort to satisfy their obligations. ITV were then allowed to move News at Ten only then move it back again with a bulletin a shadow of its former self and with less funding. Tea Time regional programmes were then replaced by soap operas, some of which like Crossroads have been unsuccessful. In short, the ITV companies have each time been given numerous concessions but, despite assurances, have consistently failed to deliver better quality programmes and the latest rule changes proposed in the Consultation Paper suggest that things will be no different.

In short there is very little in the Consultation Paper that will mean any improvement in what the viewers watch on television and the Government's proposals will, I fear, only make matters worse.

Yours faithfully

Barry J Hembling