

## PREFACE

Television in Britain has been the central cultural experience of our age. British television has been distinctive, appreciated, even loved, because of the quality, range and diversity of its programming – a service unmatched in most other societies. Today this is no longer true. Despite the gains of new technology and the availability of many more channels, audiences seem dissatisfied, perhaps more than at any other time, and less inclined to watch. Professionals, engaged in the business of broadcasting, appear even more unhappy, sometimes to the point of cynicism.

The 1980s and 1990s saw great upheavals in broadcasting which have shaped where we are today and played on the quality of that service giving rise to the question: “What has happened to our television?” The drama of all this has unfolded across 25 years. In this book I seek to provide some answers to that question by examining what happened to one broadcasting company – Granada Television, its parent network, ITV, and the effect on broadcasting as a whole. Granada was not the largest but was the most interesting of the ITV companies and ITV the most powerful dynamic in the broadcasting system. It was there that the brunt of change would come. That change, in turn, greatly affected the nature of programming on the BBC and other channels.

I lived through many of the events that affected Granada Television and its parent company, Granada Group, working for the company for 23 years, the last five as Head of Current Affairs. I propose to follow the story from the watershed year of 1980 to the new Communications Act of 2003 and a little beyond. Through this process there are many insights that explain what has happened to our television. For everyone who watches and wonders what goes on behind our screens, the story of what happened to Granada Television and ITV is replete with lessons for broadcasting as a whole.

In 1955 Britain got a second television channel to rival the BBC. Independent Television was a peculiarly British idea. Unlike the BBC, which was financed by its licence fee, ITV was commercial and had to pay for itself from advertising. It was a monopoly but heavily regulated and required by law to provide public service programming from that monopoly. It was also, unlike the BBC, which was heavily metropolitan, a federation of regional companies, required to base themselves in their regions and to transmit in the regions. Initially the four largest companies formed the network and also

transmitted to the nation. London was divided between two companies to prevent the capital from dominating the system. To keep the companies up to the mark, they were re-assessed every seven years or so, and those judged lacking were shown the door.

This gave not only ITV but British television as a whole a quite different flavour from television in other countries. ITV, its franchises sometimes run by larger than life impresarios, proved far more independent and innovative than the BBC, which, under the spur of competition, became braver and less patronising. ITV's regional bases meant that ideas, concerns and talent outside London found a voice and often a national and international platform. Even the accents of most broadcasters would change from Reithian cut glass to a much richer variety of voices. All this was supported by a regulator, encouraging a drive towards quality.

Among the companies, many of which came and went, was the Manchester based Granada, always one of the most distinctive, founded in 1956 by Sidney Bernstein and his brother Cecil. It was born out of Granada Theatres, a chain of cinemas, and the show business traditions of the Bernsteins and was given a licence to broadcast from the North of England in the weekdays. From the first it would prove fiercely northern, independent and aimed to beat the BBC at its own game. Granada was prepared to challenge the establishment and big business. It pioneered soap opera, which it called drama serial; started political coverage of elections; and introduced new kinds of weekly current affairs and drama documentaries. Granada would also provide a nursery for talent; northern writers, actors and comics who, for the first time could get a break without having to migrate to London. Many, Victoria Wood, Michael Parkinson, Jack Rosenthal, and The Beatles, would become household names. The company eventually became the dominant producer in ITV, selling its programmes worldwide.

Today ITV, with the exception of Scotland, Ulster and the Channel Islands, is no longer regional. It seldom makes waves. The major companies have merged to form one characterless ITV based in London. With few exceptions its programming by 2007 ranged from the bland to the blander, all too often following someone else's fashion. It would not be true to say that modern commercial television never makes any excellent programmes. These still appear but they are much more exceptional. The crucial point is that the average standard of programming is lower when, with the passage of time, it might have been higher. Today the public are bored, the advertisers unimpressed and the share price very low. This book looks at how and why this happened to Granada and to ITV. It seeks to explain how the unique institution of ITV was hollowed out to the detriment of broadcasting as a whole while successive Governments lacking in courage and vision, and the