

## Richard Hoggart and Pilkington: Populism and public service broadcasting

*In 1962 the Pilkington Committee, of which Richard Hoggart was a highly influential member, produced a report which was highly critical of ITV and its regulator the Independent Television Authority. It recommended that the third television channel be allocated to the BBC, and that the authority, once armed with greater seriousness of purpose, should both plan the ITV schedules and sell advertising time, thus greatly reducing the power of the advertisers over the programme makers and schedulers within the companies. The government balked at the proposals for ITV but, nonetheless, the ensuing 1964 Television Act strengthened the powers of the ITA and allotted the third channel to the BBC. The report was bitterly attacked by most national newspapers, several of which had substantial holdings in ITV companies, and which saw the report's strictures on populism in television programming as an implicit critique of their own journalistic standards and as a threat to press freedom. This paper examines the press critique of the Pilkington Report, and suggests that it prefigures later press interventions in the broadcasting sphere, as well as press reactions to the Leveson Inquiry.*

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### Introduction

On 13 July 1960, the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan established a committee under the chairmanship of the industrialist Sir Harry Pilkington 'to consider the future of broadcasting services in the United Kingdom' and, more specifically, 'to advise on the services which should in future be provided in the Unit-

ed Kingdom by the BBC and the ITA' and 'to recommend whether additional services should be provided by any other organisation' (HMSO 1962: 1). It was chaired by the industrialist Sir Harry Pilkington, but the key member of the committee was undoubtedly Richard Hoggart, who had recently written an influential article for *Encounter* entitled 'The uses of television' (Hoggart 1970: 152-162).

The report was commissioned for four reasons. Firstly, ITV had been introduced in 1954 for only a ten year 'experimental' period, mainly because of Labour Party hostility to commercial television, and this would soon be drawing to a close. Second, the channel was attracting mounting criticism from those who believed that the ITV companies were making unacceptably large profits from poor quality programming. Third, there was the looming question of whether there should be a third television channel, and if so, to whom it should be allotted. And fourth, the BBC Charter was due to expire in 1962. However, the resultant report, which was produced in June 1962, went far beyond addressing these specific issues and although, as we shall see, its main recommendations for restructuring ITV were rejected, in 1977 the Annan Committee were able to claim convincingly that 'the Pilkington Report transformed the face of ITV' (p. 146), whilst Jeffrey Milland has argued that 'broadcasting in Britain continued to be based on Pilkingtonian principles for forty years, establishing criteria for judging the performance of broadcasters which few challenged, at least until the 1980s' (2009: 95). For others, the Pilkington Report had an importance that stretched even beyond broadcasting. Thus, as Jean Seaton puts it: 'The committee had been asked to review the development of television. In fact, they did much more, producing a report which judged the nation's culture' (quoted in Freedman 2003: 31), and Michael Bailey, Ben Clarke and John Walton claim that 'insofar as the final report concerned itself with the philosophy of "good broadcasting" and British culture more generally, one could argue that its many appraisals and accompanying proposals belong as much to the "condition of England" tradition as they do to broadcasting history' (2012: 139). Equally, Hoggart himself stated that the report presented an argument not simply about broadcasting but about...

... freedom and responsibility within commercialised democracies. It touched on the interrelations between cash, power and the organs for intellectual debate; it had to do with a society which is changing rapidly and

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doesn't understand its own changes; it had to do with the adequacy of our assumptions and vocabulary to many current social issues (1970: 189).

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the report's attacks on populism in broadcasting, and particularly in ITV programming, and then to analyse the populist counter-attack on the report in significant sections of the national press. But first it is necessary to sketch in something of the context in which the report was commissioned and published.

### **ITV: Profit and populism**

By the late 1950s ITV was becoming increasingly popular – and profitable. By concentrating increasingly on the most watched kinds of programmes, ITV companies were making an average annual pre-tax profit of 130 per cent. It was at this point that Roy Thomson, of Scottish Television, coined, extremely unwisely, the phrase about owning an ITV franchise being a 'licence to print money'. ATV's profits increased from less than £450,000 to more than £4m between 1957 and 1958, and the shares of its deputy chairman, Norman Collins, leapt in value from £2,000 to £500,000. Within three months of ITV's opening night, the controller of programmes for Associated-Rediffusion, which owned one of the two franchises for London, was perfectly blunt about his intention to change the schedules: 'Let's face it once and for all, the public likes girls, wrestling, bright musicals, quiz shows and real-life drama. We gave them the Hallé Orchestra, *Foreign Press Club*, floodlit football and visits to the local fire station. From now on, what the public wants, it's going to get' (quoted in Sendall 1982: 328). For this he was admonished mildly by ITA director-general Sir Ronald Fraser, who responded: 'A television company must have a policy of its own, and that policy must be something more than "giving the public what it wants" unless we are prepared to say that we no more respond to the social significance of television than to the social significance of toffee' (quoted in *ibid*: 139). However, by 1960 Fraser had changed his tune, averring that: 'If you decide to have a system of people's television, then people's television you must expect it to be, and it will reflect their likes and dislikes, their tastes and aversions, what they can comprehend and what is beyond them' (quoted in Milland 2004: 81).

The Conservatives were divided in their attitude to ITV, as they had been since even before its birth. There were those who supported it

because it was a private enterprise, a rival to the BBC (which many Tories, then as now, disliked because it was a public corporation, and one which they perceived to have a liberal bias), and provided freedom of choice in viewing, but others disliked what they saw as its commercial values. On the other side of the political divide, Labour had at one time pledged to abolish ITV, but dropped this idea before the 1959 General Election. Many Labour supporters may have disliked its commercialism, but, equally, others wanted a stake in the burgeoning consumer society and saw nothing amiss in ITV's advertisements and quiz show programmes with their tempting prizes.

When the report was published in June 1962, the Pilkington Committee made it abundantly clear that, in its view, commercial values had exerted a largely negative pressure on television broadcasting. The BBC was given a relatively clean bill of health, but ITV and its regulator the Independent Television Authority (ITA) were very heavily criticised. However, even though the ITA was excoriated for failing to recognise what the committee saw as television's immense power to damage society, the report nonetheless recommended that in future the authority, once armed with greater seriousness of purpose, should both plan the schedules and sell advertising time, thus greatly reducing the power of the advertisers over the programme makers and schedulers within the companies. The report also recommended that the third channel be awarded to the BBC.

### **'A candy-floss world'**

Before I go on to examine, and indeed defend, what the report had to say specifically about populism, I do, however, want to acknowledge that aspects of its approach to broadcasting are as likely to evoke as much hostility today within media and cultural studies circles as they did in the case of its many critics at the time of its publication. For example, it pinned its colours firmly to the 'effects' mast<sup>1</sup>: 'Broadcasters must recognise that television affects moral standards by the constant repetition of the values it shows, and by the assumptions underlying its programmes generally. They must remember, too, that their audiences at almost all times include a great many children' (HMSO 1962: 28). It also noted that 'we strongly refute the argument that because an effect has not been conclusively proved the broadcasting authorities need not concern themselves with it' (*ibid*: 15). One of the report's particular bugbears was 'triviality', which it appeared to think of as an inherent quality of television:

Programmes which exemplified emotional tawdriness and mental timidity helped to cheapen both emotional and intellectual values. Plays or serials might not deal with real human problems but present a candy-floss world<sup>2</sup> ... Our own conclusion is that triviality is a natural vice of television, and that where it prevails it operates to lower general standards of enjoyment and understanding. It is, we were reminded, 'more dangerous to the soul than wickedness'<sup>3</sup> (ibid: 34-35).

This was a judgement with which the committee appeared to concur. It was particularly concerned over ITV quiz shows, of which it opined that:

In relying upon the appeal to greed and fear, and to the pleasures of watching these emotions roused in others because valuable prizes are at stake, and in relying on an atmosphere of artificial good fellowship, these programmes abandon the objective – light entertainment which amuses because it is good – for light entertainment which is poor in invention and needs the support of extraneous appeals (ibid: 58).

Similarly 'party game' items on ITV variety shows were met with the sniffy response that 'one may, of course, make a fool of oneself among relatives or friends, because one is then participating in an intimate and lively human relationship; to do so for the amusement of millions of others, who are both unseen and unknown, is to risk being merely a foolish spectacle' (ibid: 59).

#### **Broadcasting and the 'moral condition of society'**

On the other hand, the charge levelled at the time against the report that it took a moralistic line on broadcasting misunderstood what it meant by 'moral' and obscured its valuable contribution to the debate about public service broadcasting, a contribution which is as important now as when it was first published. Much of the relevant material here is contained in Chapter Three of the report, 'The purposes of broadcasting', which was actually written by the committee secretary, Dennis Lawrence, who was a civil servant in the Post Office, then the government department responsible for broadcasting. It is, however, highly Hoggartian in tone, and Hoggart himself referred to it as 'the finest statement in English' on 'the purposes of broadcasting in a democracy' (1992: 65).

The report argues that as it presumes that 'television is and will be a main factor in influenc-

ing the values and moral standards of our society', so 'by its nature broadcasting must be in a constant and sensitive relationship with the moral condition of society' (HMSO 1962: 15). This is repeated in slightly different formulations three times (ibid: 28, 31, 39-40). As Hoggart explained in a talk given shortly after the report's publication, aptly entitled 'Difficulties of democratic debate', this did not mean that the report was asserting a 'crudely moralistic relationship' between broadcasting and society, still less that it was suggesting that 'broadcasters had a responsibility for the direct propagation of the Ten Commandments' (1970: 197). Later Hoggart explained that the formulation 'simply stated the inescapable connection with society out there and with the nature of its life, its assumptions, choices and judgements' (1992: 62). 'Moral', then, is used here in a manner which could be seen as synonymous with 'culture' in Raymond Williams's broad sense of the term as denoting a society's 'whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual' (1963: 16). As Hoggart himself put it: 'It means that the quality of the life of a society as expressed in its texture – its assumptions and values as bodied out in its habits and ways of life – that these will be reflected and to some extent affected by broadcasting as by other forms of mass communication' (1970: 197). Putting these comments together with the report itself, Bailey, Clarke and Walton argue that what is being suggested here is that ...

Broadcasting is one of many modern technologies of mass communication that are constitutive of 'the life of a society', that shape and are shaped by social relations and processes. Hence the importance that broadcasters respect the medium and assume a responsibility for its output, its listeners, its viewers, indeed, the public at large (2012: 142).

#### **Majorities and minorities**

Central to the report's defence of public service broadcasting is an attack on the populist notion that broadcasting should simply 'give the public what it wants'. In this respect it argues:

The public is not an amorphous, uniform mass; however much it's counted and classified under this or that heading, it is composed of individual people; and 'what the public wants' is what individual people want. They share some of their wants and interests with all or most of their fellows; and it is necessary that a service of broadcasting should cater for those wants and interests. There is, in short, a considerable place for items which

all or most enjoy. To say, however, that the only way of giving people what they want is to give them these items is to imply that all individuals are alike. But no two are. ... A service which caters only for majorities can never satisfy all, or even most, of the needs of any individual. It cannot, therefore, satisfy all the needs of the public (ibid: 16).

Furthermore, as Hoggart himself asserted, public service broadcasting ...

... means catering not only for known majorities but also for as many minorities as possible, some small, some almost majorities. An important point here is that these groups are not in watertight compartments separated from each other; they overlap and shift in and out. We are all at some time members of majorities and also of different minorities (2001: 39).

All of which, interestingly, adds up to something of an endorsement of the idea that individuals have multiple identities, which is central to the kind of cultural/media studies that generally take a dim view of Hoggart.

#### **Diversity and freedom of choice**

Similarly the report emerges as the champion of another quality prized today by these (and other) disciplines, namely diversity. Thus it states:

No one can say he is giving the public what it wants, unless the public knows the whole range of possibilities which television can offer and, from this range, chooses what it wants to see. For a choice is only free if the field of choice is not unnecessarily restricted. The subject matter of television is to be found in the whole scope and variety of human awareness and experience. If viewers – ‘the public’ – are thought of as ‘the mass audience’, or ‘the majority’, they will be offered only the average of common experience and awareness; the ordinary; the commonplace – for what all know and do is, by definition, commonplace. They will be kept unaware of what lies beyond the average of experience; their field of choice will be limited. In time they come to like only what they know. But it will always be true that, had they been offered a wider range from which to choose, they might and often would have chosen otherwise, and with greater enjoyment (HMSO 1962: 17).

This passage also invokes a notion dear to the hearts of latter-day apostles of ‘de-regulation’,

namely freedom of choice, but it does so in a way which is not simply devoid of the ‘free market’ prescriptions which today habitually attend this idea but is indeed diametrically opposed to any such approach. Thus it continues:

‘To give the public what it wants’ is a misleading phrase: misleading because as commonly used it has the appearance of an appeal to democratic principle but the appearance is deceptive. It is, in fact, patronising and arrogant, in that it claims to know what the public is, but defines it as no more than the mass audience; and in that it claims to know what it wants but limits its choice to the average of experience. In this sense, we reject it utterly. If there is a sense in which it should be used, it is this: what the public wants and what it has the right to get is freedom to choose from the widest range of programme matter. Anything less than that is deprivation (ibid: 17-18).

And Hoggart himself was well aware of the economic motives underlying such spurious appeals to democratic principles, noting that ‘those who claim to give the public what they already know they want usually mean what it is most profitable to them and the advertisers to offer’ (2001: 172).

The report also firmly takes issue with the notion that the only alternative to ‘giving the public what it wants’ is imposing on the public what someone thinks they ought to like and which will be good for them. In the report’s view:

The role of a broadcasting regulator is not to follow the latter course but to respect the public’s right to choose from the widest range of subject matter and so to enlarge worthwhile experience. Because, in principle, the possible range of subject matter is inexhaustible, all of it can never be presented, nor can the public know what the range is. So, the broadcaster must explore it, and choose from it first. This might be called ‘giving a lead’: but it is not the lead of the autocratic or arrogant. It is the proper exercise of responsibility by public authorities duly constituted as trustees for the public interest (HMSO 1962: 18).

This was a responsibility the committee clearly felt the ITA had shirked, thus helping to deprive the public of the wide range of subject matter which it should have every right to expect from ITV programming. Although, as we shall see, the Pilkington Committee was widely accused

of wanting to narrow the range of programmes on television by prescribing a diet of worthy but dull fare, the committee itself saw the pursuit of the largest possible audiences by the ITV companies as limiting viewers' choices and leading to the tyranny of majority tastes, whereas its recommendations 'sought to extend intellectual and imaginative freedom, to give more room for variety and dissent' and encouraged thinking 'not only about what we are but what we might become if we were given more varied chances' (Hoggart 1970: 199-200).

#### Press interest in ITV

In his 'Difficulties of democratic debate' talk mentioned earlier, Hoggart said of the Pilkington Report: 'Here was a confrontation of an unusually searching kind, and few were ready for it. This has depressing implications, and they go far wider than broadcasting matters alone' (ibid: 200). In particular, the majority of national newspapers were highly critical of the report, and it was not simply in the popular press that the populism which it had attacked in broadcasting answered back, and did so in a particularly raucous and vituperative fashion. However, before we go on to analyse this particular aspect of the press response to the report, it is important to understand what the report itself had to say about the national press, and especially its holdings in ITV companies.

Pages 180-181 of the report contain an extremely valuable, and highly revealing, analysis of such holdings. Thus, for example, Daily Mirror Newspapers owned 13 per cent of Associated Television's (ATV) voting stock, and 8 per cent of its non-voting stock; Thomson Newspapers (which owned *The Times* and *The Scotsman*) and Thomson Television (which was not itself a press group but was wholly controlled by Roy Thomson, who also controlled Thomson Newspapers) between them owned 80 per cent and 100 per cent of the voting and non-voting stock respectively of Scottish Television; News of the World Ltd. owned 21 per cent and 12 per cent of the voting and non-voting stock respectively of TWW (Television Wales and the West); Associated Newspapers, publishers of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Sketch*, owned 38 per cent of the voting shares in Southern Television; and the Manchester Guardian and Evening News Ltd. owned 21 per cent of both the voting and non-voting shares in Anglia Television.

#### A threat to democracy

The committee was asked by the postmaster general, who had commissioned it in the first place, to consider whether, as some believed, a

threat was posed to democracy by the fact that newspapers had shares in ITV companies. The report explains:

The threat is thought to reside in the fact that, because two of the media of mass communication are owned in some measure by the same people, there is an excessive concentration of power to influence and persuade public opinion; and that if these same people are too few or have broadly the same political affiliations, there will be an increasingly one-sided presentation of affairs of public concern (HMSO 1962: 182).

The report states that the committee had thought it was not for them 'to consider whether or not there has been bias or insufficiency in the presentation by the press of affairs of public concern, because of the association of newspaper interests and television companies', but they did concern themselves with two issues regarding press interests in ITV:

First, newspapers might unduly publicise and praise, or avoid adverse criticism of, the television service provided by companies in which they had an interest, and might disregard or criticise unfairly the competing service of the BBC; second, newspapers might disregard or criticise unfairly any exercise by the authority of its powers against these companies (ibid: 182).

The committee found no evidence that either of these had taken place. However, they judged that although the risk of the emergence of a threat to democracy was small, 'even so it would be unwise to dismiss it too lightly: in particular, the omission or minimising of news – not necessarily for reasons of bias – might not be easily identified or corrected. But if the likelihood is small, the consequences could be profound' (ibid: 183). They concluded:

The suspicion of too great a concentration in too few hands of the power to influence and persuade cannot be dismissed by the argument that the power has not been used, and is not very likely to be used. So, some limits must be set. The simplest rule would be to prohibit press participation altogether. But though we believe that the presumption lies against press participation, we do not think it necessary to recommend an absolute ban. That being so, a factual formula is necessary (ibid: 183).

In their view, the press should not be dominant in any company, in the sense of being the largest single interest in it. And in the specific case

of Scottish Television, essentially a fiefdom of Roy Thompson, they recommended that the contract should not be renewed on its expiry in 1964 unless the press interest had been sufficiently reduced.

### Fury and derision

It is hardly surprising, then, that the report was bitterly rejected by significant sections of the press. It was not that the newspapers avoided 'adverse criticism of the television service provided by companies in which they had an interest': rather, they reacted to it with fury and derision. As Hoggart correctly states, 'the members of the committee were described as authoritarians, socialistic, round-heads, do-gooders, highbrows, puritans, and paternalists; they were, it was said, polemical, smug and naïve' (1970: 189), and elsewhere he notes that certain journalists 'threw every dirty word in their box of cliché abuse at us: "nannyng ... elitist ... patronising ... Grundyish ... do-gooding ... superior ... schoolmarmish" – all the usual dreary, underdeveloped litany of fear', which he describes as an 'Islamic-fundamentalist-like fury' (1992: 61). But it would be simplistic to explain hostile newspapers' ferocious onslaught on the report merely in terms of the threat which they perceived it to pose to their lucrative holdings in ITV companies: what appears to have struck an extremely raw nerve were the report's strictures on populism within broadcasting, strictures which several of the more popular papers perceived as attacking, albeit implicitly, their own populist forms of journalism. Moreover, they also raised the spectre that press regulation might follow in the wake of any successful attempt to require the ITV companies to adhere more closely to the standards of public service broadcasting. That this was beyond unlikely, given successive British governments' allergic reaction to any suggestion that the state should involve itself in some way with press regulation, is beside the point: this was primarily a tactic to scare and scandalise their readers. However, it should be noted that the third Royal Commission on the Press was about to produce its own report.

I will now attempt to show how various national newspapers mobilised populist discourse against the Pilkington Report and, both explicitly and implicitly, in defence of their own forms of journalism and their particular conception of press freedom.

### 'Multiplication, abundance and freedom'

On 28 June, the *Daily Telegraph* (which had no shares in ITV companies) published an editorial

about the report, headed 'Pride and Prejudice'. Here a critique of the report's anti-populist stance is blended with a defence of competition and private enterprise and an attack on public enterprise, notably the BBC. In the paper's view:

A form of arrogance ... saturates this amazing document, a haughty conviction that whatever is popular must be bad. Even more deplorable is the committee's assumption that competition has not only done harm but can do nothing else ... The committee's suspicion of any sort of commercial motive becomes at times almost pathological. Throughout the report run the assumptions that commercial disciplines are inimical to, if not actually incompatible with, any sort of objective excellence; that nothing worthwhile can be achieved except by those free of all ignoble desire for gain; above all, that any enterprise deriving revenue from advertisements can only be debased and corrupted in consequence. A serious newspaper, itself deriving revenue from advertisements, could hardly be expected to agree with such nonsense.

Responding to the committee's judgement that local newspapers should not be allowed to own local radio stations for fear of concentrating local media power in too few hands, and that these stations should thus be owned by the BBC, it complains that this would entail 'concentrating more power in even fewer hands. Indeed, it seems to see vices in every private and independent enterprise, virtues in every public enterprise. It sees the least danger where wiser men have seen the most: in the power of the State'.

A similar line, mingling defence of both competition and popular taste was pursued by *The Sunday Times*, 1 July 1961, whose editorial was headed 'An unimaginative report'. This stated that 'only a bigoted few would wish us back in the days of monopoly BBC television' and went on to argue:

We are at the threshold of an age of enormous expansion and opportunity in this means of information and entertainment. The obvious answer, then, is more competition, with effective control of errors and excesses in the national interest, but without dictation of programmes in the interest of some arbitrary judgement of public needs.

The editorial, which does actually acknowledge the paper's common proprietorship with

Scottish Television, also sounds a similarly self-defensive note to that heard in the *Telegraph* in its complaint that 'nowhere do the relevant paragraphs of the report reveal any recognition that the British press is widely varied and demonstrably successful in giving the public what it asks of newspapers for which it freely pays its money' (ibid). But it was the paper's television critic, Maurice Wiggin, in an article entitled 'Going the Whole Hoggart', who brought together an attack on the report's anti-populist stance with a warning about its implications for media freedom in general. The report itself is described as 'rich in gobbledegook', the committee as a 'bizarre tribunal', and their conclusions as 'insufferably arrogant'. Wiggin also complains that 'the report reeks of Richard Hoggart. The author of *The uses of literacy* must have signed it with a proud consciousness of having struck a blow for something or other, preferably other'. Wiggin concludes:

There is a selective switch on every set. Every man has the obligation to use it as he thinks fit. Some will opt for triviality, some for sobriety. Tastes differ. The important thing is that we should be as free as possible to please ourselves. A cultural dictatorship is absolutely unacceptable by free men. If television, then why not the Press, the cinema, the theatre, the publishing of books? Some men love freedom, others fear it. Everything that brings us a step nearer to the standardised state is suspect. Pilkington would bring us a whole stride nearer.

In his view, what is needed is a 'bold and venturesome branching out into every sort of vigorous multiplication, abundance and freedom' and not 'clamping down on free enterprise and erecting yet another smug and impervious State juggernaut'.

#### 'Pilkington tells the public to go to hell'

Some of the most forthright attacks on the report were to be found in the *Daily Mirror*, 28 June, which devoted no less than five pages to it (although two of these were largely straightforward accounts of the report's contents). It does also note at the end of one of the articles that the Mirror Group 'is interested' in ATV. Its front page article is headed 'Pilkington tells the public to go to hell', and is more of an editorial than a news story. In its view, the report should have been published on 1 April. The reader is informed that 'Sir Harry, earnest and doleful as he appears to be, has amused his friends by bounding into first place among Britain's Top Ten comedians without a single rehearsal', and

that the committee 'are not merely trying to turn the clock back: they want to go back to the hour-glass and the sundial', as well as the penny farthing. The article presents what it calls the committee's 'peculiar proposals' thus:

They tell the public, in 160,000 words, to go to hell. And the public have to pay £45,000 for the privilege of hearing this insult – that was the cost of the report. In effect the committee say: you can't have the TV programmes which a two-thirds majority of you prefer. You must have a different set-up controlled by the government. An 'Uncle' ITA, responsible for planning and selecting programmes – just like 'Auntie' BBC ... By inference they tell the Tory government, which itself set up this deplorable committee, also to go to hell. The Tories had the courage to smash the BBC and set the cathode ray free. Pilkington wants not merely one fettered TV Authority controlling programmes, but two. Both run by the Whitehall Warriors ... The plan is merely to NATIONALISE the lot. They couldn't repeal the Act, so they are trying to repeal the intention of the Act. It is impossible, reading the report, not to conclude that Sir Harry's Eleven were dead against the whole conception of independent television from the start. Public opinion – except that expressed by the vociferous few – has been rudely and crudely ignored. The one and only democratic principle applied is – EQUAL MISERY ALL ROUND.

#### 'Big Brother TV'

Equally vehement in its opposition to the report was the *Daily Sketch*. This was a right-wing publication owned by Associated Newspapers, which folded it into the *Daily Mail* in 1971; interestingly, its highly populist tone prefigures the way in which the *Mail* itself was later to develop. On 28 June, it devoted four pages to the report, all highly negative, and seamlessly blending news and comment in a way which has now become all too familiar in the press. One front and second page article, headlined 'A vicious blow at your choice', consists almost entirely of negative quotations from chairmen of ITV companies, and the other is headlined 'Whose finger on the switch? Beware, It could be Big Brother', thus announcing yet another attack on that favourite populist target: 'Them'. According to the article:

The people who want to run our lives and tell us what to do came one step nearer to doing it yesterday. By 1964 – they hope – we shall have Big Brother TV telling us what we must see and what we mustn't. They will

ration the time for fun and crowd in the time for uplift. If they think you're enjoying yourself too much – well, they'll soon put a stop to that. Make no mistake about it. This is what the Pilkington Report means. They want to wipe out independent television ... This is a stupid and biased report. So biased that it would be laughable if it were not so dangerous. The Pilkington Committee want to set up another nationalised television system like the BBC – run by men in black jackets and striped pants.

It then manages to combine an equally distasteful ageism and sexism in one sentence by stating: 'You can almost see the dried up old spinster leaving her tracts at the pub door to go and beat her flimsy breasts at a Pilkington meeting.'

In its coverage, the pre-Murdoch *News of the World*, 1 July, admits that it has a 'fairly large interest in one of the smaller commercial television companies', and its 'Opinion' column, headed 'Not on your telly, sir!', asks:

What right has any collection of people to decide what is best and proper for others to see and hear when they turn on the television at home? And by what method are these people with total power to be chosen? We do not believe in control of this kind. The ordinary men and women of this country (who will vote for whichever government they want next time) can be trusted to decide for themselves which way to turn the knob on a television set. And it is their right and responsibility to decide for their children, not Pilkington and Co's.

This populist line of attack then turns into a more generalised critique of public enterprise:

If Pilkington has his way, ITA becomes NTA – the Nationalised Television Authority. A synthetic Siamese twin of the BBC. Surely we have learned by now the lessons of the nationalised industries. Dr Beeching is trying to put some commercial values back into British Railways; Lord Robens is preaching to the miners that they must make profits. Both say the answer is decentralisation, more initiative, more flexibility, more drive.

In the newspaper's view, the NTA bogeyman would, like all public enterprises, 'put up the price, make the product more difficult to get, remove from the public any choice or method of complaint and create an army of inefficient bureaucrats' (ibid).

### 'Pious puritans' and 'pretentious prigs'

On 1 July in the *Sunday Pictorial* (at that time the Sunday sister paper of the *Daily Mirror*), we find Woodrow Wyatt pre-echoing the hyper-populist tone of the inaptly named 'Voice of Reason' column which he would write for the *News of the World* from 1983 onwards. Thus he refers to the committee members as 'pious puritans' and critics of ITV as 'a tiny handful of pretentious prigs who look down their noses at simple pleasures'. In his view:

Turning ITV into a parallel BBC and giving the BBC another service would eliminate all serious competition. The BBC would once again become over-complacent, over-governed. We would all have our heads bored off. Not content with doing this to us on the telly, Pilkington wants to repeat the same prissy pattern for local sound radio. The profound pundits of Portland Place would be allowed to set up stations all over the country, pretending to be local. In practice, they would give us what the director general of the BBC thinks is best for us. Nothing local, nothing jolly, nothing exciting. Why not give them the newspapers to run, too? Then we would make quite sure that there is no variety or freedom of expression whatever. The nation would be told what the genteel residents of South Kensington think we ought to know – *and nothing else*.

Finally, and fittingly for this study of populist attitudes, we turn to the 'Man o' the People' column in *The People*, 1 July. This is entitled 'Hide this page in case Sir Harry sees you!' It warns:

Now be very careful. If you should be reading this on the beach or on a bus, be ready to slip your copy of *The People* discreetly into your pocket. Sir Harry Pilkington and his pals might be watching you. And at any moment they might decide to get together again to pass judgment on your deplorable taste in newspaper reading. They (the committee) have already agreed that you are a nit-wit and a moron for preferring commercial television to the BBC. Give them another £40,000 of Government money, and they will, I am sure, be delighted also to recommend the suppression of *The People*, the *Daily Mirror* and all the latest popular films.

Complaining about there being five educationalists and a scientist on the committee, the paper argues that 'it is surely frightening to put such eggheads into a position where they can actually recommend the government to



rob millions of ordinary people of these simple pleasures. Are we really to be told by a university lecturer and a professor of jurisprudence what we are to enjoy when we nestle into the old arm-chair after the day's work?' However, it reassures its readers:

The government is not quite so daft as to allow these eggheads to decide the public's viewing. If they were and Sir Harry's cock-eyed plan were accepted, we would be back in the new Dark Ages. For the Culture Boys would then be on the rampage. It would be the *Observer* for you on Sundays by order – and Shakespeare at the cinemas during the week.

#### A paranoid fantasy

In this, inevitably selective, survey of populist attitudes to the Pilkington Report in the press I have deliberately confined myself to the national press. However, I would like to quote a single example from elsewhere – *World's Press News*, July 1962<sup>4</sup> – both because it was written by a Fleet Street journalist, Arthur Christiansen, who edited the *Daily Express* from 1933 to 1957, and because it illustrates particularly clearly the way in which certain journalists attempted to present the committee's proposed reforms of ITV as possible harbingers of some form of 'state control' of the press. Thus Christiansen expresses the fear that after the Pilkington Report anything can happen and asks: 'Is the free press in danger? ... How long will it be before we get a Socialist government which will set up an inquiry into the press that will do a Pilkington on Fleet Street?' Hoggart is identified as 'the *eminence grise* of the Pilkington Report' and as someone who 'loathes the popular press. Way back in 1957 he revealed his prejudices in a book he called *The uses of literacy*'.<sup>5</sup> There then follows a frankly paranoid fantasy about what might happen if Hoggart became the chairman of a government committee to inquire into the press:

First, editorial content to be subject to a committee composed of representatives of the Home Office, the Foreign Office, the BBC and the Combined Services. Next, newspapers to be non-profit making, surplus revenues from advertising to be turned over to the Treasury ... Inefficient newspapers to be subsidised and printed by the million whether they are purchased by the public or not. 'Popular' papers to be limited to circulations of not more than 50,000. Journalists to be licensed, with sentences of seven years correction detention for indiscretions.

#### Hitting a raw nerve

Hoggart himself argued that the reception of the report by the press was 'an exceptional demonstration of distortion, tendentiousness, personal abuse, half-truth, straight misrepresentation, disingenuousness, pseudo-honesty and irresponsibility' (1970: 191). He also recognised that his critique of populism in broadcasting had hit a particularly raw nerve in a medium much of whose output was largely defined by such an ideology. As he put it:

Many journalists, even many of those in the 'serious' journals, have been so anxious to avoid aligning themselves with the Establishment, with the idea of superior or patronising powers-that-be, are so anxious to be identified with 'the people', that they have dropped into a sort of wasteland in their social philosophy, in which they are unable or unwilling to redefine the full nature and responsibility exercised in the public service.<sup>6</sup>

He also noted that journalists, who spend much of their lives criticising others, are peculiarly allergic to criticism of their own practices, and that they ...

... fight back very hard if the system is challenged at the roots. I think they were deeply disturbed by the Pilkington Report because they felt themselves indicted by it. If Pilkington's analysis of the tension between freedom and responsibility demanded by good broadcasting in a democracy was sound, then it had some relevance to the Press also; and the Press would not come out of such an examination lightly (1970: 192).

#### Harbingers of the future

The newspaper response to the Pilkington Report clearly looks back to earlier controversies over the founding of ITV in the first place, and positions taken up in the early 1950s were largely resumed in 1962. But the coverage also prefigures much that was yet to come in the pages of the national press, such as the ever-growing hostility towards the BBC (which would be greatly intensified with the arrival of Murdoch as a press proprietor in 1969); the enthusiasm for new broadcasting technologies (a particular specialism of *The Sunday Times* in the 1980s, when Murdoch was busily laying the foundations of his satellite empire); the simplistic assumption that new broadcasting technology and an increased number of channels would automatically entail greater diversity of programming. And a raucous populism which regards the state as only ever the enemy of media freedom (understood implicitly as the

right of media owners to do with their media whatsoever they will), never as an enabler of media freedom in the wider sense of helping to make the media more diverse, representative, accessible, accountable, assessable and so on. Indeed, to read the likes of Wyatt, Christiansen and *The People* is to be flung forward abruptly in time into the all-out hysteria of the press response to the Leveson Inquiry (2012), an examination from which it most certainly did not emerge lightly, and to which it responded with even greater 'distortion, tendentiousness, personal abuse, half-truth, straight misrepresentation, disingenuousness, pseudo-honesty and irresponsibility' than it did to the Pilkington Report, since here it was directly in the firing line.<sup>7</sup>

### After Pilkington

In the ensuing 1964 Television Act, the ITA was given the responsibility for ensuring that programme output should be 'of a high general standard' and 'properly balanced in subject matter'. It was also granted the power to vet schedules, and even individual programmes, before transmission. The authority insisted that ITV broadcast two current affairs programmes a week, at least one main weekday drama and one documentary, plus regular programmes on art and religion, all in peak time. The number and style of quiz shows were limited, which resulted in admittedly popular programmes such as *Take Your Pick* and *Double Your Money* being cancelled.

It would, of course, be absurd to argue that there was nothing worthwhile in terms of public service broadcasting on ITV before the 1964 Act (both *Armchair Theatre* and *This Week* started in 1956, although *World in Action* did not begin until 1963). It must also be recognised that the coming of ITV forced the BBC to sharpen up its act in numerous significant ways, not least in news and current affairs. And on the downside, the newly empowered ITA not infrequently censored important programmes which dealt with contentious subjects, such as episodes of *World in Action* (Goddard, Corner and Richardson 2007: 185-214). Programmes on the situation in Northern Ireland proved particularly problematic for the ITA (later the IBA) (Potter 1990: 199-213), and *This Week* (Holland 2006: 111-167) and *World in Action* (Goddard, Corner and Richardson 2007: 201-06) not infrequently found themselves in difficulty with the Authority when they attempted to tackle this intractable issue. But it should also be recognised that the revamped schedules did strike a better balance between information, educa-

tion and entertainment, and after Pilkington the channel embarked upon the finest period in its history, which would last until the early 1990s when the ill-judged Broadcasting Act 1990 irrevocably changed the nature of ITV. As Hoggart (1992: 71) put it, the ITV companies had been 'screwed into virtue'.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although it should be pointed out that at this time Hoggart himself took quite a nuanced view of 'effects'. See in particular 'The argument about effects' in Hoggart (1970: 215-227)

<sup>2</sup> Chapter seven of *The uses of literacy* (1990 [1957]) is called 'Invitation to a candy-floss world'

<sup>3</sup> A remark generally attributed to R. H. Tawney, president of the Workers' Educational Association, which gave evidence to the committee

<sup>4</sup> Item 5/9/42 in the Richard Hoggart archive at the University of Sheffield

<sup>5</sup> In which Hoggart wrote: 'The popular middle-class papers are as trivial and as trivializing as those for the working-classes. For myself I find the dailies aimed particularly at middle-class people more unpleasant than those for working-class people. They tend to have an intellectual smugness, a spiritual chauvinism and snobbery, and a cocktail-party polish which makes their atmosphere quite peculiarly stifling' (1990 [1957]: 244)

<sup>6</sup> 'Pilkington and after', *Christian Broadcaster*, no date. Item 5/9/27 in the Richard Hoggart archive at the University of Sheffield

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed and highly critical account of press coverage of Leveson, see the report by Gordon Ramsay at <http://mediastandard-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Final-Draft-v1-040914.pdf>

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## Julian Petley

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