

## 1970s Current Affairs – A Golden Age? By David McQueen

The 1970s has been described as a ‘golden era’ or ‘classic period’ of current affairs broadcasting in Britain both by long serving journalists, such as Peter Taylor, and academics in recent studies of the form (1). This reputation is built on the successes of programmes such as *World in Action* (1963-1998) and *This Week* (1956-1992) at ITV and *Panorama* (1953-) at the BBC. At a time of social, political and economic upheaval these programmes explored controversial issues, exposed hidden scandals and often challenged powerful vested interest. Conflicts at home (in Northern Ireland, on the economic front, in the political sphere) and abroad (in the United States, Vietnam, South Africa and other nations) were explored with a new-found candour and willingness to defy established viewpoints. This confident, challenging turn in investigative television journalism drew audiences of many millions at a time when current affairs programmes were guaranteed a prime time slot on ITV by a mandate from the Independent Television Authority (ITA) and by the BBC’s Charter requirements.

Nevertheless, an examination of programmes from the decade quickly reveals that the quality of current affairs in the 1970s was far from consistent high. The different series had distinct, competing identities and Independent Television (ITV) often appeared to dominate the form in terms of creativity, ratings and critical reputation. And whilst there were many outstanding investigations on both the BBC and ITV, there were also many examples of unchallenging, mediocre and lacklustre work. If the era does in fact produce gold, it is gold mixed with a great deal of grit.

This paper draws on recently published material and archive research at Bournemouth University’s Centre for Broadcasting History to gain a sense of the state of current affairs in this turbulent decade. By examining major, parallel developments in three well known series: *Panorama*, *This Week* and *World in Action* I will indicate why the 1970s was, indeed, a significant and broadly successful decade for the current affairs form, a success that is unlikely to be repeated given the dramatically different broadcasting conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The strong, distinctive quality of current affairs programming on the commercial network in the seventies was partly determined by legislative and regulatory decisions made in the sixties which had established a unique broadcasting environment by the end of that decade. The Pilkington Report of 1962 had been highly critical of the ‘trivial’ output of ITV and expressed dissatisfaction with the ITA’s unwillingness to curb what it regarded as the excesses of the independent sector. The Pilkington Committee had been influenced by committee member Richard Hoggart who was deeply suspicious of consumerist culture not ‘rooted in everyday life’ and the academic arguments of cultural theorist Raymond Williams (2). Eager to encourage intelligent, innovative broadcasting, the Committee was impressed by BBC’s output in the early sixties under its iconoclastic BBC Director General Hugh Greene. Greene had managed to dramatically improve both ratings and programme quality at the BBC after his appointment in 1960. With programmes such as *Steptoe and Son*, *Tonight* and *That Was the Week That Was* the BBC had shown a willingness to ‘experiment’, ‘show the new and unusual’ and ‘give a hearing to dissent’, qualities which the Pilkington Committee was keen to encourage. Furthermore, with the Director

General's background 'as Head of Psychological warfare in Malaya in the early 1950s' a newly confident, united and 'on-message' BBC had made a powerful case to the Committee (Greene 1969, p.131).

An important example of the effect of the Pilkington Committee's findings and the subsequent Television Act of 1964 was the ITA's dramatic decision not to renew Rediffusion's licence to broadcast in 1967. The ITA aimed to put content and public service values above commercial considerations and was highly critical of Rediffusion who, despite warnings, scheduled too many 'insubstantial' quiz shows such as *Double your Money* and *Take your Pick* at a time when other companies were responding to Pilkington's call for quality. Rediffusion, home to *This Week*, was ITV's strongest, most commercially successful television company and the move shocked many commentators. The ITA forced Rediffusion to merge with ABC Television to form a new company called Thames for the franchise to broadcast to the London region on weekdays.

The second significant change was the government's move in 1971 from taxing ITV's advertising revenue to taxing profits. This resulted in companies investing heavily in programming, including prestigious projects such as Jeremy Isaacs' hugely expensive 26-part *World at War* (1973-74). Encouraged to produce high quality, challenging material ITV would soon dominate current affairs production with popular, high impact and often controversial series such as *This Week*, *World in Action* (at Granada) and later *First Tuesday* (1983-93) at Yorkshire TV.

Holland's study of *This Week/TV Eye* explores how journalists in the 1970s, including Peter Taylor and Jonathan Dimbleby, were given the freedom to pursue their interests and develop their styles. It also emphasises the pivotal role Jeremy Isaacs played, particularly after becoming Director of Programmes in 1974. The dramatically different priorities of the period for commercial television are made clear in Isaacs' instructions to Peter Taylor:

'The ratings are not your problem. They're my problem. You must do what you feel you ought to be doing the do it the way you feel you ought to do it.' (Holland 2006, p.62)

Technological developments that affected current affairs in the 1970s include the switch to colour which began with the introduction of 625 line TV sets towards the end of the 1960s (3). By 1970 colour was the norm in current affairs, despite fears initially expressed about the effect on audiences of gruesome colour coverage from the Vietnam War, Northern Ireland and other conflicts. A second development which had begun in the early 1960s was the switch from 35mm film to 16mm sound film, first regularly employed at *World in Action* from 1963 where filmmakers made a virtue of the 'fast and dirty' look of the format (Goddard *et al.* 2007, p.20-23). Reducing crew numbers and costs by moving to 16mm allowed *World in Action* and other current affairs series to devote resources elsewhere, including foreign stories previously too expensive to cover on a regular basis.

*World in Action* was the first current affairs shot entirely on film and the gritty 'anti-aesthetic' style (4) matched the tabloid TV techniques Producer Tim Hewat had first developed on *Searchlight* (1959-1960) and which he continued with *World in Action*

until 1965. Hewat's strategy of visually 'grabbing the audience by the lapels' complimented the 'declamatory and aggressive, inquiring and insubordinate' character of Granada's hugely popular current affairs series (5). David Plowright who took over the series from Hewat in 1966 refined this style somewhat but it remained a distinctly tabloid format with broadsheet concerns that appealed to a broad audience. Both *World in Action* and *This Week* were regularly in the top 20 with 10 million viewers or more. By contrast, the BBC's current affairs output seemed more cautious, reverential and 'establishment friendly'.

*Panorama*, which had, to some extent, set the pace for current affairs in the 1950s and early 1960s had entered the 1970s somewhat in the doldrums, with far lower audience ratings and lukewarm critical reception. The programme was extended to one hour (8-9pm) from September 1970, making more use of the debate-type programme after success with this format earlier in the year on the South African cricket tour and hanging, with Robin Day as main presenter chairing live discussions. *Panorama* also now devoted more time than its ITV rivals (with the exception of LWT's analytical *Weekend World* (1972-88) to political interviews regarded as Robin Day's forté. In 1970, for example, he interviewed two Prime Ministers: Harold Wilson on Biafra and the Common Market and Edward Heath on rioting in Belfast.

While there were some single subject programmes, most *Panorama* episodes continued to have two or three segments. The *Panorama* of the 21<sup>st</sup> December 1970, for instance, was made up of a 17 minute report on the rural poor in Devon, a 15 minute live studio discussion on 'the situation in Poland' and 24 minutes of filmed interviews by Robin Day from Vietnam with the country's Ministers, the President Nguyen Van Thieu and the US Ambassador. It also included film of the Saigon slums, workers in fields and villages and US soldiers on patrol on the river and in the jungle. *Panorama*, at this time, aimed to produce authoritative, reflective, analytical and 'professional' reports, rather than the independent-minded exposés and challenges to the status quo more frequently found on *This Week* and *World in Action*.

Julian Pettifer who joined the programme in 1969 as a reporter typified the new emphasis on cool, detached professionalism over the 'chummy' camaraderie of *Panorama*'s stars of the 1950s and 60s. Ex-*Panorama* journalist and presenter Richard Lindley describes Pettifer as: 'Oxbridge elegant, blonde and good looking, the epitome of grace under pressure, just perfect in a punt', a 'near-perfect reporter', but writes that he sometimes appeared to share *Panorama*'s 'increasing complacency' (2002, p.111). Pettifer reported from around the world including the Soviet Union, Vietnam, where his dramatic reports under fire won him notice, and China which no journalist had visited since the kidnapping of Reuters journalist Anthony Grey by Red Guards in 1967 (The Times 1970, p.10).

Pettifer's reports exemplified some of the strengths and weaknesses of *Panorama* in the 1970s. Despite his widely admired intelligence and professionalism critics took note of his detached manner and notices were not always glowing. His *Panorama* report from Chile following the overthrow of President Allende was compared unfavourably with that of ITV rival *World in Action*. *Panorama* had interviewed the Generals and their supporters who had taken over the country, while *World in Action* concentrated on their victims. Stuart Hood, former Controller of BBC Television, writing in the Listener in 1973 was critical of *Panorama*'s 'coolness', anticipating in

his argument some of the debates that would surface two decades later in Bosnia over ‘journalism of attachment’:

It is clear that the *World in Action* team, which brought back from Chile interviews with the victims of the men whom *Panorama* questioned with its usual polite aloofness, feel that neutrality is not possible in every situation [...] this is one of the reasons why *World in Action* is more interesting and successful than *Panorama*.

(Hood cited Lindley 2002, p.114)

As other current affairs programmes had developed in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Tonight* (1957-65), *24 Hours* (1965-72), *Nationwide* (1969-83), they had begun to take the wind out of *Panorama*'s sails, and according to Lindley, the programme had grown rather slow, old-fashioned, predictable and ‘self-important’.

Criticism grew of *Panorama*'s lack of attention to ‘ordinary people’, particularly as *Tonight* had shown in the 1960s that a popular, incisive current affairs programme was possible that, in Bernard Levin's words, was ‘sceptical towards received opinion and indeed authority’ (Watkins 1982, p.66). Cultural critic Raymond Williams criticised *Panorama*'s attention to ‘superficial high politics’ and its habit of bringing to the screen ‘men whom we know, because we have heard them so often’ who ‘say nothing but say it purposively and with an official presence’. (Williams 1968, 1972)

Regarded in this way as somewhat remote and elitist *Panorama* also appeared lacking in direction at a time of political and cultural upheaval:

The 1960s had come and gone, yet *Panorama* continued on its stately way as if the Beatles, Profumo and *That Was the Week that Was* had never been; its manners remained polite, its judgements cool; its attitude to those at the top rather as if one member of a gentleman's club -- the Garrick perhaps - was talking to another.

(Lindley 2002, p.114-15)

It may be partly in response to this perception that David Dimbleby was appointed *Panorama* presenter in 1974 a position he held until 1977 and which he would return to in the 1980s. David Dimbleby was a freelance reporter for *Panorama* in 1967 and was first offered ‘Robin Day's vacated chair’ in 1972. David had gained notoriety from *Yesterday's Men* in 1971, a documentary which both mocked and enraged former Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Unlike ‘Garrick Club’ anchor Robin Day, the young Dimbleby could not easily be caricatured as ‘establishment friendly’ despite inheriting his father Richard's role, who had been ‘virtually a living embodiment of the programme’ (*The Times* 9/2/72, p.12). In fact, despite being an effective presenter, David Dimbleby's interviews were less adversarial than those conducted by self-styled ‘Grand Inquisitor’ Robin Day and *Panorama* still

lacked energy and ‘bite’ until the arrival of Peter Pagnamenta who became Editor in 1976.

Meanwhile *This Week* and *World in Action* had cemented their reputations as popular, innovative and challenging investigative programmes. Innovation was particularly evident at *World in Action* where David Plowright’s early decision to set up separate teams for producing reportage, inquiry and observational films had paid dividends. According to Godard *et al.* (2007) ‘reportage’ comprised the largest output with the quickest turnaround, responding to ‘the arguments and controversies of the moment’, in a selective and innovative manner where possible. ‘Inquiry’ required a slower turnaround and meticulous research for its ‘well researched exposés’. ‘Observation’, or the ‘implicit’ rather than ‘explicit’ mode of enquiry, included gentler more impressionistic films about personal lives which raised provocative social questions. These included the films of Denis Mitchell, often made without voiceover, such as ‘Quentin Crisp’, ‘Bannside’ (on Ian Paisley), ‘St Mungo’s People’ (homelessness), ‘Pigs’ (the police in Cincinnati) and ‘Mountain People’ (in the Appalachians) (all 1969-1970). The observational films often used more experimental or verité techniques drawn from the Direct Cinema movement. ‘Seymour’ (1970) was another such film by Jo Durden-Smith which followed a convicted criminal on his release from jail and dealt with issues of recidivism.

In the early 1970s *World in Action* expanded into longer specials and dramatisations, often in ITV’s Tuesday documentary slot. These include *World in Action* strands such as *Seven Plus Seven* (developed from 1964’s ‘7 up’ charting the hopes and experiences of a group of seven year olds drawn from different class backgrounds), the wildlife series *Disappearing World* (1970-93) and various drama documentaries developed by a dedicated unit first established for the making of ‘The Man Who Wouldn’t Keep Quiet’ (1970) about Soviet dissident Pyotr Grigorenko.

Holland (2006) notes the influence of Independent filmmaking on current affairs practice at this time. On issues such as Northern Ireland and South Africa ‘alternative’ filmmakers rejected the role of the journalist as a ‘dispassionate observer’ as well as the well-established program formats and distant professionalism of television structures, ‘all of which seemed rooted in establishment values’ (p.75). Jo Menell’s brief stint as *This Week* Producer in 1970 brought current affairs close to the underground culture of times with marginal and ‘morally suspect’ topics such as group marriage, cannabis and hippy politics in the USA. Similar topics are the focus of *World in Action* from 1967 under David Plowright with programmes on drugs, the American civil rights movement, Vietnam, student militancy and the hippie movement (6) helping to test the contemporary limits of ‘objectivity’.

‘Alternative’, ‘counter-cultural’ and ‘oppositional’ perspectives and filmmaking practice (7) both influenced and competed with the more traditional ‘committed’ television journalism which had been consolidated by Jeremy Isaacs, David Plowright and others— ‘an approach that was securely grounded in humanist, social democratic values, committed to truth, objectivity and a view of the audience as citizens with the right to be informed’ (Holland 2006, p.76). The challenge that *World in Action* and *This Week*’s more radical or probing investigations presented to entrenched business interests or establishment perspectives on political affairs led to frequent and increasingly aggressive intervention by the IBA (Independent Broadcast Authority –

previously ITA). This occurred over investigations into the tobacco, asbestos and pharmaceutical industries; the effects of the drug Thalidomide; corruption in Westminster up to ministerial level; and reporting from South Africa, Uganda, Vietnam and Northern Ireland.

In some respects the work of Jonathan Dimbleby at *This Week* and John Pilger at *World in Action* exemplified the 'oppositional' tradition which particularly rankled with the IBA and elements of the mainstream press. Refusing to accept the definition of problems advanced by mainstream politicians and establishment figures on various topics lead to their films being branded as 'slanted' or 'campaigning'. At best this resulted in a voiced-over distancing of the programme from the views expressed such as, "Tonight a personal report by the Daily Mirror's special correspondent John Pilger..." on 'The Quiet Mutiny' (1970). This was after numerous changes imposed to the original cut of the film about US soldiers refusing to fight in Vietnam, according to Pilger (to this author). Indeed, the IBA frequently accused *This Week* and *World in Action* of 'editorialising' or producing an 'unbalanced' view. Jonathan Dimbleby's 'A Lady Wrote to Me' (1977) about 'benefit scroungers' concluded by reminding viewers of the far greater sums of money lost to the state in tax evasion:

Social security is not a fringe benefit. It was established out of common humanity to protect the deprived. The poor can't fight back. Can't remind us that their scroungers cost the state only 0.16% of the Supplementary Benefit budget. Cannot remind us of the millions they don't claim, theirs by right. Cannot remind us either of another world, a world where money is manipulated, tax evaded and avoided, where expense accounts are indulged on friends and family, but charged to the company. Where there are bosses who pay their workers below the rates set by law. A world where many more millions of pounds are stolen from the state, but a world without rhetoric or slogans or scroungers. No wonder New Year's Eve is bleak in Salford.

(cited Holland 2006, p.106)

Dimbleby's conclusion was judged to be 'totally unacceptable' in an IBA review following a complaint from Conservative MP Ian Sproat.

However, the greatest source of conflict with IBA was Northern Ireland. Many of the programmes made about 'the Troubles' in the 1970s were censored, censored or, in two cases, not shown at all. *World in Action's* 'South of the Border' (1971) about the effect of 'the Troubles' in the Irish Republic was banned unseen and without explanation. Featuring interviews with senior politicians as well as IRA members the IBA eventually defended its decision to ban, without viewing, the programme in terms of the Television Act's prohibition on broadcasts 'likely to lead to disorder'. The second, a discussion of an Amnesty International report into torture by Northern Ireland's security services in 1978 led to black screens after unions refused to transmit

the comedy that had been scheduled in its place (Goddard et al. 2007, Holland 2006).. The IBA, frustrated by aspects of Peter Taylor's persistent and controversial investigations in Ulster advised Thames to 'lay off Northern Ireland' and to 'use another reporter' (Curtis 1984, p.59). Many more programmes were to be banned, censored or delayed on both BBC and ITV in the 1980s and 90s (8).

The BBC's current affairs coverage of 'the Troubles' led to a number of clashes with Labour and Conservative governments when the Corporation's 'self-imposed restraint' was not exercised sufficiently in the view of some M.P.s or Ministers. By 1977 this has culminated in Northern Ireland Secretary Roy Mason's explicit threat to the BBC's Charter and income and Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's White Paper for appointed 'Service Management Boards' to secure greater government control. (Day 1989, p.279, 305). All this in an era of broad cross-party consensus in Westminster on 'dealing with' Ireland before Mrs Thatcher's election in 1979. The pattern of intimidation that had characterised government reactions to the BBC's coverage of conflicts stretching back to Suez certainly continued, and some critics argue, intensified under Margaret Thatcher (Walters 1989). For if the supposedly 'establishment friendly' *Panorama* had entered the 1970s in a somewhat becalmed manner it would leave the decade in a storm of protest over events in Northern Ireland.

In between the programme went through a number of changes under seven different Editors. *Panorama's* reputation improved in the second half of the 1970s after Peter Pagnamenta who became Editor in 1976, reduced the role of 'star' reporters and injected more pace into the programme whilst moving towards more single subject programmes. According to Lindley, Pagnamenta forced *Panorama* to 'tell us something new', to focus on a single aspect, leading question, personality, institution or group. In effect *Panorama* now required a 'narrative device' of some kind rather than a mere 'survey', thereby avoiding superficial or predictable coverage. Lindley suggests that the price for this more vigorous style was that *Panorama* would sometimes shrink from 'tackling the underlying issues', but praises Peter Pagnamenta for shrewdly anticipating the next big story and boosting *Panorama's* reputation and audience (p.221-223)

Positive reviews of *Panorama* around this time suggest dynamism had returned to the programme. A review in 1977 of a report on prisons called 'The Crisis Inside' indicates that the report anticipated the typically bold, campaigning quality of a *World in Action* exposé of prisons 'Banged Up' two years later, which it may have inspired:

If occasionally simply provoking (Tom Mangold's reforming zeal twice threatened to get the better of his judgement), the film constantly provoked thought. The central defects in our penal system were illustrated with disturbing clarity: the squalor, the humiliation, the overcrowded cells, the overworked prison officers, the challenge which "anarchists" and terrorists now presented to a shaky edifice.

(The Times 1<sup>st</sup> March 1977, p.9)

Foreign as well as domestic stories around this time are praised in newspaper reviews. 'Under Surveillance' Michael Cockerell's report on the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia is described by Michael Church as a 'remarkable feat' testifying to the Chartist's strength and 'their Government's shabby and unbelievably stupid behaviour' (1977, p.13). 'The friends Who Put Fire in the Heavens' (1978) was an award winning investigation into a company called Otrag that would not have been out of place in the pages of a James Bond novel. Assisted by former Nazi rocket scientists, Otrag had taken over huge part of Zaire to develop a commercial space rocket with the aim of selling spy satellite services to Third World dictators like the Shah of Iran. Then came a report on union activist and nuclear plant worker Karen Silkwood whose suspicious death later became the basis for film starring Meryl Streep (Lindley 2002, p.144-45)

*Panorama* had shown it could raise the nation's pulse rate again and the appointment of Roger Bolton as Editor in 1979 ensured a bold, agenda setting, investigative focus on domestic issues would keep *Panorama* in the headlines, perhaps more than it might have wished. Bolton, in his own words, set out 'to lead the public debate as opposed to reflecting it'. He was a graduate from Liverpool University, unlike many staff and reporters who were 'Oxbridge' educated, and he appeared more willing to challenge the status quo at a time when, as he saw it, 'consensus had broken down'. Bolton had already experienced controversy as Editor of *Tonight* which concluded its twenty-two year run by broadcasting an interview with the INLA, an organisation responsible for killing Thatcher's close friend and adviser Airey Neave that year (Bolton 1990, Lindley 2002). It was over its reporting from Ireland that Bolton was about to expose *Panorama* to the fury of Margaret Thatcher's government.

With regards to the 'Troubles' in Ireland, as former Editor Robert Rowland admitted:

While *Panorama* in the sixties covered the consequences of bigotry and racial conflict all over the world - Vietnam, Rhodesia, USA, South Africa - we failed considerably to report the festering difficulties of Northern Ireland.

(2000, p.177)

*Panorama* did report extensively from Ireland in the 1970s but from 1971 a system of reference upwards operated in relation to interviews with the IRA. As Anthony Smith (1996) explains permission had always to be sought and therefore was requested less and less often - and when requested it was more and more frequently refused. Yet, until 1979 this did not appear to trouble *Panorama*:

[...] the apparatus of internal self-censorship did not interfere with the normal course of interviewing major political figures and *Panorama* staff for instance, did not to any great extent feel that their functions were becoming difficult to discharge. It was *World at One*, *World in Action* and *24 hours* which found the new situation cramping.

(Smith 1996, p.31)

While *Panorama* did, at the start of the decade, interview members of the Official IRA who had effectively recognized partition, the BBC's position in relation to the more militant Provisional IRA had been made clear in 1971 when the then Chairman Lord Hill wrote to the Home Secretary: 'between the British Army and the gunmen, the BBC is not and cannot be impartial' (cited Carruthers 1996, p.119). The IRA bombing campaigns of the early 1970s which resulted in heavy loss of life and the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1974, which made membership of the IRA illegal in the United Kingdom, hardened existing attitudes to that organisation at the BBC.

By the end of the 1970s it was extremely difficult to report the views and activities of militant Republicans who enjoyed widespread support in the Catholic community of Northern Ireland, or the militant Nationalists who opposed them with equal or greater Protestant support. Reporting on the apparently insoluble conflict proved to be so fraught that a *Panorama* Editor would lose his job for the (untransmitted) footage of a roadblock his staff had filmed, despite attempting to follow BBC procedures and gaining approval in general terms for the programme being made. The events leading to the sacking of Roger Bolton, though frequently recounted, are worth briefly revisiting to indicate the tenuous state of broadcasting freedom at the BBC. In September 1979, in the wake of the INLA controversy and the murder of Mountbatten, *Panorama* began planning a project on the Provisional IRA, examining its history, aims and tactics. Two ex-chiefs of staff of the Provisional IRA, David O'Connell and Sean MacStiofan, were to be among those interviewed and their names, along with the outline of the project, were cleared by the Director, News and Current Affairs (Clutterbuck 1981, p.115-116).

On the 17<sup>th</sup> October, following an interview with David O'Connell, a *Panorama* crew that included Jeremy Paxman filmed an IRA roadblock in the village of Carrickmore in Northern Ireland. While paramilitary roadblocks in the province were not unusual and had been filmed before - for *This Week* (9) -, the *Panorama* team felt this show of force had been a 'stunt' put on for their benefit (10). The next day they informed the *Panorama* office in London and the Northern Ireland Office. The Northern Ireland Secretary, was informed on that day and told the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, soon afterwards. The *Panorama* team also telephoned the BBC lawyers who told them if they could not recognize any of the men they were not obliged to inform the police. It is clear that the team believed they had 'referred up' as BBC directives instructed, but there was one problem:

The BBC's Head of Programmes and Head of News in Belfast were also told by *Panorama* about the film, but the BBC Controller Northern Ireland, James Hawthorne, was not informed and the first he heard of it was on 25 October, when he was asked about it at dinner by a senior Northern Ireland Office official.

(Clutterbuck 1981, p.116)

When news of the roadblock was leaked in Ireland, there was an outcry in the British press with the Daily Express claiming it was as if during the Second World War, a BBC crew 'had gone to film Nazis occupying the Channel Islands'. Supported by strong condemnation from the Labour Party, Mrs Thatcher called in Parliament for the BBC to 'put its house in order'. Shortly afterwards the police seized a copy of the untransmitted film under section 11 of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. As David Miller writes, this signalled:

‘the willingness of the government to use the full force of the law against the broadcasters, a precedent for escalating further hostilities. And they indicate the relative success of the government in their battle to keep the voice of armed republicanism off the screen.

(1994, p.34-35)

Roger Bolton was sacked following an enquiry by the acting Director General Gerard Mansell for not ensuring that the BBC Controller Northern Ireland had been informed by Head of News Belfast about the incident. Roger Bolton's dismissal as *Panorama* Editor caused real anger at the BBC and threats of industrial action eventually led to his reinstatement. On resuming his position he was advised by Gerard Mansell to 'raise his sights when dealing with such problems and to remember the wider interests of the BBC' (Lindley 2002, p.233).

The collapse of BBC management in the face of government pressure contrasts sharply with management support at Thames and Granada for programme makers against IBA interference. At Granada the desire 'to challenge authority and upset the status quo came from the top' and the high morale at the programme was partly attributed to the management board backing *World in Action* 'to the hilt' against legal and regulatory attacks. The fact that *World in Action* had the biggest complaint file with IBA was seen as 'a compliment' by Sidney Bernstein; and Denis Forman attributed the success of the programme to the determination of management to resist 'the moral blackmail through which the British Establishment seeks to smother any story that could cause them embarrassment'. It is also symptomatic of Granada's relationship with the regulatory authority that for from September 1963 until June 1964, following a special on oppression of the black populations in South Africa and Portuguese Angola, all *World in Action* films had to be pre-vetted by the ITA, a uniquely draconian and disciplinary measure that caused deep frustration at Granada at the time (Goddard et al 2007, p.151, 189-192).

The 1970s was marked by tension and disagreement around definitions of impartiality and balance in the relationship between broadcasters, the government and the regulatory authority overseeing commercial broadcasting (ITA/IBA). Concerns over 'slanted' or 'authored' viewpoints are repeated through the decade on a number of topics including the dangers of smoking, and injustice in apartheid South Africa (11). The conflict in Northern Ireland became a repeated source of friction with the reporting of allegations against the police or the army coming in for sustained 'flak'. Widely held Republican, sectarian and paramilitary perspectives in Ireland were effectively censored. On the rare occasions they are aired, even in a 'hostile' interview context, they usually prompt intervention by senior management (at the

BBC) or by the regulatory authority (at ITV) and/or confrontation with the government.

Concerns about the ability of image-led documentary programmes to deal with complex issues were expressed by John Birt and Peter Jay's in a series of influential articles in *The Times* attacking current affairs' 'bias against understanding' and failure, in their view, to look beyond symptoms to the wider and more complex causes of particular events. Birt and Jay's thesis was an influential one and was eventually put into practice, first at LWT's *Weekend World* (denounced by some politicians as a platform for Peter Jay's neo-liberal economic views) and later at the BBC as a 'mission to explain'. This leads led to an overhaul of production practices, a suspicion of more radical analysis and a certain disengagement or distance at the investigative level. From the middle of the decade (particularly after the reversion to tax on revenue rather than profits) there was also evidence of 'creeping commercialisation' – a tendency which was to become more marked in the 1980s and accelerated dramatically in the 1990s and beyond.

*This Week* was an early casualty of these market forces when Thames came under a new managing director Bryan Cowgill in 1977 who puts greater stress on entertainment and 'building the audience'. *This Week* was relaunched as *TV Eye* in a move supported by the new Head of Current Affairs, Peter Pagnamenta, against the wishes of former Editor David Elstein. This name change signalled a different organisational style and a different approach to its audience. The new Editor Mike Townson, poached by Pagnamenta from the BBC, shifted the emphasis away from long-running, slowly developing investigations to more immediate concerns of the moment and human interest stories. Alongside this Townson makes a conscious move to avoid the politicised context that caused so much trouble for *This Week*. The new direction taken by *TV Eye* was received with dismay by many of existing team.

While *This Week* returned nearly a decade later under Roger Bolton to cause further government outrage with 'Death on the Rock' (1988), in retrospect it is clear that *TV Eye* marked the beginning of the end for the so-called 'golden age' of current affairs. The particular conjunction of institutional, economic and political circumstances that marked out the first seven years of the decade could not be repeated and British current affairs, would never be simultaneously quite as bold, innovative, challenging and popular as it had been, at its best, in the 1970s.

In conclusion, *This Week*, *World in Action* and *Panorama* together produced a body of current affairs programmes that allows us to view the decade in its rapidly changing complexity and gain some insight into its transitional and sometimes violent character. These programmes probed behind sensational headlines, investigated social ills, explored complex foreign and domestic affairs and, on occasion, defied or embarrassed elite power and entrenched interests. Protected, to some extent, from ratings and other commercial pressures, programme makers could rework current affairs conventions and push at the restrictive boundaries of a highly regulated and heavily monitored broadcasting industry. This occurred less often at a post Hugh-Greene BBC with self-policing mechanisms usually preventing more controversial material from being aired; but more often at ITV where Thames and especially Granada actively encouraged 'testing the limits' for a time.

The 1970s was also a decade when highly constraining, not to say misleading, notions of ‘balance’ and ‘objectivity’ were challenged, despite persistent and often unreasonable opposition from broadcasting regulators. This challenge came in its sharpest form from producers and journalists, supported by television executives, who would not compromise when it came to reporting stories and presenting well-researched, factual evidence that was inconvenient or threatening to vested interests. It is these programme makers given the space, resources and institutional support to produce innovative documentaries and incisive investigative reports that we remember. Their work is evidence of a hard-won ‘golden era’.

## Notes

- (1) Particularly Goddard, Corner and Richardson’s (2007) study of *World in Action* and Patricia Holland’s (2006) study of *This Week* both of which are drawn on extensively in this essay.
- (2) In fact the influences on the Pilkington Committee and the reasons for the ITA not renewing Rediffusion’s charter are a matter of dispute: see Jeffrey Milland (2004).
- (3) Colour television in Britain began on BBC2 on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1967 and on BBC1 and ITV on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1969, but was not commonly adopted in current affairs until 1970.
- (4) ‘Anti-aesthetic’ was a term used by Brian Winston in interview with Goddard *et al.*, 2007. p.23.
- (5) Tim Hewatt quoted in N. Chanan’s unpublished manuscript *Granada - the Early Years* cited Godard *et al.* 2007. p.25.
- (6) See Goddard *et al.*, 2007. p.48.
- (7) See Philip Schlesinger’s (1983) definitions of ‘alternative’ and ‘oppositional’ perspectives in relation to images and narratives of terrorism cited in Holland (2006) p.114. More broadly Thompson and Bordwell (1994) describes ‘a cinema of social engagement, addressing itself to concrete social problems and arguing for radical social change’ emerging in the 1960s and early 1970s (p.642).
- (8) See Liz Curtis’s (1996) *A catalogue of censorship 1959-1993*.
- (9) Peter Taylor wrote a public letter of defence explaining how he had filmed similar incidents under similar circumstances in his work as a journalist ITV: ‘one was a Provisional IRA roadblock in Ballymurphy during the Queens visit in August 1972; the other a border checkpoint at which an M60 machine gun was displayed in March, 1978’ (Taylor 1979, p.15).
- (10) See *Auntie: The Inside Story of the BBC*, Episode 4 Walking the Tightrope 1970-1986, 1997. TV, BBC1. 1997
- (11) Although the IBA becomes more ‘tolerant’ of *World in Action* as the 1970s and 80s continued and was more inclined to support its work in the face of complaints according to Goddard *et al.* 2007. p.201-202.

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