

cc B)up

PRIME MINISTER

27 November 1986

Television News

BBC and ITN

Recently I spent two evenings observing the production of television news at the BBC (The Six O'Clock News) and ITN (News at Ten). In both cases I attended the editorial conferences before the news was written, and then attended the informal de-briefing following the news itself.

I came away with some clear impressions.

Organizational Structure

The most obvious difference was between the management structures of the two organisations. BBC TV News is a small corner of a huge department store, while ITN is a highly specialised boutique. ITN has a very simple and clear management structure (Chart 1). The Chief Executive (David Nicholas) sits on the main board and is directly answerable for all ITN operations (news, staff, property, product development) to the board. The editors of the four daily news programmes (1 o'clock, 5.45, Channel Four and News at Ten) report to him directly.

By contrast the Editor of BBC TV News is directly accountable to no less than six different people (Chart 2):

Director General and
Deputy D.G.

- overall performance

Managing Director BBC TV

- overall finance,
staffing, unions

Director of Programmes BBC TV	- quality of programmes (balance of views)
Assistant D.G.	- sensitive matters
Chief Asst to D.G.	- political matters (domestic politics, N. Ireland)
Chairman, Development Cttee	- capital spending

In addition to this the Editor of News sits ex-officio on a large number of inter-departmental committees - 7 of which meet every week and another 2 to 3 of which meet in addition every other week.

Under the present structure the Editor has very little if any incentive to be enterprising e.g. by selling the news abroad, developing new products etc. The contract with Visnews in particular needs looking into.

Writing the News

ITN news has always been presented and written by journalists. Newsreaders typically write the headlines and 2-3 items each for the particular programme they are presenting. By contrast BBC News has traditionally been presented by actors/actresses but written by journalists. As a result ITN has attracted senior journalists as newsreaders (Alastair Burnet, Sandy Gall), whereas comparable individuals in the BBC have ended up in Current Affairs (David Dimbleby, Michael Charlton, Robin Day, Peter Snow).

The writing of the BBC News however is changing. BBC newsreaders now typically write the headlines, the lead story and maybe others. The trend within the BBC is to hire journalists as presenters and to strengthen their role in writing the news. In short it is copying ITN.

Editorial Control

On both channels, the editor has the final say over the words read out and the visuals chosen. In both cases however this responsibility is typically delegated to the producer of the individual news, who then presents the programme structure for discussion with the editor at an editorial conference. On both channels the words are written by either the presenter or journalist and then read and checked by the producer and a deputy in charge of sub-editing.

In terms of the accuracy, balance and fairness of the News everything depends therefore on the ethos within which producers, presenters and journalists work and on the choice of the the individuals themselves.

In terms of people ITN has one major advantage. David Nicholas, the Editor, has been at ITN for over 25 years and Alastair Burnet has worked with at least one producer for over 20 years. Since Nicholas has been Chief Executive of ITN he has seen no less than 9 Editors of BBC TV News come and go.

Conclusions

BBC News is just one example of how the organizational structure of the BBC above the level of programme editors is confused and cumbersome. It fails to provide proper incentive for either efficiency or enterprise.

Recommendation

As this is such a complex and sensitive subject politically it might be best to raise these issues at an informal meeting with the Chairman of the Governors.

At such a meeting it would also be useful to raise the matter of how the Governors and senior management go about creating a proper ethos within News: the way they choose staff, training within the department, the rigour within which editing is carried out, the extent to which they receive criticism from above or outside, the method of dealing with everyday complaints and their impact on the operation.

M.

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Chart 1

Structure of ITN

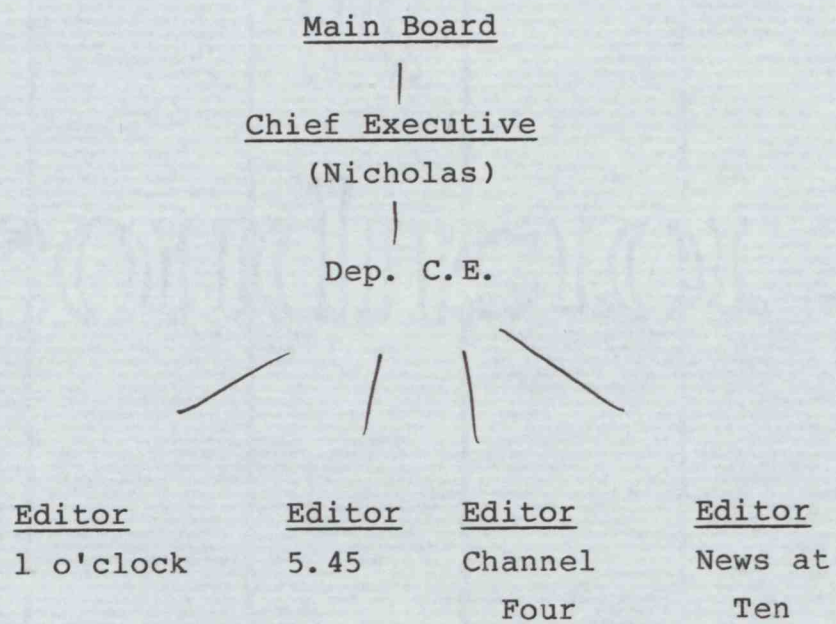


Chart 2

Structure of the BBC

Board of Governors

Board of Management

Director-General (Milne)

Deputy D.G. (Checkland)

Assistant D.G. (Protheroe)
(Head of Journalism)

Chief to the DG (Drylan)
(political issues)

RADIO

M.D. RADIO

