

# ITV'S PSB: GOING UP IN SMOKE?

ITV staff and freelances, battered by redundancies and axed prime-time productions, have little faith left that either the broadcaster or Ofcom are remotely interested in the company's public service broadcasting obligations, reports Janice Turner

One of the biggest jobs that had to be done at Meridian early this month was signing the mountain of leaving cards. After the broadcasting regulator Ofcom on 21 January gave the go-ahead for ITV to jettison much of its obligatory regional news output, Meridian took the biggest hit. Of the 180 staff employed there 100 are losing their jobs. "We haven't even got a receptionist", said Martin Clarke, chair of BECTU's Independent Broadcasting Division, who is also leaving. "Output has been slashed by 50%." A total of 425 jobs have gone across regional news as ITV changes the geographical areas covered by their output.

The picture is grim elsewhere. "Plymouth is shutting down in February. The WestCountry TV region will be no more," he said. "That franchise is being reduced to about six people in an office and will be serviced from Bristol."

Border Television franchise effectively disappears and is becoming part of Tyne Tees, and programmes for Border – just news – will be made in Tyne Tees. Border is also reduced to a handful of people in an office.

Anglia Television previously made two news programmes; now it will only have one

**On any given night the size of the audience for Anglia's news is greater than the entire audience for Sky News**

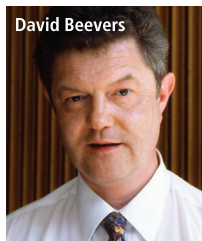
programme and a six-minute opt-out. The same goes for Yorkshire.

#### MORE CARNAGE

The redundancies were in order to cut up to £40-million from ITV's current regional news budget. But no sooner were negotiations on the regional news redundancies complete, ITV workers, staff and freelance, were hit again.

The day after Ofcom's announcement, ITV declared that to save money its flagship

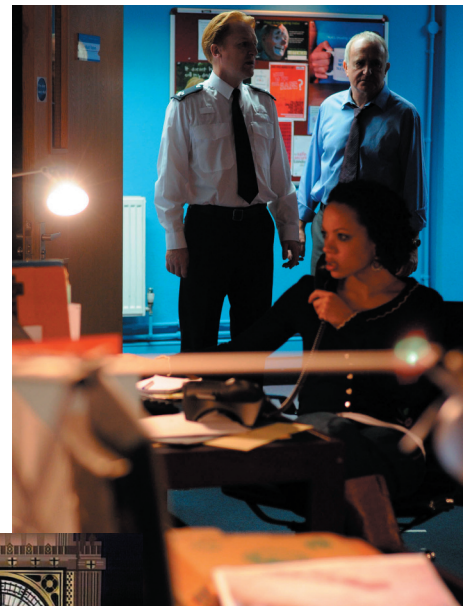
serial, *The Bill* made by Fremantle, was to be cut from two one-hour programmes a week to just a single one-hour weekly drama to be broadcast after the 9pm watershed. On top of this they announced that they would stop making *The Royal* completely and halt production of the Yorkshire-based series *Heartbeat* for a year. They argued that they already had enough programmes in the can for the foreseeable future – but are saying nothing about production once those programmes have been broadcast. "Manchester and Leeds make *Coronation St* and *Emmerdale*, and now that's all they have left to make", added Clarke. "There have been considerable redundancies at 3sixtymedia in Manchester because there isn't enough for them to do."



David Beever

#### EVIDENCE

But there is plenty more evidence indicating that neither Ofcom nor ITV think these are the last of the cuts to public service broadcasting. Ofcom has suggested that new, independently funded consortia could be set up to administer bids to make regional news, effectively giving ITV the green light to withdraw from regional news altogether. To add insult to injury the regulator suggested that the funds to make such programmes for the Nations and Regions could stand at £30 – £50-million, significantly less than even ITV's own scaled-back operation. And on 4 February ITV chief operating officer John Cresswell wrote to all staff saying that the changes Ofcom had accepted were still not enough. Management had looked at every aspect of ITV's activities to see where further savings could be made, and the results of this would be given to staff on 4 March.



ITV executive chair Michael Grade indicated ITV's lack of concern about their PSB commitments when on 28 January he said that they would cap spending on public

service programming at £35m a year – the value Ofcom has assigned to the free analogue spectrum that the commercial broadcaster uses to transmit ITV1. Grade added that ITV would provide international and national news as part of the £35m public service broadcasting spend and government could decide what it should do with the remaining budget. Grade said ITV's preferred option was to retain its PSB status, which brought benefits such as almost universal coverage and a prominent position for its channels on digital TV electronic programme guides. But if the deal was unworkable there was the option to give it up.

In such a scenario, ITV would no longer offer any guarantees about its content or how much it commissioned from the UK but would seek the best return for its shareholders, even if that meant doing

