[GB] ITC Publishes Annual Review of Performance of Private Broadcasters

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The Independent Television Commission (ITC) which regulates the private sector of British broadcasting has published its annual Performance Review examining the performance of the regional Channel 3 companies, Channels 4 and 5 and public teletext services during 1998. The Review assesses the compliance of the companies with their licence obligations; these include diversity and quality and so it is able to take a broad overview of the standard of commercial television.

In its overall assessment of Channel 3, the Commission noted that whilst its total share of terrestrial audience had fallen from 37.3 % to 36.4 % it had achieved its target of 38 % of audience during peak periods. Overall there was a marked improvement in the supply of documentaries, of entertainment and drama specifically for children and of sport. However, there were shortcomings in areas such as current affairs, comedy and arts. The amount of coverage of current affairs fell, partly because there was no national election, and there was some concern about a lighter and more consumerist tone and content to some current affairs programmes. Although some individual documentaries were of high quality, material that was genuinely innovative in style, content or approach was limited. Concern was also expressed at the use of cheap late-night material to make up Channel 3's commitment to arts programming. A marked increase in the number of programmes which breached the Programme or Sponsorship Codes was also noted, especially lack of sensitivity to the requirements of family viewing policy. Overall, priorities for 1999 should include greater diversity in the weekday peak-time schedule, more and stronger current affairs material and factual programming, and greater sensitivity to the needs of family viewing.

In the case of Channel 4, the Review found more innovation than in the previous year, responding to criticisms that the Channel had begun to lose its distinctive character. News coverage sustained its reputation for serious, measured and high-quality reporting. The arts record was strong, but adult education requirements were not fully met. The number of breaches of the Codes fell although one breach had been serious. Channel 5 had consolidated, but there was scope for improvement in drama, both for children and for adults, and failure to provide adequate drama was a breach of the licence commitments. Some material treated by the Channel as current affairs did not meet the Commission's definition of this, including for example showbiz material.

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Independent Television Commission, Performance Reviews 1998.

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