



PROFILE

Stuart Littlemore

There are two schools of thought about Stuart Littlemore. One is that he is a pompous git. The other is that he may be a pompous git, but at least he's *our* pompous git. Even if you don't like his style, according to adherents of the second theory, you can't deny that he stands up for the right things in the media: accuracy, sensitivity on issues of race and privacy, a bias against sensationalism, and opposition to the concentration of ownership.

Well, up to a point. But in fact Littlemore's paternalistic style is intrinsic to his point of view. His belief in Quality with a capital 'Q' leads inevitably to the assumption that it's perfectly possible, indeed necessary, to make value judgements about what is and what is not 'quality'. That's a perfectly defensible position. What isn't defensible is for those judgements to be raised to the level of objective fact. Everyone's entitled to their opinion, but in this case it seems that some are more entitled than others.

Littlemore appears to be 'our' pompous git only to people who agree with his definition of quality—which most people in white middle-class, Left-liberal circles probably do. It's a thoroughly elitist doctrine, because it implies not merely that 'quality' is superior to 'trash', but that people who watch 'trash' (that is the vast majority of the population) are morons. That may not seem like

an unreasonable assumption when the program under discussion is something you don't care for yourself—say *Hinch*. But Littlemore's partiality becomes much more obvious when he ridicules something you yourself enjoy. Sport was the real eye-opener for me. He obviously despises it. What's more, he professes not to be able to tell the difference between a rugby league State of Origin commentary by HG Nelson and the genuine Channel Nine article. If this is true it betrays an awe-inspiring absence of humour; if not, an extraordinary capacity for disingenuous snobbery. I suspect both.



For people who share Littlemore's views on sport, perhaps the easiest way to avoid being seduced by his illusion of objectivity is to imagine his reaction to your favorite 'downmarket' American comedy. I find *The Simpsons* and *Cheers* particularly helpful in this respect. Better still is to place him actually in the bar at *Cheers*. Does the lip curl with distaste? I think so. It's a salutary experience to find that contempt directed at you, rather than some hapless sub-editor on a provincial newspaper who can't spell the name of the prime minister.

The problem with *Mediawatch* isn't just that Littlemore demands a shared set of values. It's also that too often he fails to put into practice the

sceptical approach demanded of others, particularly when it comes to people and projects which he instinctively feels he should be in sympathy with. Three examples come to mind. The first was the spectacle of Littlemore and that other thoroughly civilised critic John Mortimer discussing the virtues of 'quality British TV' (ie *Rumpole*) as though it were fine wine or classical music. The second is his uncritical (even cringing) attitude to foreign publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *Sunday Times*. (The latter hasn't been a quality paper in the sense that Littlemore imagines for at least ten years.) The third was a more recent feature on the remote communities satellite TV service, *Imparja*. By most accounts (Michael Meadows in *ALR* 134, for example), *Imparja* has been by no means an unqualified success. Yet Littlemore's trip to the Alice produced nothing more than a puff for what he evidently saw as a good cause, rather than a story.

It's a pity that the show demands such a conformist and essentially ABC-centred view from its audience, since many of its more detailed criticisms of the media are valid and important. The observation that a reporter from one of the commercial stations kitted himself out in a paramilitary-style jacket to report a car chase incident was a recent case in point.

But the value of such comment is vitiated by Littlemore's acerbic (and too often downright petty) high-mindedness—a state which leaves no room for self-deprecation, or indeed any acknowledgement that he himself is part of the media. He presents the case against shoddy journalism like the barrister he is. What he is after is not so much an understanding of the media as a conviction. The presentation of the evidence may be cogent enough, and highly entertaining, but the overall effect is dulled by the knowledge that, when it comes to judging quality, it's Littlemore himself who makes the laws.

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