

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRITISH CINEMA NEWSREELS, THE BIRTH OF TELEVISION NEWS AND A SHORT HISTORY OF ITN

Most observers agree that the first British cinema newsreel appeared in 1910. It was launched as a weekly product by the French Pathe company under the title Pathe's Animated Gazette. It was soon joined by competitor products, both French (Gaumont and Eclair) and home-grown (Warwick Bioscope Chronicle, Williamson's Animated News and Topical Budget).

Within a short time the newsreels settled into a regular pattern of issuing two editions per week, synchronising with prevailing cinema programme changes. Newsreels were distinct from the actualité films that had been thrilling audiences since the very beginning of cinema itself because their running times were longer – at several minutes – and their focus was directed more towards subjects of topical interest; and the stories were moved on and linked together through the use of captions.

Unlike actualité films Pathe's newsreel was offered to exhibitors for rent, rather than for purchase. This practice, which endured for the whole of the newsreel's history, had an influence on the product itself. Whereas every new edition of a newspaper immediately supersedes earlier ones, newsreel editions were made to last: they were passed down a renters' chain at successively diminishing rentals over several weeks. This affected both the types of story that they covered and the way in which news was reported. The stories had to have a relatively timeless quality about them in order to continue to appear fresh to those audiences who were seeing them only several weeks after their original release date.

First world war

With the coming of the First World War the newsreel companies established the Cinematograph Trade Topical Committee which, it was hoped, would secure them as much film of the war as possible, through the projection of a united front to deal with Government. It did not endure and was replaced by the War Office Cinematograph Committee, which was headed by Sir William Jury. Actuality war film was shot under government control – there was also an official system of censorship in place – and was distributed to the various newsreel companies for incorporation into their respective programmes. In 1916 the British Government, deciding that it needed an official newsreel with which to communicate news of the war to cinema audiences, purchased Topical Budget and renamed it 'Official War News'. After the war it was bought back by its original owner, William Jeapes and relaunched under its former title.

The 1920s saw the newsreels' popularity increase significantly, and there was fierce competition among the production companies. There were also some new arrivals, Empire Screen News launched in 1926 and British Screen News opened in 1928. The latter title survived for about four years. The decade also saw several newsreel companies launching cinemagazines, which offered audiences coverage of lighter stories and a wider range of subject matter. Some titles were created especially for female audiences – for instance, Eve's Film Review, which was launched by Pathe. The decade also saw the introduction of 'super' reels which, running for nearly 10 minutes, lasted almost twice as long as the ordinary newsreels. There were also changes in ownership: the British interests of the Gaumont, and later Pathe, both passed to British companies.

Sound

The change over to sound took the British cinema industry some time. As a result the newsreel companies produced both silent and sound newsreel editions – in most cases through until the middle 1930s. In the early years of sound the newsreels experimented: some released stories whose soundtracks simply comprised ambient location sounds with the stories being introduced by captions. However, a new arrival, Universal Talking News, hardly used location sound at all, but instead carried a jaunty studio-recorded commentary supported by dramatic music. It was only after these first hesitant steps that the newsreels evolved the style that was ultimately to serve them until their demise: Stories were closely supported by a distinctive, authoritative commentary that was enhanced by music to set the mood. Several commentators became stars in their own right – such as E V H (Ted) Emmett (Gaumont British News), Bob Danvers-Walker (Pathe News), Lionel Gamlin and Leslie Mitchell (British Movietone News) and R E Jeffery (Universal News).

1930s: the newsreel industry matures

The first British sound newsreel to be launched was British Movietone News in June 1929¹. Empire Screen News disappeared in 1932, but its sound counterpart, Universal Talking News, launched in 1930². It dropped the 'Talking' from its banner in the mid-1930s. Pathe – continued in business and produced several discrete silent and sound titles³. Gaumont British – the company had modified its name when its ownership had changed in the 1920s – produced Gaumont Graphic (a silent newsreel) and Gaumont Sound News (a sound version of the silent newsreel). Both newsreels were replaced in 1934 by Gaumont British News⁴. Topical Budget ceased production in 1931. However, in the same year, a major new sound newsreel, British Paramount News, appeared⁵. This new entrant soon gained a reputation for brashness, and considered itself to have a harder news 'edge' than its competitors. 1937 saw the launch of another newsreel, National News, this time boasting issues in full colour. It was panned by the critics and soon went under. There were a few other entrants, but they too quickly met the same fate.

Competition and war

The 1930s witnessed an intensification of the competition and commercial rivalry that had developed in the 1920s, and there are countless amusing anecdotes that frequently gloss over the fact that it was a deadly serious and cut-throat game. Recognising this, four of the companies banded together in 1937 and set up a trade association – The Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland (NRA). Its aims were to resolve industry-wide problems and to promote and protect their collective interests. A year later British Paramount News joined the Association.

The coming of war in 1939 saw the establishment of a press censorship system. Whereas in peacetime the newsreels had not been subject to cinema censorship⁶, the newsreels in wartime were covered by the press censorship that was managed by the Ministry of Information. During the conflict the newsreels, aided by the NRA, acted together in their relations with government, and evolved a pool system (called the 'rota system') that enabled the companies to cover all of the major operational theatres of the conflict without wastefully deploying scarce personnel and resources. Several officially-produced newsreels also emerged for exhibition in the operational war theatres. Newsreel running times during the war were strictly controlled: each issue was limited to 700 feet (about 7 minutes) in order to conserve scarce film stock. Only at the end of the 1940s did newsreel issues reach their pre-war running lengths, after restrictions on film stock supply were removed.

Post war

In 1947 MGM's Metro News emerged onto the scene, although seemingly only to enable it to share in the coverage of the 1948 London Olympics. The 1950s saw the newsreels under increasing stress from several different directions: costs continued to rise and the companies struggled to remain competitive. Also, some cinemas ceased taking newsreels – such as Sidney Bernstein's Granada cinemas stopped taking them in the late 1940s. But the biggest threat came from television. The emerging medium was able to offer effortless immediacy through pictures broadcast straight into viewers' homes. At the same time, cinema audiences were declining and tastes were changing. The newsreels did try to compete and Gaumont British News latterly experimented with the device of an on-screen reporter (Peter Lee). A striking example is provided by the edition of 9 September 1958 – Colour Bar Violence – in which the story includes a televisual style of reportage. However, the industry was in terminal decline. British Paramount News closed for ever on 10 February 1957. It was followed nearly two years later by both Gaumont British News and Universal News (29 January 1959), both were replaced by a cinemagazine called Look At Life. Pathe continued until February 1970 and British Movietone News ceased on 27 May 1979.

1 The company boasted a fleet of mobile sound recording vehicles and was owned jointly by the American Fox Movietone company and the British newspaper empire, Associated Newspapers.

2 Both of these titles were operated by British Pictorial Productions, which was affiliated to the Universal Film Company of America. Ownership passed into the domain of J Arthur Rank's General Cinema Finance Corporation: Universal in 1936.

3 Pathe was operated by the Associated British Picture Corporation and Warner Brothers

4 The company was owned by the Gaumont British Picture Corporation, which also owned Gainsborough Pictures. The company was also later acquired by J Arthur Rank.

5 The company was wholly owned by the American Paramount Pictures Inc..

6 All films except newsreels exhibited in cinemas were subject to censorship, which was exercised by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC). BBFC is now known as the British Board of Film Classification, a name change that it adopted in 1984 'to reflect the fact that classification plays a far larger part in the Board's work than censorship.'

Television News in the UK

Beginnings

Regular television services began in the UK on 2 November 1936. Broadcasting times were limited to two hours a day and were split equally between afternoons and evenings. In those early years there were no BBC-produced television news programmes. Instead, each week television broadcast on alternate evenings the latest Gaumont British News and British Movietone News cinema newsreels. Each evening's transmission ended with a recording of radio's nine o'clock news.

Television did, however, cover some news events. It did so as live outside broadcasts. The first such was on 12 May 1937, when BBC television broadcast live coverage of the return of King George VI's coronation procession from Westminster Abbey – from three camera positions at Hyde Park Corner. Television cameras had not been allowed inside the Abbey itself, although the service had been broadcast live worldwide by radio. A year later the return of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to Heston aerodrome on 30 September 1938, from the four-power Munich Conference on the Sudeten crisis was covered live. That transmission was an early a television / radio 'simulcast' with commentary on both media given by Richard Dimbleby among others. Recording of the television coverage was not possible due to technical limitations of the equipment then in use, although the radio broadcasts were recorded⁷.

In spite of its potential the coming of war saw the television service suspended on 1 September 1939, partly due to concern that transmission equipment might aid enemy bombers to find targets.

After the Second World War

Television services resumed on 7 June 1946 and a day later broadcast live television coverage of the victory parade in London. There were then about 15,000 households that had a television licence. From 1946 until 1954 television news as such was simply a relay of the late-evening radio news accompanied by a still picture of a clock in vision. However, this was supplemented from 5 January 1948 by the regular broadcasting of the television newsreel. That was a BBC-produced newsreel, which adopted many of the conventions of the cinema newsreels, although it was expected by executives to be devoid of the humour that characterised its cinema counterparts. Some of the personnel who produced it had been recruited from the cinema newsreel companies, a fact occasionally registered in the NRA's minutes.

Initially, one edition of the newsreel was produced each week. It was broadcast on Monday and Wednesday evenings, Saturday afternoons and evenings. Unlike its cinema counterparts the programme was longer: each edition ran for about 10-15 minutes and comprised fewer discrete items. Later bi-weekly editions were produced. Its coverage of the war in Korea lent the newsreel a more serious edge. From 1951 a programme called *Newsreel Review of the Week* was also introduced. That was broadcast on Sunday evenings. It showed selected stories from the previous week's newsreels and was introduced by Edward Halliday, who sometimes appeared in vision.

News 'in vision' did not arrive on British television until 7.30 pm on 5 July 1954, when an 'illustrated summary of the news' was first broadcast. The 10-minute long BBC programme was called *News and Newsreel*; and Richard Baker was the first newsreader. Initially, the newsreaders did not appear on screen following concerns that they if they did it might lead to the news becoming in some way personalised. The BBC continued at that time to uphold its objective of broadcasting 'the news of the day accurately, fairly, soberly and impersonally'. Instead the programme made use of still images in vision, accompanied by some film. BBC newsreaders did not appear in vision until the beginning of September 1955, just weeks before the launch of ITV's promised revolutionary news coverage.

Birth of Independent Television and ITN

The BBC's charter was due for renewal by Parliament in 1946. Almost as soon as the second world war had ended there were rumblings about whether the BBC's monopolistic broadcasting position should be ended. Prime Minister Clement Attlee's government indicated that renewal would not be

⁷ The cinema newsreels also covered the event and Gaumont British News coverage is available via Newsfilm Online.

accompanied by an extensive review like that which had taken place in 1936⁸, a decision that drew much criticism. Ultimately, an extensive review of the BBC was carried out between 1949 and 1951 by a committee chaired by Lord Beveridge, which concluded that the Corporation should neither be broken up nor be subjected to competition⁹. One of the committee's members, the conservative MP Selwyn Lloyd, disagreed with these conclusions and issued a minority report recommending the end of the BBC's broadcasting monopoly. When the Conservatives won the 1951 election Lloyd's ideas were gradually incorporated into government policy. Over the next three years, and following two broadcasting white papers, the government introduced a bill which, when passed in July 1954, would see the establishment of an independent television network, which was to be overseen by an Independent Television Authority (ITA)¹⁰.

The ITA began work on 4 August 1954 and immediately set about the task of inviting bids for ITV's regional broadcasting contracts. In October 1954 it began consideration of the new channel's news provision. After much debate, during which it was advised by a committee that included an ex-newsreel senior executive, the ITA decided that news bulletins ought to run for thirteen and-a-half minutes and should be delivered by 'personality newsreaders'. The news company would initially be owned and operated by the four successful ITV contractors, although the ITA would also have a strong stake. The new company, Independent Television News Ltd. Was formally set up on 4 May 1955, although its first Editor-in-Chief, Aidan Crawley, a former broadcaster and junior minister in Clement Attlee's government, was actually been appointed on 8 February 1955.

Crawley had studied how television news was delivered in the USA and began translating what he had learned into practice. He believed that television news should be visual and, in contrast to the BBC's newsreaders, wanted his presenters, who would be called newscasters, to be journalists. They would share in writing and compiling the news and adapt the scripts to suit their natural speaking patterns. Crawley wanted the news to have a human touch and was keen that like its Fleet Street counterparts the journalists should not shy away from 'scoops' and 'exclusives'. Crawley was also keen that the journalists should interview news personalities in a direct and pointed way and that they should follow up evasive responses. No longer were politicians and personalities to be accorded gentle, deferential interviews. The new team also pioneered the 'vox pop' in which ordinary citizens were canvassed for their opinions.

ITN's first news programme was broadcast at 10.00pm on the new channel's opening night, 22 September 1955. The first newscaster was Christopher Chattaway. Its new approach to television news won early critical and audience approval and had an impact on how BBC television news itself subsequently developed.

Almost as soon as the new company went on air ITN's shareholder companies exerted pressure for the bulletin running times to be reduced, for the company's costs to be trimmed back, and made it clear that they did not support Crawley's desire to extend ITN's remit to include current affairs programmes. The ITV companies saw current affairs programming being firmly within their territory. Ultimately Crawley felt that he had no option but to resign and he did so on 13 January 1956. That evening the Chair of the ITA, Sir Kenneth Clark, was interviewed about the resignation by ITN's Robin Day live on air in the 22.45 ITN news bulletin. While the encounter was not recorded for posterity the digitised script offers a glimpse of what it included, as the archived bulletin script includes the newscaster's typed introduction and one page of manuscript notes (see script PDF pages 2 and 3: the pages were archived out of order on the microfilm and that sequence has been retained in the digitised file).

8 The review had been carried out by the Ullswater Committee.

9 Beveridge's committee began work on 27 June 1949 and published its report on 18 January 1951.

10 Churchill's government first published a white paper on broadcasting in May 1952. It suggested that, for television, 'provision should be made to permit some element of competition' when the resources became available. This was followed a year later by a white paper on broadcasting policy which recommended that a public corporation should be established that would control the standards programmes that would be made by a number of privately financed companies, who would be allowed to sell advertising time, but not programme sponsorship. The proposed new public corporation would also own and operate the transmitter network. The proposals were debated in Parliament in late 1953 and a Bill was published on 4 March 1954, finally achieving the Royal Assent on 30 July 1954.

With Crawley gone ITN quickly recruited an experienced Fleet Street journalist as its next editor-in-chief: Geoffrey Cox. Cox, who had been a foreign correspondent for the Daily Express before the second world war, and after it had taken a senior post with the News Chronicle. He brought to the company a hard news 'nose' and was sympathetic with Crawley's approach. Cox was to stay with the company for twelve years and oversaw its development into an established news broadcaster.

In the year that Cox arrived two international crises developed that provided opportunities for the new company to establish its credentials. From the early summer through until the end of the year a crisis centred around the Suez Canal developed. Cox had discovered that it was possible to extend the time allotted to the late evening news bulletin. He exploited that to ensure that both Suez and the other crisis, Hungary, were well covered and attracted audiences eager to learn and see more, including footage back from the Port Said and the Hungarian border.

Political coverage

The coverage of political issues by television was a sensitive issue, particularly in the 1950s and the new medium developed. Politicians of all sides were concerned that television, being a powerful medium of communication, might eclipse the role of Parliament by becoming an alternative debating chamber. After the second world war a 'gentleman's agreement' between the political parties led to the creation of a device called the 14-day rule. Under it television was banned from covering or commenting on any political issues that were going to be debated in Parliament during the coming 14 days. That was extended to inviting MPs to discuss on air any Bill that was before either house. With the advent of ITV it became a formal rule. Suez, however, was too big an issue to work within the rule; and ITN ignored it; and every interview that ITN carried out broke it. When the rule was before Parliament for renewal in early 1957 its illogic was clearly evident and it was dropped. The rule's disappearance coincided with ITN's pioneering of a more aggressive and expansive coverage of politics.

Soon after Suez, and through the adoption of an incremental process, ITN began developing ways of covering elections. Initially the company was cautious and was careful to avoid encroaching upon what was considered to be the political parties' territory. It carefully planned its early coverage, by using by elections as a test bed. Throughout 1957 and 1958 the company increasingly found its feet and identified the things that worked, and those that didn't. Its coverage quickly evolved into one that is immediately recognisable as a prototype of the coverage with which audiences are familiar today. By all accounts the political parties considered the coverage to have been fair, and this enabled television to develop further its coverage of elections. Newsfilm Online has digitised some of that early by election coverage:

- *South Lewisham by election*, 14 February 1957, reporter: George Ffitch.
- *Carmarthen by election*, 28 February 1957; reporter: George Ffitch.
- *Ipswich by election*, 24 October 1957; reporter: Robin Day
- *Rochdale by election*, 12 February , 1958; reporter: Reginald Bosanquet.

The lessons learned in covering the by elections were to prove invaluable preparation for ITN in covering its first general election, which was held in October 1959. It did so by bringing reports from several constituencies, prepared for an election night all-night programme to report the results, and interviewed the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan two days before the election. In that he was finally asked to describe the 'actual mechanics' of resuming the reins of power, if he were to be successful. He smiled and said, 'I don't do anything! That's what's so splendid about it. I don't even have to shift my house ...'

By 1963 television's role in covering elections had become accepted to such an extent that, during the by election that was being contested by Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the prospective Prime Minister, the Liberal Party candidate's refusal to be interviewed or filmed did not stop the television coverage.

Party conferences

ITN experimented with its coverage of political party conferences. It wanted to provide detailed reports and broadcast special programmes each evening, using film of the day's proceedings that had

been rushed back to London. Its coverage of several day's proceedings of the 1956 Labour and Conservative party conferences has been digitised by Newsfilm Online. The reports include footage of speeches (with natural sound), introductions, links and interviews conducted by Robin Day. The first day of the Labour Party conference included an interview with the only speaker from the floor to oppose party policy and to advocate the taking of military action against Egypt.

The last day of the Conservative Party Conference (13 October) included long coverage of Prime Minister Anthony Eden's speech and, afterwards, a number of short interviews and vox pops with delegates including, Lady Clarissa Eden, Lady Antonia Fraser and William Rees-Mogg.

The coverage was all shot on film which had to be rushed back to London for processing and editing before broadcast, so only morning and early afternoon sessions were reported each day. ITN shot was a mixture of sound (speakers and interviews / vox pops) and mute film (for cut-aways and audience reaction shots). ITN's then editor, Geoffrey Cox, later wrote that he accepted that there was an element of cheating in the coverage, but argued that it was legitimate, given the technical restrictions imposed by the equipment of the time.

Over the succeeding years ITN did venture into current affairs programming, with the launch of a half-hourly series called Roving Report. It first appeared in March 1957 and was broadcast weekly with a few exceptions until November 1964 when it was replaced by a new programme called ITN Reports. The new weekly programme ran until December 1965, when it in turn was replaced by Reporting '66. In January 1967 the programme was restyled Reporting '67. The full surviving archives for those programmes have been digitised and are accessible to users of Newsfilm Online.

Interviews

ITN is frequently cited as a pioneer of a new, considerably less-deferential, style of interviewing; and Newsfilm Online has digitised some of them, including a series of interviews that Robin Day conducted from Suez in late November and early December 1956 and an interview with Lord Altrincham that he conducted by Robin Day on 6 August 1957. Altrincham had earlier published an article in which he had criticised Queen Elizabeth II for lacking the wit and 'star quality' that the country needed¹¹. As he reached the street after leaving the studios he was smacked across the face by a member of the League of Empire Loyalists.

A landmark interview was Robin Day's 18-minute interview with the Egyptian president Nasser, which was broadcast on 1 July 1957, at a time when diplomatic relations between Britain and Egypt had not been restored. The interview had considerable impact, both nationally and internationally.

ITN also pioneered the use of live studio interviews in the bulletins: they added an element of topicality, spice and the unexpected. They soon became a regular feature of ITN's news bulletins.

International coverage

ITN was keen to ensure that it was able to cover international stories, allowing for its slim financial resources. The company sent out its own film crews to capture the big and developing news stories: for instance, its reporter Brian Connell covered events in Paris in May 1958, where political events were pointing to a return to power of Charles de Gaulle. Connell covered de Gaulle's press conference (translating the general's remarks on the fly) and a demonstration in which he interviewed its leaders while they were marching. One of its stringers (freelance cameramen) managed to film the landing in Beirut of battle-prepared US marines in 1958. The troops landed on a pleasure beach among bemused onlookers and children. There are countless other examples of ITN's international coverage available for download from Newsfilm Online, including footage of aircraft blown up by Palestine Liberation Front guerillas in Dawson's field, Jordan, in 1970 and Michael Nicholson's 1974 report from Cyprus that shows Turkish paratroopers in the course of landing to occupy part of the island. These reports have all been digitised by Newsfilm Online and are available for download.

¹¹ Lord Altrincham (John Grigg) made numerous criticisms of the Queen, particularly what he saw as her stilted personality and unnatural way of speaking. The article appeared in Altrincham's magazine *National and English Review*, caused a huge amount of controversy at the time, and the BBC initially refused to even report the story. Following this interview with Robin Day, Altrincham was smacked in the face, outside Television House, by a member of the conservative group, the League of Empire Loyalists, who hit the Lord with the cry 'Take that from the League of Empire Loyalists!'.

Perhaps one remarkable piece of film shot by ITN was a deliberate re-staging of the invasion of Sinai by Egyptian armed forces. It was arranged specially for ITN – at a cost of countless £millions to the Egyptian defence ministry – and was carried as a special report in News At Ten on 16 July 1974. The reporter was Keith Hatfield.

Other programmes

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ITN also produced other programmes, such as Impact – the programme that carried the Lord Altrincham interview – and also produced programmes for some of the regional ITV companies. For instance, in 1961 it was asked by the weekday London area franchise holder, Associated Rediffusion, to produce a short news programme focussing on London's news stories, to follow the late networked news bulletin each weekday night. The programme was called Dateline, and it ran until the mid 1960s, but soon matured into a 15-minute single story news analysis programme.

News At Ten

According to Geoffrey Cox, ITN argued for some years with its ITV shareholders that it should have the opportunity to produce longer news bulletins that would provide space to report the background to some of the news stories. Early in 1967 the ITV companies announced their agreement. The result was News At Ten, which when it was launched on 3 July 1967, was trailed as a new approach to news programming, presented by two newscasters and the promise of longer news reports and live studio interviews. After early mixed critical reactions the programme matured into an authoritative mainstay of British news broadcasting, ultimately coming to be regarded by many as a British institution. The ITV companies periodically sought to move the programme to a different time slot, as they felt that it interfered with their programming schedules, but they were successfully resisted by ITN, with support for the public, critics and on some occasions politicians and Parliament. The programme achieved an uninterrupted run of 32 years. It was finally replaced in March 1999 by ITV's Nightly News, a programme that was scheduled to go on air at 10.30pm or later. In the years since the demise of News At Ten the ITV network saw audience levels for the successor half-hour news programmes fall. In January 2008, ITV and ITN reintroduced News At Ten.

ITN Lunchtime News

When ITN launched in 1955 lunchtime news programmes were a feature of its scheduling. However, as the years advanced lunchtime news programmes disappeared from the schedules, except at weekends, when they were embedded into ITV's Saturday sports coverage and Sunday afternoon family broadcasting. They disappeared completely from schedules in the second half of the 1960s. Finally, on 16 October 1972 ITN launched a new weekday lunchtime news programme. It was initially called First Report and ran for 20 minutes and went on air at 12.40pm each weekday. Its presenter was Robert Kee and the programme soon acquired an authority and gravitas. The programme shifted to a 1pm time slot in September 1974 and in September 1976 was re-named News At One and extended to run for a full half-hour, with Lenard Parkin as the presenter. The programme and its successors, allowing for changes in presentation style and broadcast timing, is still a feature of weekday television schedules.

Channel 4 News

There had been a growing debate that independent television should have a opportunity to open a second television channel. With that debate won and legislation put in place by Margaret Thatcher's government, Channel 4 was launched on 2 November 1982. The same evening saw the first transmission of the Channel's 55-minute long news programme. The channel had awarded ITN the contract for producing the programme but said that it wanted it to be different from other television news programmes. Initially the programme's ratings were poor, as the programme struggled to find a

format and approach that was consistent with what Channel 4 wanted. However, after a change of editor and a complete overhaul the programme began to develop its own style and voice and, more importantly, to grow its audience. Channel 4 News went on to become an award-winning news programme with a reputation for providing penetrating news analysis and authoritative journalism. The Channel gradually added weekend news bulletins to its schedule and early in the new century lunchtime bulletins became a regular feature of its schedules as well.

Channel five

Channel 5 was famously launched on 31 March 1997 by the Spice Girls. ITN won the contract to supply the channel's news programming. Five News adopted a studied presentational informality, including dispensing with a mainstay of news studios, the newscaster's desk. The channel saw that as a prop on which newscasters perched, rather than sat behind. In late 2004, the contract was re-tendered and was awarded to Sky News. ITN's involvement ceased at the end of that year.

Rolling 24-hour news

ITN's board agreed that the company should launch a digital rolling news channel to run on satellite, cable and latterly Freeview. With a modest operating budget ITN News Channel opened on 1 August 2000. It re-launched in 2004 but was never able to make a significant income and it finally closed on 23 December 2005, surrendering its channel to ITV 4. Since its closure the company has not ruled out the possibility that it could reappear at some point in the future.

- The company launched a news channel specially formulated for mobile telephones – ITN News for mobile – in October 2006.