

ITV's 2006 CSR report

## Elephants still in the room

By Kathee Rebernak

**ITV's fourth corporate responsibility report is as enlightening through what it skips as through what it says**

UK television broadcaster ITV's 2006 corporate responsibility report is crisp, colourful, and mercifully short.

In just 36 pages containing full-colour photo spreads and cartoon-like illustrations, ITV addresses issues such as "responsible programming", diversity and its contribution to the "creative economy". A careful reading, however, raises questions on whether ITV has really examined many of the broader issues of responsible journalism.

### On the issues that count...

For a media company, issues of impartiality, sensationalism, critical inquiry and analysis, and self-censorship are crucial. Yet ITV says little about these issues other than to note the regulatory requirements of accuracy and impartiality and to maintain that ITV's journalists, editors, and producers "are continually exercising their judgment in order to assess each programme's content". Examples are few, and those offered fail to apprise readers of the impartial exercise of such judgment.

Though the report features ITV's coverage of compelling social issues, including Alzheimer's disease, conservation and global warming, it is largely silent on ITV's coverage of one of the defining issues of our time: the Iraq war. As in the US, the UK media has been roundly criticised for its coverage of the Iraq war, and ITV and other broadcasters have been accused of covering mainly positive news from Iraq. Yet though ITV cites "extensive reporting of the Iraq conflict" and a "hard-hitting" piece about wounded soldiers as part of its international coverage, the report gives readers little sense of the depth or flavour of its war coverage.

A brief discussion of editorial judgment, leading with the comment that "news items can contain distressing images", raises the spectre of self-censorship. But ITV either fails to recognise self-censorship as an issue in its newsroom or refuses to acknowledge the possibility that it engages in the practice.

And despite the oft-raised issue of whether children can be harmed by watching too much television, as recent studies suggest, ITV sidesteps the issue entirely, discussing instead the programming on its recently launched children's channel. The discussion of advertising to children focuses only on ITV's efforts to comply with recently enacted restrictions and leaves stakeholders to wonder what position, if any, ITV holds on this issue.

In fact, ITV takes no position on such controversial issues as gambling, advertising propriety and age discrimination. Instead, it cites its compliance efforts and defers to the positions of regulators and consultants. For example, it relies on the Broadcast Advertising Clearing Centre, a consultancy that screens advertising for inappropriate content. The report does not disclose the number of complaints made against ITV-aired adverts but instead notes the number of complaints made against adverts screened by BACC, including those aired by other broadcasters. ITV seems not to exercise any independent judgment on whether an advert crosses the line, or runs dangerously close to it.

To its credit, ITV has established an operational group for managing corporate responsibility issues, has identified issues it considers material and actively engages with its stakeholders. A full-page spread in the back of the report identifies objectives for corporate responsibility management, advertising, the environment, employment, and other issues and reports performance against those objectives.

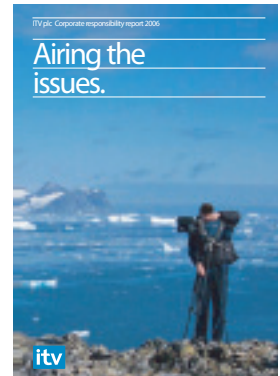
### Passing the buck

But on closer view, the objectives are largely compliance-driven, vague and qualitative. What's more, ITV is selective in presenting performance data. For example, the report offers comparable data from 2004 to 2006 for its charitable donations, but other indicators show data for only 2005 and 2006, though the company has been reporting since 2003. Indeed, ITV appears to disclose fewer indicators in its current report than in previous ones.

Other data is presented in a vacuum. For example, ITV presents company diversity figures without comparable country data. This kind of selectivity creates the impression that ITV is cherry-picking.

To help remedy these shortcomings, ITV should consider using the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines and should conduct a thorough materiality analysis to help prioritise issues.

It would be lovely if ITV took a hard look at its performance on some of the meatier issues facing today's media. And while we're at it, given the recent debate over offsets as a means of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, ITV might investigate whether its purchase of offsets for its trip to Antarctica for its "Big Melt" programme was the best course. It might make for a nice feature story. ■



### Snapshot

**Follows GRI?** No.  
**Assured?** Partially.  
**Goals?** Yes.  
**Targets?** Some.  
**Stakeholder input?** Yes, survey responses.  
**Seeks feedback?** Yes.  
**Key weaknesses:** Fails to address critical industry issues.  
**Pleasant surprise:** Dedication to diversity, on air and off.

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