

Whose Agenda?

The BBC Reporters' Log on the Iraq War

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One: Introduction

“It seemed to me a much more general attack... on the BBC... [Alistair Campbell] was saying that we had run an agenda against the war... These are very serious charges to make against a broadcasting organisation.”

Greg Dyke
Evidence to Hutton Inquiry, 15 September 2003

BBC Director General Greg Dyke has strenuously defended the BBC's coverage of the recent Iraq war, insisting it was fair and balanced. He has contrasted the BBC's absolute commitment to 'independence and impartiality' with the 'unquestioning' approach of the US media. "In the area of impartiality, as in many other areas, we must ensure we don't become Americanised," he said.¹

A similar line has been taken by other BBC journalists and managers. An unsigned article on the BBC website suggested that some of the British public had 'bowed to patriotism' since the war started. However, it quoted two experts, Professor Frank Furedi of the University of Kent and media analyst, Phil Taylor to support the thesis that British media coverage was uniquely even-handed and balanced.²

The BBC political editor, meanwhile, told the Sunday Telegraph that British government ministers "seem to think anyone taking a balanced view is a friend of Baghdad."³ Rageh Omaar, writing in the same newspaper, claimed that he "chuckles" to himself when he hears criticisms of BBC bias. "The allegations that we are being seduced by a slick Iraqi propaganda machine are way off the mark," he claimed.

The BBC, however, has failed to stem criticism of its war reporting. Conservative Party culture spokesman, John Whittingdale,⁴ for example, claimed that, "People inside the BBC who are opposed to the conflict are imposing their own views." Alastair Campbell argued to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee that, "In the run-up to conflict there was an agenda in large parts of the BBC ... and there was a disproportionate focus upon, if you like, the dissent, the opposition, to our position. I think that in the conflict itself the prism that many were creating within the BBC was ... it is all going wrong." The Daily Telegraph joined in:

¹ The Guardian (2003): Dyke attacks 'unquestioning' US media. Guardian, 24 April.

² BBC News (2003): Doing the Dissent Thing. BBC News Online, 2 April

³ Daily Telegraph (2003): Labour Chairman says BBC is acting like friend of Baghdad. Daily Telegraph, 30 March.

⁴ Guardian (2003): BBC editorial rules spark accusations of anti-war bias. Guardian, 7 March

“Listening to the World Service, I thought we were losing ...If Saddam Hussein listens to the BBC, he would be delighted. Any coalition soldier hearing the BBC’s coverage would probably want to go home.”⁵

This criticism provided an important context to the conflict between the government and the BBC over Andrew Gilligan’s claim that the government had knowingly published false claims about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction in order to “sex up” the case for war.

It is therefore timely to look back at the BBC’s war coverage and ask whether it met Greg Dyke’s high standards for independence and impartiality. If not, can claims that the BBC attempted to further an anti-war case through its coverage be substantiated?

The BBC Reporters’ Log

The sheer volume and diversity of BBC news output poses a considerable challenge for those attempting to analyse it. The problem is compounded by the difficulty in carrying out an objective assessment of the ‘tenor’ of any piece of journalism.

To solve these problems, we have turned to the BBC Reporters’ Log, which was hosted on the BBC News website between 19 March and 17 April 2003. The Reporters’ Log provided an opportunity for “the BBC’s unrivalled team of correspondents” to report “their impressions and personal experiences [of the war] as they watch events unfold.”

141 correspondents posted to the site a total of 1343 times, including senior BBC reporters such as John Simpson, Rageh Omaar, and Andrew Gilligan. The complete log runs to 140,000 words. Reports were sent from a considerable variety of locations, including from within Iraq, from allied bases, and from capital cities around the world.

On the evening of 20 March 2003, for example, there were posts from the following reporters, at the following times and locations: Peter Hunt : 2345GMT Doha, Qatar; Adam Mynott: 2237GMT Northern Kuwait; Andrew Marr: 2235GMT EU summit, Brussels; Ben Brown: 2234GMT Northern Kuwait; Ryan Dilley: 2212GMT Kuwait City; David Willis: 2217GMT Iraq - Kuwaiti border; Gavin Hewitt: 2212GMT Iraq - Kuwaiti border; Ryan Dilley: 2125GMT Kuwait City; Nick Bryant: 2122GMT Washington; Andrew Marr: 2055GMT EU summit, Brussels; Nicholas Witchell: 2037GMT Doha, Qatar; Gavin Hewitt: 2037GMT Kuwaiti - Iraqi border; Paul Wood: 2021GMT Baghdad; Hilary Andersson: 1922GMT Northern Kuwait; Tim Franks: 1906GMT Northern Kuwait; Paul Wood: 1807GMT Baghdad.

The Reporters’ Log offers the following advantages for analysis:

- It provides a continuous narrative from the beginning of the war to its end, told from many points of view and different perspectives.
- BBC correspondents report their impressions directly to the audience, allowing appraisal of the reporter’s basic assumptions.

⁵ Daily Telegraph (2003): Listening to the World Service, I thought we were losing. Daily Telegraph, 30 March

- The number of posts to the Reporter's Log allows quantitative analysis to be performed – and ensures that analysis will not be distorted by the occasional impulsive post.
- The nature of the medium means that archives are freely available in an electronic format that can be easily analysed.

Methodology

All 1343 posts to the BBC Reporters' Log were analysed. The majority of posts contained factual statements or accounts of reporters' personal experiences. Others, however, discussed strategy, Coalition and Iraqi claims, and the progress of the war. We focused on these latter posts, allocating them to 8 different categories as follows:

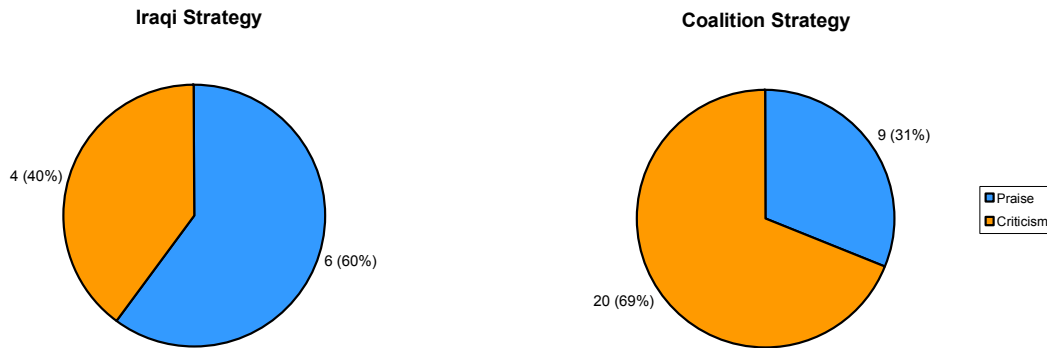
1. Praise for Coalition strategy
2. Criticism of Coalition strategy
3. Praise for Iraqi strategy
4. Criticism of Iraqi strategy
5. Coalition successes
6. Coalition setbacks
7. Scepticism over Coalition claims
8. Scepticism over Iraqi claims

The report is divided into 7 sections. The next section discusses posts dealing with Coalition and Iraqi strategy during the war. The third section looks at how the war progressed. Section four examines reporters' responses to claims made by Iraq and the Coalition respectively during the war, while section five discusses some of the more speculative statements made by reporters. Section six looks at accusations made by reporters, and a final section provides conclusions. An appendix shows each author's posts in each category.

Two: Strategy

Out of 1343 posts, 39 (2.9%) discussed Coalition and Iraqi strategy and tactics. Such a small number does not allow us to draw robust conclusions, but the pattern of the posts is striking. Out of 10 comments on Iraqi strategy, 6 are positive and 4 negative. Out of 20 comments on Coalition strategy, 9 are positive and 20 are negative (see chart 1).

Chart 1 – Strategy



Summing up their experiences during the war, Jonathan Marcus observed that, “this war went very well for the coalition” (Final Thoughts), and John Simpson (Final Thoughts) argued, “if military tactics alone could have settled the future of Iraq, this would have been an outstanding success.”

During the war, however, reporters were much more sceptical about Coalition strategy. A persistent theme was that Coalition strategy had failed to meet expectations, with military planners surprised by the nature or strength of Iraqi resistance:

The Pentagon has never seriously doubted that it would win this war, but central to the US strategy is the manner of victory - swift, decisive and relatively bloodless. That may not be how things turn out. (Jonathan Marcus, 27 March)

They didn't expect the level of harassment they are experiencing, nor did they expect the Fedayeen to fight so hard. They certainly didn't expect this kind of campaign with its hit and run tactics. (Gavin Hewitt, 29 March)

Clearly the coalition think these have dual use, or military use, but hitting the telephone exchanges will not do anything to bring the civilian population on side. The clear message from the coalition to the Iraqi people is: "You are not the enemy. We want regime change and are not here to harm the Iraqi people". But if you start plunging the city into darkness, cutting off the water, bringing down the telephone exchanges and generally making life difficult for people, then I think the nature of the struggle will start to change. (Paul Wood, 30 March)

That has been the story of Nasiriya, American over-confidence unravelling day by day as they struggle to get to grips with Iraqi guerrilla tactics. (Andrew North, 31 March)

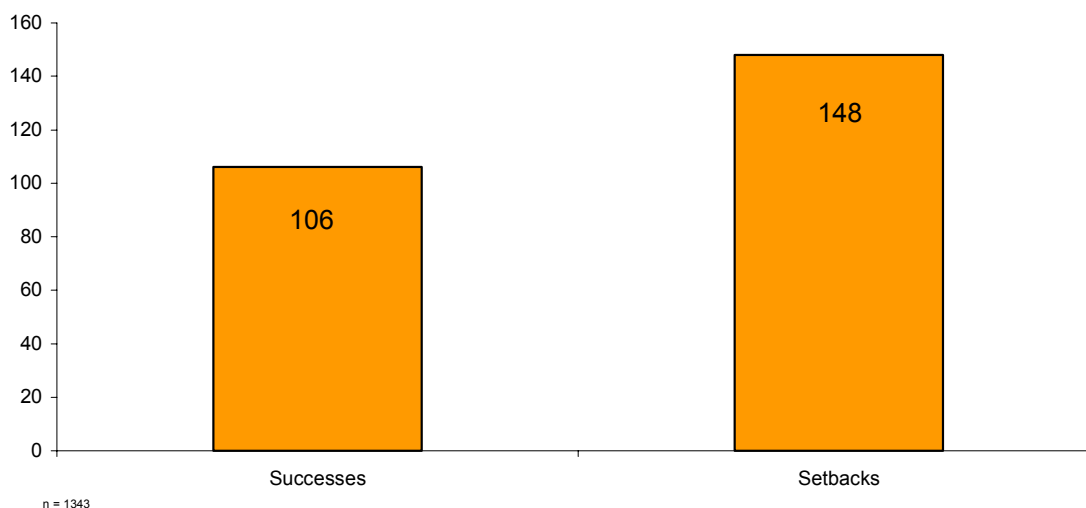
This mad dash towards Baghdad seems to be forgotten about now it is all about moving slowly and cautiously towards the capital. (David Willis, 1 April)

I know there's been a lot of wishful thinking in the Coalition in all sorts of ways.
(Andrew Gilligan, 2 April)

Three: The progress of the war

Unsurprisingly, there was a much larger number of posts discussing the progress of the war. 254 posts report or assess the Coalition's successes and setbacks (see chart 2), with 42% outlining successes and 58% focusing on setbacks encountered by US and UK forces.

Chart 2 – Coalition Successes and Setbacks



Setbacks are reported in more detail than successes, despite the fact that victory was achieved at high speed and with relatively light casualties.

Residents of As-Shaarb - where several people died in a market place last night - ... are in no doubt, as are the Iraqi authorities, that this was an attack on civilians. Whatever the truth - of how this bomb or missile came to land on As-Shaarb and who it belonged to - this is already a propaganda victory for the Iraqi authorities.
(Paul Wood, 9 April)

The deaths of women and children at the hands of American soldiers sits uneasily with the president's promise, repeated publicly on Monday, that the war would bring a better life for Iraqi civilians. (Steve Kingstone, 1 April)

Baghdad may in theory be free. But its people are passing their first days of liberty in a greater fear than they've ever known. (Andrew Gilligan, 11 April)

There is near anarchy in Baghdad now. (Andrew Gilligan, 11 April)

Many of the Coalition's successes, moreover, come with riders:

I think that if any of us put ourselves in the position of the Iraqi people, I don't think that any of us want an invading army and certainly nobody wants an occupying army. (Caroline Wyatt, 31 March)

People here don't like Saddam at all, but they don't like the Americans any more. (Andrew Gilligan, 1 April)

We must remind ourselves this is a 24-hour bombardment of the Iraqi capital. So where are the defenders? My guess is they have been secreted into the city in small units. (Rageh Omaar, 2 April)

People here do not see it as a war against the regime, they see it as war against Iraq. (Rageh Omaar, 2 April)

This is such a needy region it is very difficult to see how the British can restore that sense of law and order that was here before. (Caroline Wyatt, 4 April)

Four: Iraqi and Coalition claims

Iraqi claims

During the war, BBC Director General Greg Dyke argued that BBC journalists were not being censored by their Iraqi minders ("They did not interfere with what was being broadcast", he said in a speech at Goldsmith's College on 24 April).

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, however, one of its reporters cast doubt on this claim: "You had to report what the Iraqis were saying, yet a lot of it was clearly bare-faced lies" (Paul Wood, 17 April). This accords with the experience of other broadcasters, who revealed after the war the extent of the measures they were forced to take in order to remain in Baghdad.⁶

As a result, there are surprisingly few expressions of scepticism about Iraqi claims (see chart 3):

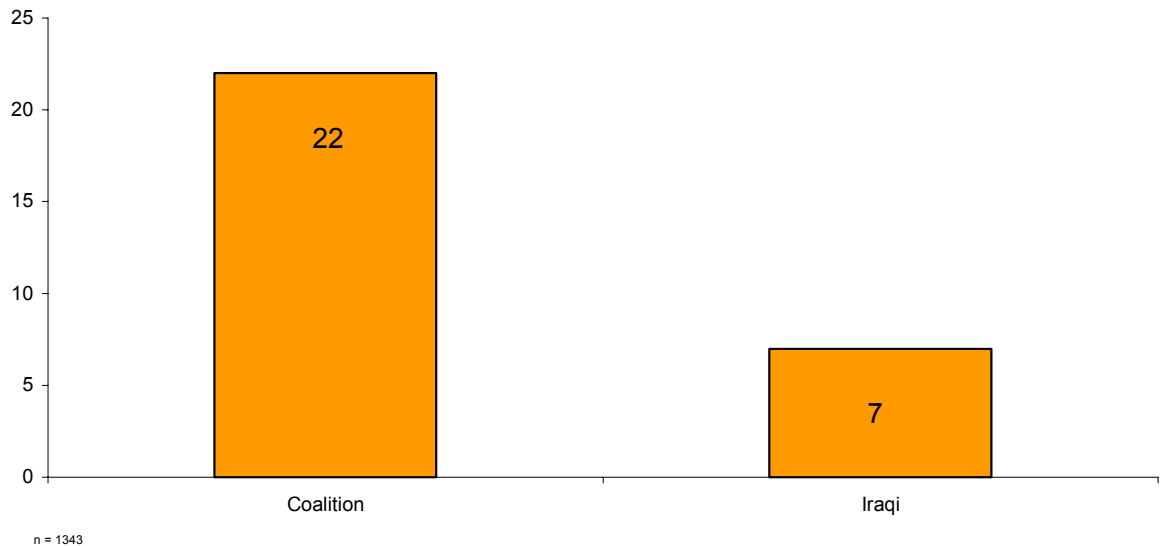
At one stage the Iraqi authorities claimed there were 6000 of these Arab volunteers. I don't think there was anything like that. (Paul Wood, 10 April)

There has been a remarkable performance by the Iraqi Information Minister who came on to the BBC roof to deny the coalition forces were here...the residents remain petrified and they have been fleeing. (Andrew Gilligan, 7 April)

One has to have a fairly sceptical eye on what [Amir al-Saadi] has to say, because what the Iraqis want is to maintain the moral high ground. (Malcolm Brabant, 15 April)

⁶ Eason Jordan New York Times op-ed (2003): The News We Kept To Ourselves. New York Times 11 April.

Chart 3 – Scepticism over claims



It is interesting how few appearances are made by the Iraqi Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, even though he was a key source for those reporters based in Baghdad, and was to become a figure of ridicule for his increasingly exaggerated press conferences. Much of what al-Sahaf said during the war is reported without comment:

The picture painted by the Iraqi Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf is of Iraqi forces pounding the Americans, driving them back. (Paul Wood, 6 April)

The Iraqi authorities have denied the successes claimed by coalition forces as they advance to within 30 kilometres of Baghdad. An Iraqi military spokesman said the Baghdad division of the Republican Guard had not been destroyed near Kut as reported. The information minister said there had been no crossing of the River Tigris. (Paul Wood, 2 April)

Coalition claims

No such inhibitions are found, however, when Coalition claims come under the spotlight. 22 of the posts (chart 3) raise serious doubts over the veracity of US and UK statements. Andrew Gilligan is the leading critic, but others also weigh in:

This was President Bush trying to take the high moral ground for the coalition forces - I think President Bush was all about justifying this war when he made his radio address earlier. (Philippa Thomas, 29 March)

There is simply no truth in the claims that American troops are surrounding [the airport]. (Andrew Gilligan, 3 April)

The Americans have been very keen today to trumpet the actions of their special forces. (Paul Adams, 3 April)

The US has a history of premature claims in this conflict. (Andrew Gilligan, 5 April)

We don't know if it's all under control but for once we can believe the US claims - this could be it. (Andrew Gilligan, 7 April)

Reporters also point out that information from both sides is likely to be propaganda, to be treated with equal suspicion:

It is in the interest of both sides to make wild and unrealistic claims of their successes. (Andrew Gilligan, 5 April)

In a sense it's quite crude propaganda - of course there is propaganda going on everywhere - but it's particularly crude on Iraqi television. (Mike Baker, 2 April).

Five: Speculation

The extent to which BBC reporters are prepared to engage in speculation about the war's progress and its likely outcome is notable. In most cases, this speculation is negative in tone:

Despite American hopes for the Guard's destruction, the bombing may not have the desired effect. After seven weeks of intensive pounding, the Serb army emerged from Kosovo almost intact. (Andrew Gilligan, 31 March)

I think Tikrit will be the last stand and a very violent one at that when it comes. (Dumeetha Luthra, 11 April)

Some correspondents are quick to read the mood of the Iraqi people:

The Iraqis are saying [the dust storm] has been sent by God to save them. They may not like Saddam a whole lot, but they dislike the Americans even more. (Andrew Gilligan, 27 March)

However, America isn't really popular here. Today they might be cheered, tomorrow it might be a different story. (Paul Wood, 9 April)

What the crowds are saying is, "We are glad that Saddam Hussein is gone or going - but we don't like the Americans, and what we want is to be able to rule our own lives". (Paul Wood, 9 April)

However, reports become more positive as the invasion moves into its final phase:

The reports we're getting suggest that the Americans coming into Baghdad were hailed as liberators. There were crowds celebrating, giving flowers to the troops, locals coming out to shake their hands. (David Willis, 9 April)

The Americans have been greeted with pretty open arms. There is some jubilation from crowds in the streets. But there's already signs of some looting here and this is evidently going to be a problem in the coming days. (David Loyn, 12 April)

This ability to ascribe emotions – positive or negative – to amorphous groups of 'people' is somewhat suspect, as is best revealed by this rather comical aside from Andrew Gilligan:

We went down to the market yesterday and people said they thought it was more of the same from Centcom. (3 April)

Whatever Iraqis were saying that day, we rather doubt these exact words came out of *anyone's* mouth.

Six: Accusation

Three incidents serve to highlight particular features of the BBC's reporting: the capture of Baghdad's airport, the role of Donald Rumsfeld in planning for the war, and allegations that the Coalition was deliberately targeting journalists.

The capture of Baghdad airport

Andrew Gilligan is one of a number of journalists to cover conflicting claims about the fate of Baghdad's airport. On 3 April at 0906 GMT, Gilligan notes that Reuters is reporting that "US forces have started to arrive in the vicinity of the Saddam International Airport, *which if true*, means they are 10 - 15 miles to the west or south west of the city." [emphasis added]

However, he is then taken to the airport by his Iraqi minders. At 1513 GMT, he reports that "within the last 90 minutes I've been at the airport. There is *simply no truth* in the claims that American troops are surrounding it. We could drive up to it quite easily. The airport is under full Iraqi control."

The airport was taken early the next day by troops who had, indeed, been surrounding it. However, Gilligan continues to argue that his original 'line' was justified: "From our end, the airport story isn't over yet. We have *extremely reliable reports* that the airport road remains in Iraqi hands, and troops have defensive positions with their guns ready. Also, that large numbers of reinforcements are pouring down that road. So although we think the US may well indeed control significant parts of the airport, the story really isn't over there yet."

He makes no further posts on the issue, failing to clarify the role of Iraqi information staff in shaping his earlier reporting. "The airport story" may not have been over, but Gilligan no longer followed it. Taken as a whole, his reporting seems confrontational – at once cynical of Coalition claims but trusting of information provided to him by his Iraqi media minders.

Rumsfeld's role

BBC reporters seem particularly interested in applying pressure to US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld:

The risk for Donald Rumsfeld - what makes him slightly unusual - is that he has been intimately involved with the planning of this war strategy. Remember, he's a civilian and often secretaries of defence don't get as involved as Donald Rumsfeld has done. So it's quite unusual the degree to which he has sat down with the war commanders, with the officers and said, "This is the way I want this to go, this is my plan". (Katty Kay, 30 March)

It is interesting to compare Philippa Thomas's reporting of a Rumsfeld press conference with the conference's transcript. Thomas wrote:

That was one of the most animated Pentagon briefings I've seen in a long while. Donald Rumsfeld talking about his 'excellent, superb plan', saying that no one's backing away from the plan. (Philippa Thomas, 1 April)

However, the transcript clearly records Rumsfeld denying that it was 'his' plan ("I'm not the person who designs war plans"), but a plan controlled by General Tommie Franks to which he made a contribution ("The task was Tom Franks'. He did superbly, and he has then gotten us to all agree to it"). Whether or not the reporter believed this to be true, the distortion of Rumsfeld's actual quote – "I think it is a superb plan. I was involved" – is clearly irresponsible journalism.⁷

Shooting the messenger

As the war progressed, journalists within Baghdad became increasingly convinced that they were being targeted directly by the American military:

It's an attack on the journalists here. It's been expected for a long time - we've taken not to going to the information ministry at night because we believed it may be attacked. Even so I think it does take the targeting to a new phase. (Andrew Gilligan, 29 March)

It's been a very, very upsetting incident for all the journalists here. A time to take stock of the dangers of reporting this war. And hope that the targeting of journalists by whoever ceases. (Rageh Omaar, 8 April)

Indeed, some journalists appear to suspect that they have become central to the story:

At the outset there were critics of the process of "embedding" correspondents with US troops, We always wondered whether the American tanks would roll up in front of our live cameras in time for the American morning TV shows, and they just about have - 0845 on the East Coast, 0545 on the West Coast. It is more or less picture-perfect timing for the Americans. (Andrew Gilligan, 9 April)

Allegations that journalists were deliberately targeted have not, as yet, been substantiated. By giving them prominence, the BBC is vulnerable to accusations that some of its star reporters are crossing the line that separates reporting the news from making the news.

⁷ US Department of Defence (2003): News Briefing: Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers. April 1.

Conclusion

From our analysis of the BBC Reporters' Log, we have drawn out the following main findings:

- The BBC Reporter's Log provided an interesting and innovative perspective on the Iraq war, giving the reader a window on events as they developed. It told a story from multiple perspectives, drawing on the BBC's extremely varied reporting team.
- A quantitative analysis of entries in the Reporter's Log indicates that most reports are factual in nature, and do not contain comment or speculation on the nature and progress of the war.
- Reports that do include comment and speculation, however, are likely to be critical of Coalition strategy and to report Coalition setbacks. Reporters are also more likely to be sceptical about Coalition claims than Iraqi claims. This provides some evidence of bias.
- It is notable that many of the more provocative reports are made by the BBC's most high profile journalists, especially by those based in Baghdad. While most BBC journalists concentrate on objective factual reporting, others habitually adopt a more confrontational role. On occasion, this leads to exaggerated, speculative or incorrect stories, which seldom receive any correction.
- These findings call into question BBC attempts to try and originate more stories, in order to set the news agenda. Questions arise over whether the BBC can 'create' the news, while holding to the standards of impartiality and independence which its Director General sets for it.
- Given the importance of the media as an actor in national and international politics, the value of media analysis is clearly growing. This report provides some preliminary and illustrative findings. In doing so, it highlights the need for ongoing and sustained work in this area.

Appendix One – Categorised Posts by Authors

	Criticism of Iraq Strategy	Praise for Iraq Strategy	Criticism of Coalition Strategy	Praise for Coalition Strategy	Coalition Successes	Coalition Setbacks	Scepticism over Coalition Claims	Scepticism over Iraqi Claims	Total Posts
<i>Adam Mynott</i>			2		3	6	1		30
<i>Andrew Gilligan</i>			1	1	8	8	6	3	66
<i>Andrew North</i>					6	9			57
<i>Ben Brown</i>			1		3	2			13
<i>Caroline Hawley</i>						5			21
<i>Caroline Wyatt</i>				1	4	5			21
<i>Clive Myrie</i>					2	4			22
<i>David Willis</i>			1		2	6			48
<i>Dominic Hughes</i>	1			1	3		1		19
<i>Dumeetha Luthra</i>					6				30
<i>Gavin Hewitt</i>			2		6	3			44
<i>Hilary Andersson</i>		1			1	3			29
<i>John Simpson</i>	1	1	2	1	5	8			50

	Criticism of Iraq Strategy	Praise for Iraq Strategy	Criticism of Coalition Strategy	Praise for Coalition Strategy	Coalition Successes	Coalition Setbacks	Scepticism over Coalition Claims	Scepticism over Iraqi Claims	Total Posts
<i>Jonathan Marcus</i>	1	1	2	1	1	3	1		25
<i>Kylie Morris</i>					1	3	1		24
<i>Malcolm Brabant</i>					4	2		1	11
<i>Nicholas Witchell</i>				1	2	4	1		19
<i>Nick Childs</i>					1	5			38
<i>Paul Adams</i>			2	1	6	1			49
<i>Paul Wood</i>		1	2		5	15		3	95
<i>Peter Hunt</i>					2	11	2		33
<i>Rageh Omaar</i>		1	2		8	7	2		69
<i>Ryan Dilley</i>					2	4			24
<i>Grand Total</i>	3	5	17	7	81	114	15	7	837

Appendix Two – Report Authors

David Steven (www.davidsteven.com) is a writer and researcher. He is managing director of River Path Associates. He has published widely on a range of international policy issues, such as globalization, the business response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the reform of higher education systems in developing countries. He edited a groundbreaking website at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. He has recently written a pamphlet on the future of unionism in Northern Ireland for the Rowntree Charitable Trust and is working on a short introduction to international public health.

Mark Weston (www.markweston.net) researches and writes on issues of international development, mainly in the areas of governance, health, and education, for a variety of organizations. Papers or articles written in the past year have been published in *Liberal Education*, *The Taipei Times*, *Health, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction* (the report of Working Group 1 of the World Health Organisation's Commission on Macroeconomics and Health), *Reaching the Summit* (the UK government brochure for the World Summit on Sustainable Development), and a forthcoming UNCTAD book on globalisation. In summer 2003, Mark designed and wrote a course on the Foundations of Public Health for the Harvard School of Population and International Health.

River Path Associates (www.riverpath.com) is a policy consultancy, providing research, strategic counsel, and creative solutions to public, private and not-for-profit organisations in the UK and internationally.



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