

Tragedy in the fog of war

Richard Sambrook

“Setting out to improve, strengthen and learn from the experience of life’s events when they go wrong is a proper ambition. It is a stance of strength, not a weakness.” So begins the Neil report into the editorial lessons the BBC has drawn from the Hutton report. Life’s events have provided plenty of experience for those of us in BBC News over the last year. And they have contributed to a wide-ranging debate in the media about journalistic standards, impartiality and ethics. In an unusual outbreak of canine cannibalism we have a rash of books, articles and programmes criticising lack of accountability and poor standards across print, radio and TV. Is British journalism really in a parlous state? Let me share some reflections from within the BBC.

Long before Hutton it was apparent that a traditional notion of impartiality was now far harder to achieve than in past eras. There are many reasons for this, among them the breakdown of a traditional left-right political divide; the fragmentation of society; the growing lack of trust in institutions; increased competition in the media, leading to increased partisanship; a far greater supply of information, leading to greater questioning of editorial judgments and frameworks; and, as a consequence, a lively debate about the role of regulation in a market for information. Not surprisingly, the sheer pace of social change has led to a lack of clarity, among the public as well as practitioners, about what journalism is for. Does the traditional notion of impartial news still hold the same value? If so, how can it be achieved?

In the United States Michael Moore and Fox News may hurl ever-louder insults at their targets in the name of journalism, but in Britain broadcast news is required by law to be impartial. However, as Kevin Marsh, the editor

of Radio 4's *Today* programme, recently put it: "Impartiality has become the trickiest word in the modern journalist's vocabulary. In a simpler political age public expectations were clear and 'impartiality' was straightforward: don't back Heath, Callaghan or Thorpe and be careful with the balance between the CBI and TUC. For the on-air greats – the William Hardcastles and Robin Days – the trick was to find the midpoint and attack the right from the left and the left from the right. (An over-simplification, but not by much.)"

Those old simplicities no longer apply. As the old frameworks have broken down, concern about the BBC's impartiality, or lack of it, has grown in some quarters, usually allied to complaints that we no longer reflect all strands of thought or provide a full enough context to the issues of the day. As we often point out, the BBC is attacked simultaneously from many directions on some issues. If we can no longer argue that this proves we *are* balanced, it must at least prove any perceived bias is not straightforward.

However, I believe it's wrong to think of "impartiality" as some perfectly defined end-product – the pot of gold at the end of the journalistic rainbow, soundbites in precise celestial balance. Impartiality is far more about the way we conduct our journalism, an openness of mind and approach that ensures fairness and proportionality to a range of views. It is both how we conduct our journalism and how we are *seen* to conduct our journalism – an openness not just of mind, but of process as well. Taking the lid off the news machine and allowing people to peek inside, together with a culture of quickly admitting and correcting error, is now as essential to maintaining public confidence as the journalism itself.

The task for the BBC in the wake of Hutton was to reassure the public that a large and diverse journalistic community, ranging from BBC local radio, to national and international news, recognised the importance of this approach and would enact it. Ron Neil, a former director of BBC News, Richard Tait, the former editor-in-chief of ITN, and a group of senior and experienced editorial executives from across the BBC spent three months examining, in great detail, our editorial culture and processes. They praised the "formidable professionalism" that underlies our news programmes but offered sensible proposals on editorial guidelines, on the handling of complaints and on training. They also raised the question of values.

Journalists are notoriously uncomfortable talking about values, or principles. They tend to dismiss attempts to do so as either meaningless, or else as merely stating the obvious and therefore unnecessary. However, in the

time I spent with the Neil group, I was adamant that the start of rebuilding any lost reputation must be a clear statement of intent. In a noisy, crowded, complicated and competitive media world, clarity of purpose is of increasing importance – and for a public organisation like the BBC it defines the “public service difference” to the programmes we provide.

In looking at Lord Hutton’s findings it was also natural for BBC journalists to stand back and consider the other pressures under which they labour. The pressures of 24-hour live reporting and a never-ending news cycle; increased competition and the fear of damaging the BBC’s reputation by missing a story; the loss of the “gatekeeper” role for broadcast news editors as information is dispensed through so many outlets (now judgment can be coloured by the thought: “If I don’t run it, somebody else will”); commentary, chat and speculation becoming easier than reporting; verifying or investigating; the need for impact in a crowded market and more...

Need to be clear-headed

As the Columbia University professor James Carey commented about the same media pressures in the United States: “The problem is that you can see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications. What you yearn to do is to recover journalism from that larger world.” The BBC of course must perform in that wider communications world but, with its reputation resting heavily upon its news services, it cannot allow the quality of its journalism to be subsumed. It was essential, therefore, that the Neil Report did not simply redraw guidelines on live two-ways and note-taking, important though they are. It also had to throw out a lifeline. In the face of these growing pressures, and the mauling which followed Lord Hutton’s report, the BBC needed to be clear-headed about what its journalism sought to achieve, and how.

The starting point, which has so far been little noticed or discussed, was a clear articulation of editorial principles; the DNA which should drive all BBC journalism, the criteria which the BBC expects to be applied to editorial judgments whether in local radio, *The Ten O’clock News* or the World Service. It is the first time the BBC has done this, so forgive me for setting all five of them out in detail:

1. Truth and Accuracy

- We will always strive to establish the truth of what has happened as best we can.

- BBC journalism will be rooted in the highest possible levels of accuracy and precision of language.
- It will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, and thoroughly tested.
- Facts set in their context rather than opinion is the essence of BBC journalism.
- We will be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation.

2. Serving the Public Interest

- BBC journalism will prioritise and report stories of significance, striving to make them interesting and relevant to all our audiences.
- We will be vigorous in trying to drive to the heart of the story and well informed when explaining it.
- Specialist expertise will bring authority and understanding to the complex world in which we all live.
- We will be robust but fair and open-minded in asking searching questions of those who hold public office and in reporting that which it is in the public interest to reveal.
- The BBC's news and current affairs journalism will never campaign, but pursue journalistically-valid issues and stories without giving undue prominence to any one agenda.
- We will provide a comprehensive forum for public debate at all levels.

3. Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion

- For the BBC impartiality is a legal requirement.
- BBC journalists will report the facts first, understand and explain their context, provide professional judgments where appropriate but never promote their own personal opinions.
- Openness and independence of mind is at the heart of practising impartiality.
- We will strive to be fair and open-minded by reflecting all significant strands of opinion and by exploring the range and conflict of views.
- Testing a wide range of views with the evidence is essential if we are to give our audiences the greatest possible opportunity to decide for themselves on the issues of the day.

4. Independence

- The BBC is independent of both State and partisan interest and will strive to be an independent monitor of powerful institutions and individuals.
- We will make our journalistic judgments for sound editorial reasons, not as the result of improper political or commercial pressure or personal

prejudice.

- The BBC will always resist undue pressure from all vested interests and will jealously protect the independence of our editorial judgments on behalf of our audiences.

- Whatever groups or individuals may wish us to say or do we will make decisions based on the BBC's editorial values.

5. Accountability

- Our first loyalty is to the BBC's audiences to whom we are accountable. Their continuing trust in the BBC's journalism is a crucial part of our contract with them as licence payers.

- We act in good faith at all times by dealing fairly and openly with the audience and contributors to our output.

- We will be open in admitting mistakes when they are made, unambiguous about apologising for them and must encourage a culture of willingness to learn from them.

A dangerous virus

Not much to argue with there: verification, making the important interesting, diversity of views, independence and accountability. They may sound obvious, precious or even pious to some, but for a diverse community of several thousand journalists in the BBC they do help to answer the question: "What is BBC journalism for and how will it be achieved?"

If this all needs stating, does it follow that BBC journalism, as reflected in the Hutton report, is defective and in need of radical reform? No, not at all. I believe the issues identified by Hutton were singular and do not reflect a wider malaise. Indeed if there was such a malaise in an organisation broadcasting more than 100 hours of news programmes on radio and TV each day we would have encountered more extensive and more frequent problems by now.

The Neil report, as well as correcting what went wrong last year, provides a precautionary vaccination, an injection of best practice, at a time when many perceive a dangerous virus at large in British – and international – journalism. John Lloyd, in his book *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*, argues that an over-powerful media has become an alternative, unaccountable establishment which denigrates politics rather than supporting the democratic process. It is a powerful diatribe against what Lloyd sees as the current aggressive and dysfunctional relationship between

the media and politics. I believe he underplays the extent to which new-style politics in the 1990s carries some responsibility for the media's current posture. He's right, though, something is wrong. Both the media and politicians need to show a little more respect for the role and responsibilities of the other. Not least because, as we tussle in the Westminster playground, the public are growing bored and wandering off to find something else to do.

We can at least agree that the primary role of serious journalism is to help the public make informed choices and decisions about the world in which they live. We can probably agree on the principles of how it ought to work: tough questions which hold politicians to account, but not cynicism or sneering; challenge which helps elucidate, but not if it generates heat rather than light; investigation, analysis and explanation to illuminate what's not clear; examples that make the important interesting, but not which distort an issue, and so on. The problem arises in practice – was that question overly aggressive or was it seeking to cut through obfuscation? Are we right to explore one issue in detail at the cost of time in which to explore others? Is the relationship between the occupants of 10 and 11 Downing Street just gossip we should ignore, or does history suggest it's a key indication of the state of government? There are no easy or right answers, but clearly articulated editorial principles can help editors navigate through such conundrums.

The BBC's case for the renewal of its charter, *Building Public Value*, was published in the wake of what its new director-general called the biggest crisis for BBC journalism in 80 years. It pledges to “recapture the full trust of audiences and participants in BBC journalism”. The Neil report, and in particular the clear statement of those five BBC editorial principles, is the means of doing so, to be applied hour by hour, day in, day out.

Following both the Hutton and Butler inquiries, I am frequently asked what is my view now about what happened a year ago? I am not one of those who would argue that Andrew Gilligan was “mainly right”. In journalism “mainly right” is like being half pregnant – it's an unsustainable condition. The facts as they continue to emerge show we got some things right and we got one big thing wrong. At the time it seemed very complicated. On reflection, it was quite simple. *Today* set out to broadcast a report about genuine and, as we now know, well-founded reservations among parts of the intelligence community about the September 2002 Iraq dossier. That was the script which the programme approved. In a live interview Andrew Gilligan used a form of words which wrongly suggested bad faith on the part of the Government. The BBC, concentrating on what it had intended to broadcast,

was slow to recognise the significance of this departure from the script. Alastair Campbell launched a sweeping attack on the BBC before the Foreign Affairs Committee. From that point on there could be no happy ending. The Government was defending its integrity and the BBC was defending its independence. For each side, those two principles are non-negotiable, and it could only end badly. Part of the tragedy is that the BBC didn't set out to accuse the Government of bad faith and I don't believe the highest levels of Government set out to threaten the BBC's independence. It just seemed that way.

I recently watched Errol Morris's brilliant documentary *The Fog of War*, where former US defence secretary Robert McNamara reflects on the 1960s. At one point he talks about the Tonkin Gulf incident, where two American destroyers reported being torpedoed by the North Vietnamese. The Americans believed it was a major escalation. President Johnson went to Congress and obtained approval to increase bombing – and the Vietnam War took off. The only problem, as McNamara recalls, was that the destroyers hadn't been under attack at all. The “torpedoes” were just shadows on the sonar. A chimera. “We were wrong, but we had in our minds a mindset that led to that action and it carried such heavy costs,” McNamara says. “We see incorrectly or we see only half the story at times. We see what we want to believe. Belief and seeing – they are both often wrong.”

Watching the film I had a pronounced sense of *déjà vu* – applicable to the BBC as much as to government. Belief and seeing are both often wrong. And what those of us involved in last year's events can never forget is the other part of the tragedy, when in the fog of this particular war a good man died.

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