

## British Journalism *Review*

# Saving the BBC's credibility

Among journalists who work for rival news media, the BBC has never had a great number of friends. One reason may be the attitude of some of its reporters and producers in the field, those who have earned the Corporation a reputation for arrogance by assuming they have a right to precedence and exclusivity, a right which officials and other sources of information have often been eager to concede. (Those with memories that stretch back to before the domination of the electronic media will recall that similar privileges used to be accorded to the men – as they then always were – from *The Times*, most noticeably by representatives of foreign governments whose knowledge of English was less than excellent.) In the case of the BBC, there has always been seemingly inexhaustible resources of staff and support with which a solitary reporter from a budget-conscious newspaper would be expected to compete.

Unpopularity in the trade, which might also be called professional jealousy, goes some way towards explaining the glee which many commentators found it hard to conceal when the *Today* programme drew upon itself the wrath of Tony Blair's Government with Andrew Gilligan's report on the morning of 29 May. An additional factor, in some cases, was the possibility of damage being inflicted on the BBC to the potential benefit of one or the other of its commercial competitors. And there were those who seemed to feel that a blow against the BBC was a blow against the Establishment, a creature which changes its shape and habits depending on the person who is describing it.

The parade of BBC masters, managers and employees before Lord Hutton revealed some of the fears and jealousies that seem to be a permanent part of the everyday story of broadcasting folk, as they are in any large organisation. But on the positive side, the BBC for all its manifest imperfections showed that it was willing to question its own attitudes. If it were the monolithic institution many of its critics claim, its members would

have shown a blind unanimity of purpose.

Listeners must have felt that *Today's* chief inquisitors, John Humphrys and James Naughtie, had moderated their toughness when confronting politicians. Then Michael Crick, a freelance whose television outlet is usually *Newsnight*, found that it did not want to run his story questioning whether or not Ian Duncan Smith's wife had earned her secretarial salary.

Leaving aside the broader and more important scope of Hutton, and considering only the Gilligan story in its several versions, it is interesting to recall the system devised by one American newspaper during Second World War. Acting upon hope expressed by Thomas Jefferson that the press would label stories as truth, probabilities, possibilities, or lies, the *Daily Pantagraph* developed the thought even further. The paper, which still circulates in the twin cities of Bloomington and Normal, Illinois, under the name of *The Pantagraph* (a combination of two Greek words that implies it writes about everything) classified its WW2 reports thus:

*Verified*: basic facts confirmed by two conflicting sources, for example, London and Berlin.

*No reason to doubt*: no verification, but by their nature uncontentious.

*Official action*: the facts about action by government or an official body.

*Unverified*: articles from one source only, containing some element of doubt.

*Informed opinion*: articles by established experts or quoting unbiased experts.

*Rumour or conjecture*: stories without reasonable substantiation and of a generally doubtful nature.

The BBC would do well to note that if the system had been widely adopted, Gilligan's story should have been required to carry an "unverified" label.

Contemporary American legislators are apparently anxious to put a similar method into law, compelling newspapers to mark stories on their websites with code letters that would indicate the credibility of each report. According to Theodore L Glasser of Stanford University, California, a Newspaper Credibility Act is being drafted by some members of Congress: it will rank news stories into four categories:

A: Stories in which journalists have "independently verified key facts" which support "in a clear and compelling manner" the story's overall truthfulness or general premise.

B: Stories in which the key facts have been verified but are not clear and compelling.

C: Stories in which journalists have failed to verify key facts, which although unverified nonetheless clearly support the truth of the story.

D: Stories where the facts are unverified and “inexplicably” there is no discernable “overall truthfulness” or “general premise”. An F category has vanished from the draft, says Professor Glasser: it carried the warning: “No one in the newsroom believes this story, so you shouldn’t.”

In spite of the fact that Professor Glasser’s article appeared in *AEJMC News*, published by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, it is possible that it is in category F, or even J – for “Joke”. Certainly, since Professor Glasser’s source was “a former student of mine, a Congressional staffer with access to early drafts of bills”, *The Pantagraph* rating for the tale would be “unverified”.

Back when the *Daily Pantagraph* was carefully pigeon-holing stories into categories, the BBC had been wholeheartedly recruited to the Allied war effort and was broadcasting a nicely judged mixture of truth and propaganda directed at the armed forces, the civilian home front, occupied territories, neutral nations and the enemy. In total war, the ethics of broadcasting bend to the demands of political and military direction.

### *A unique place*

Nevertheless, the Corporation managed to maintain enough of its own standards during WW2 to earn the gratitude and respect of the world for reporting that, if not entirely honest, was as honest as it could be in the circumstances. The trust it won then gave it a unique place in broadcasting and in British public life. If the Corporation is no longer dominant, that is because there is so much competition from other sources of news and entertainment as innovations in media explode in all directions. That explosion causes a dilution of the talent pool, resulting in a narrowing of horizons, a trivialisation of culture and a meaningless pursuit of ratings by people who have no criteria for judging the quality of programmes.

Yet despite the obvious decline in entertainment programming and the obsession of news and current affairs managers with presentation instead of content, the standard of the BBC’s output is still remarkably high. Part of

this must be due to the comparative freedom from the sort of intense commercial pressure elsewhere in the media. Commercial forces, however, are not the only ones that can be exerted. Arising out of the Hutton hearings, articles in this issue of the *BJR* discuss not only the question of protection of the identity of journalists' sources, such as Dr David Kelly, and the purpose and duties of a public service broadcaster, but also the pressures which successive governments of various colours have put on the BBC by means of threats to the licence fee, appointments of sympathetic directors-general and chairmen, and old-fashioned, bloody-minded, political arm-twisting.

The ingenious constructors of the BBC Charter would probably never have been allowed to create it in such a fashion if the politicians of the day had realised that radio was not simply a toy but the harbinger of an electronically-based civilisation. Strange as it seems, even the (usually) moderate and democratic governments of the peaceable United Kingdom are sometimes tempted to behave as if they were a gang of cut-throat desperadoes shooting their way into the capital of a corrupt Latin American republic: they want to seize control of the broadcasting station. And if they do not have control, they often want to bully the broadcasters. A glaring example of ministerial misjudgment came from David Blunkett in his accusation that the BBC was trying to "create, not report" a story when Mark Daly went undercover as a police trainee for his programme on racism, *The Secret Policeman*. Without Daly's report, racism on the beat would still exist, but would have to be classified as "rumour", "conjecture"...or perhaps "no reason to doubt". Daly earned himself a credibility code A.

At more reflective times politicians recognise that a BBC under direct government control would not only lose its prestige but also be mistrusted by the public as a source of nothing but propaganda. Throughout the United Kingdom and the world the BBC is the voice of truth and must remain so. Both the Corporation and government must constantly strive to maintain an admired reputation.

Individual stories rarely have momentous effects: Ian Duncan Smith left the stage before the Parliamentary Commissioner dealt with Crick's dossier on Betsy's secretarial career. It is too soon to be sure of the consequences of Hutton: journalists, civil servants, ministers and even the Government may well suffer. But governments are there only so long as the electorate permits them to survive. The BBC has a long-term pact with the public, and if it were weakened and impoverished by the politicians who happen to be temporarily in power, a vital part of our democracy would be irrevocably damaged.