

Politics

The price was high

AFSHIN RATTANSI

'That is not journalism ... I also wonder whether your viewers and listeners really think they need to see and hear as much about this story.'

- Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications and Strategy,
10 Downing Street, in a confidential letter to Greg Dyke,
Director-General of the BBC, 26 June 2003

'You can crush a man with journalism.'

- William Randolph Hearst

US troops in Iraq seize an Al Jazeera cameraman for filming an attack on American soldiers in Mosul - the tape confiscated, he goes on hunger strike to win his release; four Turkish journalists are detained by US troops after one of them took a photograph of a US soldier on a tank; journalists from Iran are detained for over a month; a Japanese reporter filming the bodies of Iraqis killed in a US raid finds himself in an arm-lock. He's forced to the ground before American soldiers give him a sound kicking with their army boots. Soldiers with telescopic sights confuse a Sony video camera for a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and shoot a Palestinian cameraman from Reuters dead. And, still, no Weapons of Mass Destruction are found as the US hires the UN to mop up ahead of 2004's Iowa Caucus.

Every other day, another US soldier dies and US deputy defence secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, blames Arab TV channels, al-Arabiya and Al Jazeera for endangering the lives of occupying troops in Iraq.

The moral when the media become the news? It's easy to spot who's actively being a journalist. They're the ones prepared to run a gauntlet of slanderous abuse. Or, most tragic of all, they're the ones who die in foreign bureaux after volunteering coordinates to the Pentagon.

There's a tradition of attacking journalists in the UK. So perhaps, away from the killing fields of Iraq, it should not be too surprising that the BBC's flagship news programme *Today* is under attack. The original Downing Street complaint was that *Today* was a brilliant anti-war propaganda

machine. Then, the charges changed from bias to incompetence. About the time that Mr Wolfowitz was condemning the two Arabic channels, careful leaks from Britain's Foreign Affairs Select Committee were used to smear the *Today* programme's defence and diplomatic correspondent Andrew Gilligan. The leaks failed to elicit any loud calls for an independent inquiry. A journalist who saw his role as exposing cynicism at the highest levels of government was ridiculed by a beholden metropolitan media.

I produced at *Today* when Iraq was invaded. I had returned to the BBC after launching what I now recognise as a global TV channel with *Today*-style news values, broadcasting from the Gulf. Editorial independence in Dubai lasted about as long as my *Today* editor would last at the BBC. Bar the star presenters, it was immediately obvious who should take the credit for the *Today* programme outperforming any tabloid, or Chris Evans-style commercial radio show. The then-editor, Rod Liddle, would often open an editorial meeting by disavowing that morning's newspaper stories. He sounded bored if he had to cite a leading story not broken by *Today* staff. *Today* was there to set the agenda.

Liddle's zeal was perhaps born of his Trotskyite past. His approach reminded me a little of that hero of less anchored media souls, P. J. O'Rourke. He liked irony and wanted to expose hypocrisy and corruption. Except that these noble traits weren't married to any particular sense of outrage at social injustice. As with the Angry Young Men of the fifties, there was just outrage. The only bias I noted was one towards biological determinism. He loved stories that suggested this gene or that gene controlled human behaviour and the programme was no doubt a source of great irritation to geneticists, psychologists and sociologists alike. In the Paul Johnson style, Liddle seemed to have forsaken economic determinism for a new, simpler, theory of everything. The agenda he wished to set was right-wing only by default, he didn't wish to set an agenda that could be pinned down as 'anti-government' or 'anti-Tory'.

The biggest flaw in the programme under his stewardship was the staff's near total ignorance about business and its pivotal relation to the bread-and-butter stories on *Today*. This made it impossible for us to get to grips with the misguided idealism that is PFI or the all-pervasive implications of the Enron and WorldCom débâcles. An excellent business unit team was ghettoised in small segments of the programme. This would lead to very dry interviews when we led on the looming pension crisis or companies being sold Britain's health and education infrastructure. Rod and his successor appeared to have no sense of urgency when it came to questioning the terms of sale of Britain's most valuable assets. I believe it was sheer ignorance rather than corruption. Even so, all *Today* employees on

BBC pension schemes look set to benefit directly from Labour's hawking of the family platinum.

Liddle was proud of his hatred for racism – as a rule, the panacea for those who renounce the politics of class is the veneration of 'culture' and 'identity'. But symptomatic of his confusion were his recurring invitations to the British National Party. He believed that our seven million audience would be put off racism the more we informed them about the BNP. As a cub reporter at Channel 4's *Bandung File* in the 1980s, I myself used to feel the same before those senior to me explained about increases in National Front attacks after prime-time television exposure. On the *Today* programme, oddball left-wing splinter groups were never invited on the programme to be humiliated even as they won council seats – I bet that, like the BNP, they would have loved the publicity.

But *Today* had no competition – there were no other editors to watch over Liddle's shoulder. The combined punch of the programme, being the government's chief outlet for policy testing as well as team-driven to set the UK's news agenda meant that stories routinely hit the front pages of the broadsheets the next morning. No other programme in Britain could match its audience figures. It's a mystery why other BBC outlets and commercial channels expect to gain ratings by regurgitating wire reports or replicating newspapers instead of striving for originality. The overwhelming lack of imagination shown by editors cannot solely be due to a lack of funds.

Behind the crisis in news journalism that means only *Today*, *Channel 4 News*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Mail* break most of the agenda-setting stories is a complex history. There is the petty corruption of journalists informally being offered free travel and free dinners. There is a class problem, with few middle-class journalists recognising even metropolitan bias, let alone demographic, cultural or income-based partiality. I should stress that the institutional racism that the BBC's Director-General, Greg Dyke, highlighted two years ago is alive and well at BBC News and anyone of colour who wants to produce for them has to accept that colleagues will pigeonhole them as darkies. Greg Dyke said that 'quite a lot of people from different ethnic backgrounds that we do attract to the BBC leave'. One *Today* assistant editor – named amidst the Hutton Inquiry evidence – explained to me in private that she didn't think I knew enough about British culture to work there. I was born in Cambridge.

Though Rod was trying to change things, producers' accents were generally cut-glass. These days, newsrooms are blinkered places, with askew perspectives. Comparisons and pattern forming – for instance, connecting problems of the NHS to problems on the railways – are frowned

upon. To take just one example, you would be met with wide-eyed incomprehension if you explained to a BBC journalist that the profits of, say, supermarkets would be wiped out if they had to pay for the maintenance of Britain's road network. How would it compute, how would one report the success of private companies which were household names if one perceived them not so much as the great success story of market-led innovation as owing their very existence to taxpayer subsidies?

Is a prohibition of comparisons partial or impartial? The myth that is central to the malaise in journalism is 'impartiality'. Anyone compiling a running order knows that ordering the stories is partial to one or t'other. Words under the *Independent* newspaper's masthead have been laid out in different fonts – *depending* on the partialities of its staff. Whether it be newsgathering or current affairs, journalism always has an angle. This is not to defend some impractical postmodern relativism: journalists merely have to recognise and accept responsibility for their inescapably biased reporting and producing. 'Impartiality' is the shibboleth that causes so much muddle in the heads of commentators relaying evidence at the Hutton Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of David Kelly. Quite apart from the tragic death of the British government's top WMD expert, it became obvious during the inquiry that Andrew Gilligan's idea of journalism was exposing identifiable misuses of power. It is clearly a biased position – just as is the position of journalists who do not agree with him, those preferring to think of themselves as earnest record keepers with no agenda of their own. For them, journalism is, consequently, to aid those who seek to misuse power.

*

Today personnel have to smoke by the rubbish bins on the side of the BBC's bombed out News Centre in what satellite feed books call 'the ghetto that is Shepherd's Bush'. Drawing on his cigarette, Liddle told me early on that *Today* would seem proudly parochial after international broadcasting. It turned out that foreign news would, in fact, be the heart of the *Today* programme in coming months. Dodgy dossiers, mass government rebellions, patsy UN weapons inspectors and testing times for Britain's international reputation would presage the military invasion of the world's number two oil-superpower. *Today* was in an ideal position to examine the chiaroscuro when Labour's ruthless careerists began to paint their steadily more desperate strokes. The programme's popularity, moreover, has a history of tempting the honourable whistleblower.

Rod Liddle took it upon himself to recruit journalists very different to the apparatchik wire-watchers who think of journalism as 'a job'. The BBC's Head of News, Richard Sambrook, would have to reassure Mark Laity,* BBC defence correspondent during the 1990s, that he was imparting the ethos of Liddle when he said at the Hutton Inquiry:

[Andrew Gilligan] was taken on originally I think three years ago, because for many years the BBC defence correspondent had simply reflected the Ministry of Defence's point of view which may be legitimate in one sense, but actually in terms of journalism we needed a correspondent who would ask questions and hold to account as well.

Rod's admiration for John Humphrys was tempered by the knowledge that the 0810 lead interview on *Today* often sounded pointless as Ministers manifestly refused to fall into carefully designed traps. Sure, *Today* could usually guarantee the cast, but what were we illuminating for our audience when a past-master like John Prescott had his ten-minute chat? The Hutton Inquiry revealed the embarrassing fact that the Deputy Prime Minister insisted that he would only be on the programme if he was being interviewed by John Humphrys – hardly a great endorsement for one of the country's great confrontational interviewers. The best we could hope for when it came to revealing disparities was for a Minister to look foolish as he or she tried to answer John or Jim with an unsuitable sentence crafted for them by No. 10. Select Committee Chairmen were particular favourites of the programme, seen by us as more important than rebel MPs when it came to calling No. 10 to account. We now know from the Hutton Inquiry that Parliamentary Select Committees, lauded in 1979 as the greatest transformation in power of the legislature over the executive since the 1902 Balfour reforms, are not quite what they seem. It's one thing that Andrew Gilligan – with the clearest of public-interest arguments – is lambasted for helping the Committee get to the truth. It's another that Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon found it normal to write and advise the head of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee not to quiz David Kelly about Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction.

If Select Committee Chairmen are under this kind of covert pressure, getting the truth out of politicians, chief executives and quango personnel isn't helped by the plethora of media training courses, actually taught by former journalists:

* Mark Laity became Deputy Spokesman and Personal Adviser to the Secretary General of NATO in 2000.

Media training

Reputation is everything. If you cultivate a positive image, you will put yourself and your organisation ahead of the pack. So a bad media interview is the quickest way to sink that hard earned positive profile.

Citigate Communications has media trained a range of organisations from the Criminal Records Bureau to the Royal College of General Practitioners, ACAS to Zurich Municipal.

Whether you've been through the experience once or a hundred times, there is little that matches the daunting prospect of facing difficult questions from a well-prepared journalist on live television or radio.

The last thing you want is to be badly prepared to deal with difficult questions from persistent journalists.

The solution? Be prepared. It's that simple. With so much at stake, hoping it will be alright on the night, first time, with the pressure on is not a good idea!

At Citigate Communications, we can help you communicate your point of view in a clear, simple and understandable way without tying yourself (and your audience) up in jargon.

We can't promise miracles: media training will rarely turn a shy and timid interviewee into someone who relishes the opportunity to cross swords with Jeremy Paxman or John Humphrys the next day. What it can do is prepare you and your colleagues thoroughly to deal with the most difficult questions.

– SOURCE: http://www.citigatecommunications.co.uk/user_site/user_pagehtml.cfm?lang=1&item_id=98

Citygate 'media-train' the government's National Institute of Clinical Excellence, the Human Genetics Commission, Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission. The Holley Warren Partnership, itself staffed by former BBC journalists, has advised the Department of Employment.

One media training company even prints on its website: 'Usually on a page like this you would expect us to name drop all the big blue chip companies we deal with or fill the page with company logos and executives comments. However at IMT, Media Training Specialists, we pride ourselves on our clients confidentiality. You, like our clients, want to be able to handle the world of the media not show them that you have trained to handle their tough questioning.' The page goes on to list some endorsements:

'Very useful, enjoyable and professionally run course. The benefit of two top class journalists was clear.'

Tobacco Industry – November 2001

'A very critical course which I wish I had attended earlier in my working life.'

Agribusiness Company – December 2001

'Very interesting and helpful, will prove invaluable if I ever find myself up against Mr Paxman or The Today Programme.'

Professional Support Service Organisation – April 2002

'A very interesting and challenging session. Well balanced with an excellent friendly feedback technique – well worthwhile.'

Financial Organisation – April 2002

'For my first time I was most impressed, ten out of ten.'

Pharmaceutical Company – May 2002

'Overall I cannot find fault with this course, a very good and interesting day.'

Water Utilities Company – September 2002

'Extremely useful day. It brought the whole concept of handling the media into perspective.'

Water Utilities Company – November 2002

'A very realistic course run by excellent trainers.'

Gas Utilities Supplier – November 2002

SOURCE: <http://www.imt.uk.com/clients_comments.htm>

The only avenue open to Liddle was thus to recruit the hungriest journalists he could find. They could shore up the programme with exclusives that tore into the heart of media strategies of the powerful. Alas, recruiting good journalists isn't an easy task in Britain, especially so now that the Academy has taken to teaching it. Take Professor Ian Hargreaves, widely seen as one of the most senior academics in the field overseeing the journalism school at Cardiff University, teaching broadcast, print and online journalism. He sees no conflict of interest in his also being Group Director, Corporate Affairs at the airport group, BAA plc. I know how I would feel about Chinese walls if I was 18 and being taught how to cover that most critical issue facing the country – the role of private and public in civic life – by someone spinning for a utility privatised at the height of the Thatcherite maelstrom.

At *Today*, we were alert to conflicts of interest. Every story was treated with the utmost gravity – even the funny 0820 ones – and nothing anyone said to a producer or reporter was taken at face value. It was predictable then, that it should face the full brunt of the government's attack-as-a-means-of-defence strategy on a day-by-day basis. Less predictable was that after a week's leave I returned to the office to learn that Liddle had apparently been fired for showing undue partiality.

The replacement (he wasn't the first choice) was Kevin Marsh from *The World at One* and various other Radio 4 shows. After Hutton, he will always be remembered as the bureaucrat who would congratulate Andrew Gilligan

even as he was stabbing him in the back and seriously damaging the Corporation's case. It was obvious from the start that Marsh knew he had a lot to live up to. He hadn't wanted to take up the job. BBC Radio news supremo Steve Mitchell would go from pulling the reins in on wildman Rod to encouraging risk-taking from quiet-Kevin. The guerrilla-hacks on the team were anxious as well. Every time Kevin Marsh emphasised continuity to the team, we were rewarded with a peculiar McKinsey sensibility for Powerpoint rather than editorial guidance. I think the first email I received from him was one informing me that he would ignore any communication that wasn't via email. Previously, we had used the relatively more secure internal 'ENPS' system which allowed for the private exchange of messages within programme areas. He had not envisaged how his email edict would change events at the Royal Courts of Justice. Marsh's next email to the staff was something about the office air conditioning system.

The only concrete suggestion he made was that he wanted to kill off the world press review – one of *Today's* segments that could never be accused of parochialism. The mood at the office during the Inquiry can't have been helped by his being away the day Gilligan gave evidence and his sporadic appearances at the office since. Nevertheless, the rumoured reason for his appointment – to downsize the *Today* team – proved not to be the case. Reporters did not lose their jobs as had been feared. Liddle's ambition to create a *Sunday Times* style 'Insight' team of old, would come into its own as the government prepared to send British teenagers into the desert. Not even Humphrys and Naughtie, focused masters at exposing mismatches, could get past the increasingly confident Hoon and Straws without something extra. Liddle's groundwork would pay off.

I don't believe the change of editor had any bearing on the central question underlying the Hutton Inquiry. From the resignations of the leader of the House of Commons and Britain's Overseas Development Minister to the *Newsnight* tape recording of David Kelly, from no WMD being found at the time of writing to government memos that imply guilt: parliament did commit British troops to war on 'sexed-up' information. If a prime minister thinks he has a moral duty to do something, isn't it normal for him to try everything at his disposal (albeit competently) to persuade Parliament? The worst or best case in recent times revolves around the controversy over whether FDR had prior knowledge of an attack on Pearl Harbour.

As to the astonishing reaction of Downing Street, it must be set against the context of the PM's dread after repeated insubordination and resignation-threats. As any whipped backbencher would be the first to say, deeply entrenched in the psyche of New Labour is the maxim 'the means justify the ends'. Swiftly wielded power, meanwhile, is centralised and

un-collective: the Secretary of State for Defence, it seems, was blissfully unaware of Britain's fraught preparations for war. It was to be expected, then, that there would be more than mild irritation at us exposing anguished panic in Whitehall and Vauxhall. Less expected perhaps was the alacrity showed by No. 10 on learning of the news of David Kelly's death. The narrow terms of reference of the Hutton Inquiry have steered the media away from the perceived danger of Saddam to the UK, from the question of why British troops have spilled their blood in the cradle of civilisation.

For all Marsh's insecurities and incompetence, he belatedly backed up his correspondent. Power politics and the complex relationship between the BBC and Whitehall are certain to have been final determinants but, on the face of it, there are hints of the BBC at its best in all of this. The only negative notes to be heard were amongst journalists under the BBC emblem whose petty jealousy got the better of them. It's a sad reflection of envy, and on short-term BBC contracts, that the provenance of some of the anti-Gilligan stories and smears may be closer to White City than Whitehall. *Today* staff are a proudly elitist bunch. The only news they listen to comes from either Channel 4 news or Radio 4's other sequence programmes. Everything else is deemed either dumbed down or ciphers for Reuters and the Associated Press. Hardly an attitude that endears them to those who work for other BBC programmes, let alone the BBC's newsgathering operation.

The Corporation may well win something from this tragic, high-stakes battle. It depends on the media strategy of Rupert Murdoch being not so covert as some have it. And it depends on there being no more bizarre insubordination from BBC personnel. The appalling scandal may at the very least have served to remind Britain about 'dark forces' at the highest ranks of our government. There are those who take Malcolm X's exhortation 'By Any Means Necessary' very seriously, indeed.

David Kelly's death, just as the harassment and murder of journalists by *realpolitik* and corporate power, also bequeaths a litmus test for readers, viewers and listeners. If the media organisation that is providing your news isn't under lethal and constant attack from the authorities, it might as well be headquartered in the Lubyanka before the fall of the wall. At the Hutton Inquiry, it emerged that the BBC's Richard Sambrook had to counsel against 'Pathe News being considered a gold standard of broadcast journalism; times had moved on' in the face of criticism of *Today* from the vice-chairman of the BBC and ex-Tory chief whip, Lord Richard Ryder. In June, the UK broadcast regulator, the Independent Television Commission, rejected complaints from viewers who thought Rupert Murdoch's Fox News TV network was heavily biased. Old Glory on lapel pins and always in the

left-hand corner of the screen during the invasion of Iraq were disinterested, then. And all the while, the family of 34-year-old Tareq Ayyoub grieves. He was killed by a US missile strike on Al Jazeera's Baghdad offices on 8 April – just over a year after the US bombing of Al Jazeera's bureau in Kabul.

There's an old truism about totalitarianism: in Stalinist Russia, citizens bought Pravda, knowing it was full of lies. They read it to discover why the authorities were lying in a particular way on a particular day. In the heartlands of the free world, journalists self-censor and pray to a false god called 'impartiality'. And citizens – some citizens – *believe* they are being told the truth.

Afshin Rattansi left *Today* for Al Jazeera amidst the Kelly Affair.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.