

Broadcast blues

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How dubious news practices and a creeping commercial ethic helped humble the mighty BBC

By Kevin Cullen, Globe Staff, 2/15/2004

THE LONG KNIVES are out for the Beeb.

The British Broadcasting Corp., the world's most recognized and respected public broadcaster, is in the throes of what could be the greatest crisis in its 82-year history. Three weeks ago, British judge Brian Hutton issued findings declaring that a BBC report last May 29 claiming that the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair had misled the public with "sexed-up" intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was itself untrue. In July, David Kelly, a British weapons expert, killed himself after he was exposed as the source of the disputed story, providing a tragic backdrop to a slugging match between the government and the BBC.

As in medieval times when there were failed attempts to challenge British authority, heads rolled in the immediate aftermath of the Hutton inquiry. BBC chairman Gavyn Davies resigned, followed by director-general Greg Dyke, and finally Andrew Gilligan, the reporter who had admitted his notes didn't back up the claims he broadcast at 6:07 a.m. on the BBC's flagship radio news program "Today."

Hundreds of the BBC's 29,000 staffers took to the streets and took out full-page newspaper ads decrying the one-sidedness of Hutton's findings and the indignity of the BBC being forced to apologize to a government seen as Machiavellian in its control of the news media.

British democracy, many BBC staffers said, had been diminished and was in danger of further erosion. Other journalists agreed, with members of the National Union of Journalists issuing this warning in the Guardian: "There is now a real risk to the independence of the BBC and a threat to the ability of its journalists to hold government and others to account." Polls showed that an overwhelming majority of Britons still believed the BBC.

But still, there is also acknowledgement among journalists, even among some BBC staff, that Hutton's findings have been a wake-up call, perhaps a clarion call, for the broadcaster. Under Dyke, they say, the Beeb became enamored with a more commercial approach to journalism, including the loosely substantiated "exclusives" that are a staple of Britain's rough-and-tumble newspaper culture. If the BBC's traditional enemies have always had the long knives tucked in their cloaks, some of its greatest admirers are among those hoping the Hutton legacy is not humiliation but humility, not retreat but retooling.

Some also worry that the fallout of the Hutton inquiry will leave the BBC less aggressive in holding public officials publicly accountable, with implications well beyond Britain. Through its World Service, the BBC reaches 150 million people, broadcasting in 43 languages. Since 9/11, Americans have increasingly turned to British media, from the BBC to the websites of British newspapers, because British journalists are seen as less deferential to government and authority. But there are some who say it may be time to replace the jabbing, accusatory finger with a more traditional stiff upper lip that doesn't so often curl into a sneer.

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When he took over as director-general four years ago, Greg Dyke was determined to shed the dowdy image of "Auntie," as the British refer to the Beeb with a mixture of affection and disdain. The BBC would get more scoops. The BBC would be edgier. Dyke was a good motivator, supportive of his charges and popular with much of the staff.

But some say the desire to make the BBC edgier left its credibility open to cuts that bleed. Some longtime fans of the BBC, like Jeffrey Dvorkin, the ombudsman for National Public Radio, saw Hutton's findings not just as an indictment of sloppy reporting and lax editorial oversight in an isolated if sensational case. Dvorkin said the report had called into question the BBC's drive to find "the largest possible audience," a mission he says has in practice been at odds with its job as a public broadcaster.

"The BBC has expanded dramatically, both domestically and overseas, over the last 10 years," Dvorkin said in an interview. "One of the definitions of success in public broadcasting, at the BBC and even NPR, is a large audience. The question is: Has that large audience been achieved at the expense of public service?"

Dvorkin said the BBC's expansion into 24-hour news, and the policy of having journalists file reports for both radio and television, has placed enormous and sometimes unrealistic strains on correspondents. "I was talking to a BBC guy (in Iraq) the other day who was filing from his hotel room 16 hours a day," said Dvorkin. "He never got out of his room to do any reporting. That's not journalism."

Some BBC critics complain its news coverage is left-leaning, a charge familiar to public broadcasters in America. Dvorkin said the problem isn't whether the BBC is too liberal but that opinion unsupported by facts -- including Gilligan's disputed report -- seeps into coverage more than it used to.

In what seems incredible in hindsight, Gilligan's report was live and unscripted, despite the seriousness of its charges. In private conversations, some BBC journalists said this was simply a cherished production value, done in the belief that news or commentary that is broadcast live is more compelling than prerecorded material.

Dvorkin said that when he was a radio producer, he, too, believed going live was worth the risks of a reporter misspeaking. Now from his more lofty perch as a media critic, his attitude has changed. "As a producer, doing stuff live was how you got notches in your belt," he said. "Now I ask, how is that better for the listener? Is it about us, or about them?"

By going live, without a script that could have been reviewed by editors, the BBC lost any opportunity for someone other than Gilligan to spot the explosiveness of the charge, and question whether he could back it up before it aired.

Some critics say that had the BBC been a little less arrogant, the Hutton inquiry might not have been necessary. Hutton himself said BBC leaders

defended Gilligan's reporting before he had been asked to back it up or produce his notes. The ensuing shouting match between the BBC and the government, combined with Kelly's suicide, made it impossible to back down, and made an inquiry inevitable.

Martin Kettle, a columnist for the left-leaning Guardian, said such arrogance stems from what he calls "punk journalism," which is common in British print media but a relatively new phenomenon at the BBC, where traditional tough questioning has been replaced by some with sneering condescension. While the BBC has been the paragon of British journalism, Kettle and other critics accuse its newer, more commercially oriented bosses of trying to ape the cynicism of Fleet Street.

Kettle was disturbed by the derisive reaction to the Hutton inquiry by most journalists, who instinctively pointed the finger at everyone but themselves. "It smacks of something bordering on journalistic fascism, in which all elected politicians are contemptible, all judges are disreputable, and only journalists are capable of telling the truth, even though what passes for truth is sometimes little more than prejudice unsupported by facts," Kettle wrote in the Feb. 3 Guardian.

"The threat to modern journalism is real," he went on, "but it comes not just from without but also from within. It comes not just from the manipulations, favoritism and half-truths of the discredited, and partially abandoned Labour [Party] spin culture, but also from the media's disrespect for facts, the avoidable failure to be fair, the want of explanation and the persistent desire for melodrama that are spin's flip side."

David Dimbleby's pointed, persistent questioning of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld during an interview last year was considered such a coup by the BBC that Dyke took a clip of it to show various audiences when he visited Harvard University last April. But others say the BBC's confrontational style has crossed the line too often in recent years. Some claim there is something of an unwritten rule among some BBC presenters that an interview with a politician isn't successful unless the politician is made to look foolish. In 1997, Jeremy Paxman, who as the host of "Newsnight" is Britain's Ted Koppel, once asked a government minister the same question 14 times in a row because he felt it was being ducked.

Gilligan, formerly a reporter at the Sunday Telegraph, was among a group of BBC reporters hired several years ago specifically to bring in more "exclusives," which are a vehicle for self-promotion in print journalism. Obsessed with sex and scandal, Sunday newspapers in Britain regularly print "exclusives" that are not true -- such as the front-page claim made in 1996 that an aide to Senator George Mitchell, then trying to broker a peace agreement in Northern Ireland, was having an affair with a convicted IRA bomber. Unless there is a legal challenge, few incorrect stories are corrected in print. And few, meanwhile, are believed beyond the circle of readers whose politics or prejudices the stories appeal to.

But it is precisely because people expect what they hear on the BBC to be true that Gilligan's report was taken so seriously, and why the Hutton inquiry was so important.

Appearing on Radio 4's "Feedback" program two weeks ago, acting director-general Mark Byford stepped away from the culture of "exclusives" that had permeated some parts of the BBC under Dyke. The BBC's mission as a public broadcaster, he said, is "first and foremost to report news in a reliable, accurate, and impartial manner."

"The notion of exclusive here, exclusive there, exclusive everywhere is not appropriate for the BBC," said Byford.

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Some worry that the Hutton inquiry will have a chilling effect on the BBC. But anyone who suggests that the legacy will be a more timid BBC is underestimating the caliber of its journalists -- not just stars, like World Affairs editor John Simpson, who disguised himself in a burka so he could slip into Kabul when the Taliban fell, but those who aren't seen or heard, like Lena Ferguson. Ferguson, a producer in Northern Ireland, is risking jail because she refuses to reveal the identities of soldiers who spoke to her on the condition of anonymity when she worked for Britain's Channel 4 News about their roles on Bloody Sunday in 1972, when British troops killed 13 unarmed civilians in Derry.

If the BBC needs to be more rigorous in its editorial process, that doesn't mean it will be less brave in its journalism. After all, the most devastating, balanced, compelling account of how David Kelly became a casualty in the war between the BBC and the government was not to be found in Lord Hutton's sober verdict. It was shown a week before his findings were published, on "Panorama," the BBC TV's premier investigative journalism program. And it didn't go out live.

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