

Study on Iraq coverage shows

# BBC was most pro-war of British networks

Robert Stevens  
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When giving evidence before the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into whether the British government had exaggerated the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to justify its planned war, Prime Minister Tony Blair's director of communications Alastair Campbell made the following assertion:

"In the run-up to conflict there was an agenda in large parts of the BBC—and I think the BBC is different from the rest of the media and should be viewed as different from the rest of the media because it is a different organisation in terms of its reputation, in terms of its global reach and all the rest of it—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, one, it is all going wrong."

Contrast this with the statement on July 4 by Professor Justin Lewis, the deputy head of Cardiff University's school of journalism, on the findings of an examination of the coverage of Iraq by the four main UK news broadcasters, the BBC, ITN, Channel 4 and Sky:

"Indeed, far from revealing an anti-war BBC, our findings tend to give credence to those who criticised the BBC for being too sympathetic to the government in its war coverage. Either way, it is clear that the accusation of BBC anti-war bias fails to stand up to any serious or sustained analysis."

In recent weeks, it has been commonplace for officials of the Blair government to echo the charge levelled by Campbell that the BBC sought to undermine the government by giving undue prominence to opponents of the war and running critical news items. The charge is not new. Most of the media were virulently pro-war and viewed any reporting that attempted even a semblance of balance, let alone opposition, as tantamount to treason. For this reason national newspapers such as the *Times*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* featured articles attacking the BBC as little more than a propaganda machine for the regime of Saddam Hussein.

One such article appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* on March 30 entitled "Listening to the World Service, I thought we were losing." The author stated that, "Day after day, studio-based presenters and gloomy academics criticise every nuance of the coalition's strategy. Determined resistance by Iraqi troops has

been endlessly reported, alongside lengthy discussions about how the allies failed to anticipate that the enemy might fight back.

"Allied bombing raids on Baghdad are reported in the context of the civilian casualties that they may have caused. British and American troops are constantly described as being overwhelmed, unprepared and taken by surprise. Worst of all is the outraged reaction to the news that, shock, horror, the war might take longer than a few weeks.

"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. So it is hardly surprising that, according to the BBC, that's exactly what many want to do."

A more recent *Telegraph* article by right-wing columnist Barbara Amiel dated July 7 continued this theme and contained an unveiled threat to the BBC. It was entitled "Disinfect the BBC before it poisons a new generation."

The opposition Conservative Party culture spokesman, John Whittingdale, said during the war, "People inside the BBC who are opposed to the conflict are imposing their own views. The BBC is our national broadcaster and it must make clear why we are asking British forces to risk their lives."

The fever pitch of such commentary was so high that Rageh Omaar, a BBC reporter stationed in Baghdad throughout the invasion, felt obliged to write an article with the purpose of opposing "the allegations that we are being seduced by a slick Iraqi propaganda machine."

Omaar will be remembered by many for his embarrassingly breathless and uncritical reporting of the staged toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in April by members of the Iraqi opposition recently flown in by the US. But during the war, he had reported from the city daily and of necessity had to cover events such as the devastating missile attack on the Al Sha'ab district in northern Baghdad on March 28 that killed and injured more than 50 people. Based upon what he was told by many immediate eyewitnesses and what he himself saw, Omaar reported that he believed the missiles had been fired by the US military. The attack was subsequently denied by the US and British military, and the journalist was subjected to a character assassination by sections of the media.

That the BBC's reportage was labelled "anti-war" or

“biased” indicates the debased state of much of what passes as news in Britain today. For it is the opposite of the truth.

The study conducted by Professor Justin Lewis, Dr. Rod Brookes and Kirsten Brander of the Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies department of Cardiff University finds that the BBC was in fact the least “anti-war” in its news reports—even when compared with Rupert Murdoch’s Sky.

The study reviewed the contents of prime-time evening news bulletins of the four broadcasters. These are the BBC1 news at 6:00 p.m., the ITV Evening News at 6:30 p.m., Channel 4 News at 7:00 p.m. and Sky News at 9:00 p.m.

Among its findings were:

- \* Over the three weeks of conflict, 11 percent of the sources quoted by the BBC were of coalition government or military origin. This was the highest proportion of all the main television broadcasters. The BBC used government sources twice as much as ITN and Channel 4 News.

- \* The BBC was the least likely to quote official Iraqi sources, and less likely than Sky, ITV or Channel 4 News to use independent sources of news such as the Red Cross. Channel 4 used these sources three times more often than the BBC, and Sky twice as often.

- \* The BBC placed least emphasis on Iraqi casualties, which were mentioned in 22 percent of its stories about the Iraqi people. Numbers of casualties received most prominence on Channel 4 News, figuring in 40 percent of its reports about Iraqis, compared with Sky at 30 percent and ITN at 24 percent.

- \* The BBC was least likely to report on the opposition of the Iraqi population to the invasion.

- \* Across all four broadcasters, the bulletins were three times more likely to present the Iraqi population as pro-invasion than anti-invasion. The exception to the ratio was Channel 4, where it was just less than two to one.

Professor Lewis pointed out that the survey was “comprehensive” on the basis that previous research had found that “people are influenced by the general weight of TV coverage rather than by particular reports” from individual journalists.

Giving examples of the BBC’s coverage, Lewis said, “The team found, for example, that when Tony Blair accused the Iraqi regime of executing British soldiers—a story Downing Street were later forced to retract—the BBC was the only one of the early evening news bulletins that failed to examine the lack of evidence to support it, or to report the rather embarrassing government retraction the next day.

“And when it came to the many other stories from military sources that turned out to be false—such as the Basra ‘uprising,’ or the shooting of Scud missiles into Kuwait—Channel 4 was the only channel—rightly as it turned out—to offer a note of scepticism or caution. The BBC, ITN and Sky were, on the whole, much more trusting of US and British military sources.”

It is worth remembering that before the 2-million-strong anti-war protest on February 15 in London, the BBC deputy director

of news, Mark Damazer, sent an e-mail to all newsroom staff requesting that certain categories of journalist not attend the march and rally in Hyde Park. Those instructed not to attend included anchor BBC news presenters such as Jeremy Paxman of the BBC’s flagship “Newsnight” program, newscasters Huw Edwards, Fiona Bruce and journalists including Political Editor Andrew Marr.

As well as these broadcasters, the e-mail banned all presenters, correspondents, editors, output editors and “anyone who can be considered a ‘gatekeeper’ of our output.”

Damazer’s e-mail stated that junior staff could attend the march, but only in a “private capacity with no suggestion that he or she speaks for the BBC.” A BBC spokeswoman commented, “There is a need to balance a respect for civil liberties with the BBC’s need to be impartial.”

The supposed “impartiality” of the BBC did not fool many opponents of the war, who correctly saw it as a voice generally supportive of the government and at all times articulating the interests of Britain’s ruling class. On March 29, for example, a demonstration by 400 anti-war protesters was held outside the BBC’s Oxford Road headquarters in Manchester. Those in attendance were criticising the reportage of the BBC for its pro-government and anti-Iraq coverage.

No one should take the attack being waged by the government on the BBC as evidence of a change of heart by “Auntie”. Nor should they see it as an occasion to soften their criticism of its role in disseminating political propaganda—even if this often needs to be more subtle than the right wing would like given the BBC’s worldwide presence. It only testifies to the desparate efforts of Blair and company to shift attention away from their own misdeeds.



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