

Britain: The furore over the BBC's Brand and Ross broadcast

What constitutes an "appalling lapse in standards"?

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For the last week the story dominating the British media has been the antics of BBC talk show hosts Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand.

The pair's activity was puerile. Brand's October 18 Radio Two show broadcast a lewd phone prank by the two on 78-year-old actor Andrew Sachs, famous for playing Manuel in the "Fawlty Towers" sit-com. They left four messages on Sachs' telephone answering machine—beginning with Ross joking about how Brand had "xxxked" Sachs' granddaughter, Georgina Baillie, followed by a series of apologies that inevitably compounded the original slight.

Even so, the broadcast would have passed without comment had it not been taken up four days later by the *Daily Mail*, for which the state-run BBC has long been a *bête noire*.

The newspaper's editor Paul Dacre has accused the BBC of a "kind of cultural Marxism," of being an opponent of "conservatism with a small c," whose "journalism is reflected through a left-wing prism," and which is dragging the nation's morals into the gutter. And Brand will hardly be a favourite of the right-wing newspaper, given his description of President George W. Bush at this year's MTV Awards as "that retarded cowboy fella." Nor for his initial retort to the *Mail's* campaign that while his actions were a "bit bad," they were nothing in comparison to the *Mail's* record of "tacitly supporting Adolf Hitler when he took charge of the Third Reich."

Having contacted Sachs for his unsurprisingly dismayed response to Brand and Ross's broadcast, the newspaper belatedly launched a campaign against the pair for their boorish behaviour and the BBC for permitting it—especially as it transpired that the show was pre-recorded and had been signed off on by BBC editors.

As the BBC launched an inquiry, suspending the two, Brand resigned from Radio Two and the broadcasting regulator Ofcom began its own investigation into a possible breach of telecommunications law. On Thursday it was

announced that Ross has been suspended from all BBC shows without pay for 12 weeks, while BBC Radio Two controller, Lesley Douglas, has resigned.

The *Mail's* campaign had a resonance beyond its immediate readership. By Thursday the BBC had received 35,000 complaints.

There was genuine disgust amongst many over what was rightly perceived as an example of two highly-paid performers using their celebrity status to humiliate those they consider to be "lesser" personages than themselves. That they had targeted a grandfather who had not signed up to the "joke," and had done so at licence-fee payers' expense, added insult to injury. With a £18 million three-year contract, Ross is the BBC's highest paid broadcaster, while Brand received some £200,000 a year for his Saturday night radio show.

Nevertheless, the furore surrounding the incident has taken on a bread-and-circuses quality.

Ross and Brand are known quantities. Brand especially has been selected to front certain shows precisely because of his "shock" value, particularly when it comes to his Lothario image.

More broadly, television and radio shows are routinely stocked by perennially cynical hosts/guests whose misanthropy and use of verbal abuse is taken for humour and even rebelliousness.

As for humiliation as entertainment, large sections of the media thrive on this. Not only through the numerous "reality" shows and celebrity magazines, but on mainstream entertainment and current affairs shows—witness the recent public humiliation of former singer Kerry Katona, whose precarious mental health is considered fair game for daytime viewing.

The *Mail* itself is a prime purveyor of such unhealthy voyeurism, with pages given over to salacious details of the personal goings-on of various "celebrities." Its professed concern for Sachs' sensibilities has not prevented the

newspaper running item after item on the fact that his granddaughter is part of a burlesque girl group entitled, "Satanic Sluts," accompanied by various semi-nude photographs.

There are legitimate issues as to the social and cultural impact of such a programming diet. Brand's show, which has some 400,000 listeners, initially attracted just two complaints, for the language used. It is not that everyone listening necessarily found the broadcast funny; it just doesn't stand out as crossing a line.

Why is such "entertainment" so ubiquitous? There are many factors, and comedy especially relies to a certain degree on "pushing the boundaries." But it remains the truth that much of what now passes for edginess is far from subversive, but rather occurs in the absence of, and as a substitute for, a genuine questioning of the status quo.

No matter how many times the "f" word is used and explicit sexual references are made, this is often nothing but a light covering for complete conformism. Certain things are never challenged and held up to ridicule and abuse—above all, the social set-up in which a tiny minority enjoy fabulous riches while billions around the planet go without food, shelter and basic infrastructure.

Brand and Ross's "jest" in fact smacked of the behaviour typical of wealthy, bored public school boys. In a videocast after the initial broadcast, Ross had said any offence caused to Sachs was not intentional and that sometimes "you don't realise that what you're doing here has a reality outside." In other words, the audience was not even a factor—it was all about two egos performing for one another.

Ultimately, what touched a raw nerve with many people about Brand and Ross is that their behaviour—and their lack of awareness as to its impact—gave expression to a fundamental imbalance in society.

This only makes more revolting the denunciations of the pair by government and opposition figures, all the way up to Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Conservative Party leader David Cameron.

The resulting row serves several purposes for the powers-that-be.

Besides whipping the BBC into line (the broadcaster's querying of the premises of the Iraq war have neither been forgotten nor forgiven) and justifying greater censorship under the guise of editorial control, setting Ross and Brand up as public hate figures has provided a useful diversion from falling house prices, the crashing pound and the rising toll of joblessness. And it offers the government an occasion to line up once more behind the right-wing media and the potential voters for whom it speaks.

No intervention has been more repellent than that of Minister of Justice Jack Straw. Straw wrote a column in the

Guardian, October 30. Under the heading "tedious and indecent"—a description more aptly befitting the author—Straw wrote, "How a price is settled when it comes to determining television presenters' pay is in the realm of alchemy, quite beyond my comprehension."

It was especially beyond his comprehension, he continued, that a person could be paid £18 million "to present a series of light entertainment programmes."

This is truly offensive coming from Straw, an architect of New Labour, whose strenuous efforts to cultivate the support of the financial oligarchy is a matter of record. Clearly, Straw's aversion to high salaries applies only to the public sector.

As for his complaint over the BBC's "appalling lapse in standards"—the man has no shame. He is the representative of a government that has launched criminal wars of intervention and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been acquiescent in the obscenities of Guantánamo Bay and extraordinary rendition, and has trampled over the last remnants of democratic accountability. It is worth noting that Tony Blair, Straw's long-time political ally, has just been declared the "world's highest-earning public speaker," raking in some £12 million for his contribution to this trade in human misery. Straw has nothing to say on this truly appalling lapse in standards.

Finally, in a pathetic effort to portray himself as the defender of the "little man," Straw claims that had Brand and Ross worked at a "local radio station ... They'd have been given their P45s [sacked] before you could say Jack Robinson."

No such call for swift retribution has come from Straw when it concerns the multimillionaire bankers, speculators and their super-rich cohorts whose dubious, if not criminal, efforts at self-enrichment have left entire economies on the verge of bankruptcy, and tens of millions of people facing unemployment, homelessness and destitution. Their "punishment" has been to receive tens of millions more in taxpayers' money as an *ex gratia* payment by the government.



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