

## **"News and Current Affairs - the Yardstick for Integrity"**

Speech By

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen - thank you Chairman for your introduction. You have entitled this session "News and Current Affairs – The Yardstick for Integrity". It is a clever title. Almost every media organisation in the world today is ultimately judged by its news and current affairs coverage.

Because it is in its news coverage that the inherent values of the whole organisation are most clearly on display. There aren't many hiding places in news. Integrity in News and Current Affairs is about the core values that underpin the news coverage. To us in the BBC and to many other broadcasters these core values are absolutely vital. Those values are accuracy, impartiality, open-mindedness, editorial independence and a strong belief in the freedom of information. In many parts of the world those values have never been under greater attack than they are today.

(SHORT PAUSE)

This Conference comes at the end of a year which has seen momentous global events - the war in Iraq, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime and the new diplomatic landscape have all dominated this year's headlines. And these are subjects I am going to return to later because they raise some important questions about news coverage.

The electronic media has never been more prominent or important. The digital revolution has led to an explosion of electronic news provision on all media platforms. The rate of expansion is mindboggling.

On radio there are more services available than ever before :- and internet listening is growing. On television there are now hundreds of news channels. Mobile news services with text are already here, mobile news services with pictures and sound aren't far behind. Some critics and writers argue that this explosion has lessened – some even argue that it has removed altogether the need for those core values of accuracy and impartiality in News output. In the world of hundreds of channels, so the argument goes, why do broadcasters need to bother about these things at all? What does it matter if one channel reports things this way - from this angle - with this set of facts to back it up, while another channel takes the opposite point of view and again selects another set of facts to make its case.

In the age of consumer choice - so the argument continues – the listener or viewer should be able to choose between the varying viewpoints put forward by the various channels and choose for himself.

Those arguments are both deceptive and wrong.

In this speech I am going to argue that not only are those values of accuracy and impartiality as important as they ever were, but also that there are new factors coming into play which make those values more relevant rather than less in this new century. Because while the world may be connected technologically, it is far from connected in terms of mutual understanding.

Here's the paradox:

Today's world is increasingly inter-dependent, yet increasingly mistrustful and fearful. It is a world that is often gravely lacking in understanding and tolerance.

It is a world that is awash with information, yet ignorance and propaganda are rife. It is a world in which issues are more complex but news coverage is often more simplistic.

You could call it a Disconnected World in a world of globalisation.

(SHORT PAUSE)

Some media organisations will be tempted to play to this sense of disconnection and alienation. I believe the challenge for broadcasters is to provide trusted, reliable information, to make sense of this complex, confusing and contradictory world and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas.

At its best, broadcasting has the potential to foster understanding and establish a genuine dialogue across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries. There has never been a more important time to connect with our audiences and encourage them to connect with each other. I shall be returning to this later.

In the next few minutes, I would like to consider some of the key issues we all face in news and current affairs broadcasting.

This conference comes at the end of a year which has seen momentous global events - the war in Iraq, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime and the new diplomatic landscape have all dominated this . year's headlines.

Wars have always been one of the greatest tests for news organizations and this is particularly so for a publicly funded national organization like the BBC.

The BBC started its Iraq coverage with some clear aims. They are aims which we have kept clearly in mind in the months since. First accuracy: in a situation where a lot of speculation and half truths howl around, we have to get the basics right. Not for us breaking rumours masquerading as breaking news - of course we want to be fast – but always better to be "second and right" rather than "first and wrong".

Secondly, we have to combine that commitment to accuracy with enough analysis to ensure that our audiences can make sense of what is going on.

Thirdly, our coverage must be comprehensive. During the war we were not only going to report from the front line - yes, we had to have correspondents in all the obvious places - with the American and British forces, and in Baghdad, with the Kurds in the north, Doha and so on. But we were also going to make sure that we heard from our teams in Amman, Cairo and Teheran. And from Djakarta, Paris, Johannesburg and Tokyo.

Finally, we will report all views on this conflict and allow those varying viewpoints their say - no matter how popular .or unpopular those voices are.

During the war, American news networks broadcast 840 interviews - only four were critical of the decision to go to war. Four out of 840. I don't believe any audience is served by that sort of imbalance. No audience is served merely by telling it what it wants to hear. It is important for a well-informed society: for a well-educated society: for a fully functioning democratic society, that audiences are able to come up against the unexpected and uncomfortable.

The war was truly remarkable for us at the BBC. In Iraq, we were providing the lifeline service of trusted information to the Iraqi people through the BBC Arabic Service, whilst at the same time coalition forces were tuning in to the World Service in English on the battlefield and as they advanced to Baghdad and meanwhile at the Central Command in Doha they were watching BBC World.

That's quite a role and quite a responsibility.

(PAUSE)

As the watching and listening intensified, so too did the scrutiny of BBC coverage. With the United Kingdom profoundly split over the war: with many countries strongly against it and with the United Nations at stalemate, we always knew there would be flak from every side and that our impartiality would be called into question. It was Huw Wheldon, the BBC's Director of Television, who said in his Richard Dimbleby lecture in 1976, that a Britain divided puts the BBC on the rack. And so it turned out to be - only this time it was a world divided.

The BBC was accused on the one hand of favouring the Bush-Blair position and on the other of being soft on Saddam. We were accused of abandoning impartiality and of sticking too rigorously to it, of rushing to judgment and being too cautious. Either we were not devoting enough time to the deaths of Iraqi civilians, it was argued - or we were giving wall-to-wall coverage to anti-war demonstrations.

We were accused of following a script written by the White House and Downing Street, or fostering sympathy for Saddam Hussein. The BBC was variously dubbed the Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation and the Blair Broadcasting Corporation. Different

constituencies often expect the BBC to support their cause. In times of war, British governments of every persuasion have sought to use the media to manage public opinion. In doing so they have often sought to influence the BBC and on occasions to apply pressure. We saw some of this in the UK Home Secretary David Blunkett's attack on the media for giving too much credence to claims coming from the Iraqi regime: and again in Downing Street's attempts to rubbish reports on the plight of ordinary Iraqis as looters ran amok in Baghdad.

(SHORT PAUSE)

No one should be surprised or overly concerned by the fact that Governments try to pressure and attempt to influence us or assume that it somehow damages our credibility. We should listen to criticism and where our critics have a point change things. But we must also be very robust in defending editorial independence and freedom. We must never lose sight of the fact that governments and broadcasters play different roles in a democracy.

As you know, there is a judicial inquiry in the United Kingdom under Lord Hutton which has among other things, looked at one set of reports in the run-up to the Iraq war. The BBC has already acknowledged that there will be things to be learnt from that, but until Lord Hutton has reported, we are not going to comment further. On this question of independence from government, let me finally quote from the BBC's World Affairs Correspondent John Simpson, who wrote this in an article published before the war:

"At the times of Suez, Biafra, Vietnam, the Falklands, the American bombing of Libya and the NATO attacks on Kosovo and Serbia the BBC reported the opposition to these wars fully. "On every occasion the Government, Labour or Conservative, tried to bully the BBC into supporting the official line. On every occasion, the BBC resisted; sometimes energetically, sometimes not as energetically as it ought to have done."

Writing about the present conflict, John went on to say, "It would be nice to think that the British Government won't repeat the self-defeating tactic of attacking the BBC's reporting now as it did during the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999. The BBC hierarchy's defence of itself then was impeccable and the Government received a bloody nose. Yet Governments have as much right as anyone else to put pressure on the BBC; it's only a problem if the BBC caves in".

(PAUSE)

While it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions from the war, there are some initial thoughts we can reflect on. The war has undoubtedly shown why international news broadcasting per se is more important today than ever. It has also shown how rapidly the whole nature of international broadcasting has changed.

The core values of trust, independence, impartiality and being audience focused remain vital. But in a disconnected world, we must recognise that perspectives can be radically

different between different countries and cultures. That includes perceptions of impartiality.

We must be vigilant about our use of language. Unlike many US broadcasters, the BBC did not routinely describe coalition forces as "liberators" .

Nor did we label the war as "Operation Iraqi Freedom". Nor – unlike some of the Arabic broadcasters - will we label Palestinian suicide bombers as "martyrs". Nor - to the annoyance of many pro-Israeli groups, will we call them "terrorists". We avoid descriptions that carry value judgments; it's even better journalism if you can avoid labels altogether.

Like other international broadcasters, we are fortunate in having journalists from all over the world working for us. They contribute a special insight into our audiences that informs all our news programmes.

At the BBC, the experience and insight of our Arabic Service colleagues and other regional broadcasters has been of immense importance during the Iraq war. They ensure that we are able to present a broad world perspective on air - in English and our 42 language services.

And the fact that we have the largest network of broadcasting correspondents rooted across the whole world means we are committed to eyewitness reportage, a global agenda and a truly international perspective.

(PAUSE)

I think one of the biggest differences between this war and those before was the difference in the nature of the relationship with our audiences. New technology can provide an immediate, informative, intelligent, interactive platform for discussion and debate.

The contrast with the days of linear, direct "push" broadcasting is dramatic. Today's international broadcasting is now very much a two-way dialogue of interactivity- a global arena for debate and exchange of views.

In the first three weeks of the war the World Service received 360,000 e-mails from our listeners. Text messages to English programmes grew ten-fold to a thousand a day following the outbreak of war. The BBC Arabic Service launched its daily debate programme, and on that programme a really sharp division of opinion emerged between those in the wider Arabic world who opposed the war and those Iraqis who had fled from Saddam Hussein's government.

The debate has been continued ever since. Major global figures, local politicians and ordinary Arabs all join in. The programme has been receiving thousands of e-mails each day since its launch in March.

We believe that this type of debate can really help to achieve greater understanding, openness and dialogue. This creation of wide public forums is becoming a new and increasingly important role for public broadcasters everywhere. As niche broadcasting grows, audiences are increasingly only going to hear about things with which they are familiar. They are only going to be exposed to views with which they are comfortable.

In a world awash with information, there is even more need for a place where people feel they are being told the unvarnished truth, and where they can listen to and take part in a debate in which all sides of the argument can be heard.

PAUSE

I'd like to end on a personal note.

Like the editor of every international news organisation, a lot has been going through my mind in recent months. I've touched on some of these ideas in this speech. The importance of establishing a dialogue between different nations and cultures - of connecting the world in dialogue and understanding as well as technologically.

The importance of defending our editorial freedom and ensuring that we present a full range of views. 'The importance of continually questioning not just those we interview, but ourselves - about our approach to news programmes, and especially how we maintain impartiality.

Above all, however, the last few months have reminded me of three things:

First, how much we rely on the professionalism, commitment and courage of our reporters and programme makers in the field. When we talk about connecting with a world audience, they are the people who make the first and most important connection. They are the eyes and ears for our audiences, and it is their skill, their courage and their professionalism that underpin everything else that we do. I believe we, and our audiences, owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Secondly, we must never compromise on our values - integrity, independence, impartiality, trust. They must be non-negotiable. Indeed trust is the foundation on which our whole organisation rests. And it is the yardstick by which we must be measured. We must report truthfully and fairly, and reflect a full range of opinions including those critical of government. Our first duty is to our audiences.

My third conclusion is about our responsibility and role as broadcasters in a world that is at once globalised and yet, at times, filled with mistrust, misinformation, oppression, hate and division. I believe broadcasters can play a part in establishing a global conversation and in doing so remove some of the misunderstanding and apprehension in the world today. We can play a part in reconnecting the disconnected world by being a catalyst for dialogue, debate and mutual understanding.

And by doing all of these things, I believe that broadcasting can contribute by making the world a better place in the millennium. Thank you for your attention to these important matters this afternoon.