

Breaking up the BBC

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Add the initials BBC to the growing list of casualties of the war on Iraq. Rupert Murdoch's Sunday Times reports with a concealed smile fogging a disguised self-interest that the British Broadcasting Corporation, as we have known it, and the world has loved it, may soon be no more. The world's most respected news organization may become the latest target of the Blair Witch project.

Is this for real? Or is it a trial balloon to test reaction or prepare public opinion? We don't know but don't rule any devious strategy out.

Here's the story:

British government considering dismantling BBC: report

LONDON (AFP) - Britain's government is considering a plan to break up the BBC and remove its independent status in the wake of a bitter row with the state-funded broadcaster over the Iraq war, a report said. Government papers detailing possible changes to the BBC's structure proposed breaking it into separate regional entities for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, The Sunday Times said.

The documents, which the newspaper said had been drawn up by "senior civil servants", also suggested that the job of ensuring the BBC's impartiality could be taken away from the corporation's board of governors. The BBC, which is independently run despite being financed by public money through a compulsory television license, is currently facing perhaps the worst breakdown in relations with the government in its 82-year history.

The dispute came after a BBC radio report alleged in May last year that Prime Minister Tony Blair government deliberately exaggerated the threat posed by Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction in a prewar dossier.

Plans being considered include giving a government media watchdog greater control over the BBC's output, closing BBC outlets which are not considered "public service" and even forcing the corporation to share some of its license fee revenue with other broadcasters. Such a move would most likely prompt public concern, given that the BBC is still generally revered in Britain for being impartial and accurate. (<http://tinyurl.com/2zcdv>)

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What is the background to this and why should Americans care?

The media war fought alongside the military combat was nominally competitive although in many cases, here in the US especially, networks shared footage and cleaved to the same pro-war outlook.

On both sides of the Atlantic, media strategy was at the heart of war strategy. In the US and Britain even as networks fought each other for market share and “mind share,” governments were fighting to keep the media on the reservation and in line with government policy.

Here in post 9/11 America, the Bush Administration found imposing “information dominance” a cake walk — I have written a whole book about how that was achieved with nary a serious dissenting objection. Our lack of media diversity assured this uniformity of approach, aided and abetted by a compliant media.

But in Britain, where you have a dominant and independent public broadcaster, the real diversity that exists was perceived by ruling elites in all parties as a problem. Now, out from behind the curtain, there is talk of a final solution, with the findings of the Hutton report as a pretext.

MEDIA CONTROL

To the war makers, the challenge of exerting media control in Britain was the opposite of the one in America. With media consolidation in place in the US, and with media companies lobbying the FCC for beneficial rule changes, it was a safe bet that the networks would not rock the boat. They needed the government’s blessings — and with Fox News playing the role of the vigilant Patriotism Police, not unlike the virtue cops in Iran, pro-war coverage was assured.

In Britain, where you have more diversity and more skepticism, it was a harder sell. “There is certainly an American media culture that is different from the British media culture,” BBC contributor John Kampner told me last summer.

Kampner continues, “In the States, as far as I can ascertain, there is a presumption that politicians are right and honest and truthful. And that is the default from which everything else operates. In Britain in some ways we have seemed to have gone to the other extreme in which we have a default in which everything and anything a politician says must be a lie and they have to prove to us otherwise.”

Extreme or not, reporters did do more digging in England, and some worked at the BBC. This infuriated Tony Blair and his constant companion and counterpart to Saddam’s Mohammed Al Sahaf, Alistair Campbell. They fought back by spin and deception: concealing information and, according to a BBC executive I spoke with off the record, pressuring the BBC with a long low intensity campaign of sub-rosa meetings, tendentious

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letters, demands for clarification and correction. The government was like a yapping dog and the BEEB became its bone (and bone of contention.)

POWER IS AT STAKE

The BBC's news chief Richard Sambrook understood clearly what worried the government, telling an interviewer, "The consequences of a government losing public support during a war is that in the end they will lose power: they lose moral authority, they lose authority within their own boundaries and then they will lose power."

In response to this pressure, the BBC insisted on its independence publicly while privately trying to make nice to Number Ten. One time 'Tony crony,' ousted Director General Greg Dyke, wrote to the Prime Minister to assure him that the coverage would be balanced, that BBC staffers would be barred from demonstrating, and even that more phones would be installed so that pro-war viewers could phone in for on-air polls.

While the BBC seemed positively anti-war to the many American viewers in contrast to what we were watching, anti-war activists there complained about a pro-war tilt in the name of "balance." A post war study of BBC content of leading news programs by researchers at Cardiff University confirmed that they were, in fact, more supportive of the government than not.

No matter. In this conflict it was perception, not reality, that mattered. Public opinion turned against Blair. He was being tagged as President Bush's "poodle."

And he blamed the BBC.

While this was going on, other interests also lined up against the BBC. Murdoch, a long time Blair supporter had been attacking the BBC for years on two grounds — 1) that it was too liberal, and 2) that its dominant market position funded by a government imposed fee provided unfair competition to commercial broadcasters like himself. Waiting in the wings were powerful US broadcast interests who want in to the media market. They were envious of the BBC's financial results that showed how profitable some of its ventures were. Greg Dyke's success in trimming costs and making money were an affront to US broadcasters who have been government protected monopolists.

ENTER MEL KARMAZIN

Last fall Mel Karmazin (the powerful chairman of Viacom who just testified in those congressional obscenity hearings because of MTV's Superbowl halftime show) was the featured speaker at the Royal Television Society conference. He and Murdoch were the 'point people' for the broadcasting industry before the war. His CBS network received a top rating from a conservative media monitoring group for its coverage of the war.

Viacom, Time Warner and other US giants want to do more business in Britain. (Clear

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Channel is already there while US entertainment shows are all over the small screen.) BBC America and BBC World channels are now on US cable, leading the US giants to ask why US interests shouldn't play a bigger role in the UK.

Helping them out is a new FCC like regulatory body whose chairman has met with Michael Powell in Washington. The hope is to put the BBC under its wings when the BBC charter comes up for renewal in 2006. They say it is to "rationalize" the market place and assure fairer competition. The real agenda, as reported by AFP and the Sunday Times, goes further and will have the effect of further controlling BBC content. They had kept their real plans secret until now.

THE PLAN TO CONTROL THE BBC

Reports AFP: "Plans being considered include giving a government media watchdog greater control over the BBC's output, closing BBC outlets which are not considered "public service" and even forcing the corporation to share some of its license fee revenue with other broadcasters."

The movement to break up the BBC was building steam but needed a pretext, in the same way that US involvement in World War II needed a Pearl Harbor, or some say the Bush Administrations imperial plans needed a 911. The British public, which adores the BBC, could not be turned against it without one.

The government soon found it after reporter Andrew Gilligan reported that the government "sexed up" its dossier selling the war, one of 19 strong stories he filed on the subject. Those two words reporting on his interpretation of what he was told by the late UK weapons expert David Kelly were uttered on a 6:07 a.m. radio report – hardly prime time. The government denied the charge strenuously, making a "federal case out of the error which was elevated virtually to an act of treason. Pounding away, they used it as the defining example of all the BBC's alleged sins. While those words may have been hyped, Gilligan's reporting was essentially true. I was surprised when the editor of the conservative Spectator came to Gilligan's defense assuring one and all that he supported the war and hated Saddam as much as Tony does.

So much for the government's anti-war conspiracy theory.

HUTTON'S WHITEWASH

Kelly's suicide led to the appointment of an inquiry headed by Judge Hutton who had covered up the Bloody Sunday massacre investigation in Ireland and was a voice for freeing Chile's Pinochet when he was arrested and held in England for his human rights crimes.

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Hutton appeared to be impartial, but then blamed the BBC for everything, and cleared the government even as its key claims of a threat from WMDs in Iraq were being discredited. The Chairman of the BBC's Board its Director-General resigned and then Gilligan resigned. The staff protested but this tempest in a teapot turned into a hurricane.

Despite widely believed charges that the Hutton report was a “whitewash,” the anti-BBC forces in government and industry found their moment and are now, public opinion be dammed, charging ahead to turn a flap into a force for insuring their media control and more privatization. As usual, Rupert Murdoch is lead in the charge perhaps emboldened by how his pal Silvio Berlusconi in Italy has strip mined the public broadcaster RAI.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

The stakes are high and not only for people in Britain.

If the BBC is dismantled, the practice of independent journalism itself could suffer a fatal blow since the BBC is the beacon, however imperfect, for real global reporting known all over the world. The loss of BBC will demolish the power of public broadcasting which is under attack world worldwide (PBS in our country has long been tamed to insure it could not compete against commercial broadcasters.)

Take out the BBC and the war for Iraqi freedom will accomplish another mission—to set back press freedom. At that point, the imposition of Bush style “democracy” in Iraq will have imposed a cost on every democracy premised on the public’s right to know.