

Breaking up the BBC, Part 2

By Danny Schechter

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To my surprise, The London Sunday Times' story (**Breaking up the BBC Voices 19,04**) on the plans to dismantle the BBC was not picked up widely in this country or even in Britain. It took a day and a half for Matt Drudge to link to it. Will this story, in the end, be ignored or regarded as a ho-hummer, or some deserved payback for the ludicrous findings of Lord Hutton? So far it does not seem to even be on the radar of our own media critics. I do think it is important to state that in defending the BBC's right to exist as an independent broadcaster, I am not in any way arguing that the BBC is without fault or that its reporting is superior on every subject. Far from it.

If you are interested in critical perspectives on the British Media check out David Miller's new book *Tell Me Lies* (Pluto), John Pilger's writings and the website MediaLens which, in mid January, carried two long pieces by the BBC's former Middle East correspondent Tim Llewellyn (they also can be accessed at www.williambowles.info/media). He indicts BBC coverage of Israel/Palestine for the domestic audience in Britain. His detailed argument is important because it shows how skewed the coverage is. But he also notes that "In the past dozen years or so, The BBC has become a vast, impersonal, extremely successful corporation, a corporation in the modern sense, rich, powerful, crushing the opposition, raiding high and expanding in many directions. It is on the verge of becoming a commercial organization with its diversity of interests..."

It is always chancy for an American like myself to write about Britain, even if I did go to the London School of Economics. I try to keep in touch with as many people in the UK as I can to insure that I am not off in the ether of some conspiratorial theory. I sent my article around to several media critics and even BBC journalists. These are some of the responses I've had.

I invited Jake Lynch, who reports for BBC and runs Reportingtheworld.org, to comment on and supplement my analysis. Here's his input:

"1. When you say "Gilligan's story was essentially true" you could point out that evidence

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to the Hutton Inquiry proved the UK Government's dossier of September 2002 was indeed 'sexed-up', with a swarm of 'mays' and 'mights' transformed into 'wills' and 'dos' at the behest of Downing St spin doctors; plenty of intelligence personnel were indeed unhappy about it as Gilligan rightly reported. The infamous 45 minute claim referred only to battlefield weapons, not missiles – as the authors of the document knew full well, but did not spell out. The intelligence warning that attacking Saddam Hussein could trigger the use of whatever weapons he did have, was suppressed, as was a finding by the top-ranking Joint Intelligence Committee, in Whitehall, that war on Iraq would worsen the threat from al Qaeda.

“So, thanks to Gilligan, we know more about the misinformation and misrepresentations used to sell the case for war than we did at this stage of any previous, comparable story.

“2. The problem now is that the BBC has drawn its horns in. Just as you sometimes see some economic bad news which, business reporters tell us, ‘made no impact on the markets because dealers had already factored in their expectations to the price of the day’, so BBC journalism factored in bad news from the Hutton Inquiry, in advance, in its reporting from Iraq.

“Prime exhibit – its reporting on January 4, when the Independent on Sunday had an exclusive story by Robert Fisk, perhaps the most important journalist working for the British media, about brutality by British troops in Basra. Fisk had abundant documentation in telling the story of a young man who had been arrested by the Brits and beaten to death – letters from the UK hospital detailing the autopsy findings; a letter from the Brits to this young man's family offering a few grand in hush money.

“On the same day, it so happened, Tony Blair went to Basra and mouthed some platitudes with British troops in the background. This led the BBC's news that day, with no mention at all of the important Fisk story. Astonishingly, Blair was allowed to bletcher on about how marvellous they were, with no mention of the elephant in the room – that day's credible, amply documented report about the ‘dark side’ of their activities in the area.

“Also much has been made in the UK media of how little trouble there is in the UK sector, compared with the ‘sunni triangle’ being patrolled by the Americans. Must be their superior training, better attitude etc, has been the comment. Bullshit – it's because the area they're patrolling is populated by Shias who see themselves as the winners in a civil war, aided and abetted by their US and British friends (could turn nasty if they are now denied the spoils in the form of majority rule).

“BBC audiences, at least of the main TV news programs, are getting no analysis of this. There is no sense of the violence as a consequence of the war, as the responsibility of the ‘war party’. There is no equivalent of the piece in the current Time magazine, about the

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dangers of Iraq lapsing into civil strife. There is no equivalent of the recent and very good piece for CNN, by Sheila McVicar, about the impunity with which the occupying forces have been behaving, with thousands either killed with no comeback or imprisoned without due process – and its likely effect on the conflict. Instead, in one report last July, on deaths since the official end of hostilities, we were told, by the reporter for BBCTV, there had been ‘an unknown number of Iraqi deaths, caught up in crossfire and general lawlessness’ - two staples of military propaganda the world over.

“Other news organizations are, in other words, now making the running on this story. New Labour has already succeeded in neutering the BBC to a large extent – which, if it happened in, say, Uzbekistan or Malaysia, would be seen for what it is – a sinister abrogation of press freedom by an authoritarian government.

VIEWS FROM ENGLAND

I asked David Traynier who has been sharing his views with us from England on the BBC affair to comment on my assessment. Here’s what he said:

“I enjoyed reading your article. I agree entirely with your central point that the Gilligan affair will be used as a Trojan horse with which to either damage or destroy the BBC. ...

“On the comparisons between the US and UK media, I think John Kampner overstates the difference. The British media is more open than in the US (and more open over Iraq than previous conflicts) but one has to be careful not to overstate matters –from my recollection, there was a broad ideological conformity in the British media over the parameters of the debate. For example, while there was talk about what should be ‘done about Iraq’ there was no real dissent from the line that something had to be done.

“Likewise, on the issue of WMD, although there was debate about how we should have reacted to Iraq’s WMD, there was no real questioning of their existence, except in specialist journals like PR Week, where Gordon Brown’s former spin doctor, Charlie Whelan, was quite scathing, noting that nobody seriously doubted that ‘the decision had already been made’ but wondering why the spin machine had done such a poor job softening people up in advance. (In fact, there probably was an effort during the 1990s to soften up public opinion for any future attack, as well as the weekly bombings, known as ‘Mass Appeal,’ which was run by MI6 using information from the ‘Rockingham Cell,’ which Dr. Kelly mentioned in his testimony to Parliament. I can supply references if you like.)

“Certainly, there was no suggestion, before the war, that I saw that the Government was acting in anything other than good faith –I think Gilligan was the first high profile person to break this taboo. As Kampner points out, it was a harder sell, but I think the BBC did its best to help. ...

“Personally, I do wonder about Campbell and Co’s righteous indignation about Gilligan’s

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allegation. I don't know if you've seen it, but one of Cherie Blair's legal colleagues has a piece about this in the London Review of Books (I heartily recommend this), which may cause the Blairs some embarrassment. In this, Conor Gearty asks and answers an important question:

“If Gilligan's broadcast was so terrible, if the Blairs were having sleepless nights as a result of being accused of deceit, if the prime minister was shunned at home and abroad as a liar, the law has a simple remedy, the one adopted by Albert Reynolds in the case that Hutton makes so much of: sue for libel. . . . why did poor, maligned, isolated Alastair Campbell not sue himself, especially when (he would have us believe) his own honour was so grossly impugned? And what about the Mail on Sunday, where Gilligan's greatest excesses of character destruction were to be found? Campbell makes much of his hatred of the paper: here was a chance to take it to the cleaners. Had this course of action been adopted, the judge and jury who heard the case would not have been constricted by the terms of reference with which Hutton misled himself. There would have been questions about the context and a proper cross-examination of the principal actors. The jury might not have been able to avoid asking itself about those supposed weapons of mass destruction that this supposedly unsexed up dossier was so certain about. In truth no such suit would have succeeded, which is why none was launched.’ (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n04/gear01_.html)

“This is an excellent point and does point very strongly to the conclusion that Gilligan and Hutton are a Trojan horse. The Daily Mail has been virtually ignored, despite the fact that in was in this that Gilligan made his most damning claims (note too that SKY News actually faked a report at one point- although it's import was far less serious, I'll concede). My own feeling on this is that Hutton is being used as an excuse to dismantle or privatize the BBC but that the idea that such moves are motivated by Government 'anger' about the BBC's behavior during the 'war' is a smokescreen.

”I think the important factors are the others you discuss –the longstanding commercial pressures and possibly pressure from the WTO and the EU about the BBC's structure being a 'barrier to competition' (can't think of the references off the top of my head but you'll probably know better than me) are the real motivation behind any moves to alter or effectively destroy the BBC.

“It can't simply be the current poor relations, since governments have been talking about the idea of privatising the BBC for years. The Tories hated the BBC and Norman Tebbit was famous for his antipathy – and Campbelleque letters- to them. . . .”

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DAVID MILLER

David Miller of Stirling University in Scotland produced an excellent collection of articles on coverage of the Iraq War called “Tell Me Lies.” (Pluto). Here is his take:

“Sorry not to reply sooner, been away. I think you have all the essentials and your take on it is the right one. One thing to say: Yes, the ST agenda is very clear and the status of the account they give is unclear. Obviously the details of the ST story may not reflect what they (Blair and Murdoch et al) might actually do and whatever they actually do will be in pursuit of their interests. But I would say that the break up of the BBC is not necessarily a bad thing seen in a different context. The key struggle at the moment is the defence of the remnants of public service broadcasting, but we might also plan and campaign for a strengthened and democratised PSB. This would mean, amongst other things, closing down the BBC’s commercial operations. Most importantly it would mean a more effective separation between the government and the BBC.

“The Sunday Times piece raised the possibility of making the BBC a quango (Quasi-autonomous non government organisation), which would make it MORE subject to government control. Just the opposite is needed and increased democratic control of the BBC. This could easily be done by guaranteeing elected union representation on the BBC Board of governors and giving all licence fee payers a vote in the appointment of governors, effectively removing the power of patronage from Blair and the Dept of Culture, Media and Sport. Public service broadcasting should serve the public and not political elites or marketing and advertising professionals. “

I am hoping to hear from others at the BBC as well. I must say though that I was discouraged when one well known BBC investigative reporter, now living in the US was dismissive of my efforts to report on this story.

“Nobody here gives a shit about the BBC,” he said in his most knowing and cynical voice.