

Of tails and dogs: An editor is fired

By David Edwards

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In January an inquiry presided over by Lord Hutton determined that a report by BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan had been “unfounded”. Last year, Gilligan had reported that senior intelligence officials thought the British government's claim that Iraqi WMD could be deployed within 45-minutes was “risible”. Gilligan also dared to suggest that the government must have known that the claim was “wrong”. As a result of Hutton’s criticism, Gilligan, together with the BBC's chairman, Gavyn Davies, and director-general, Greg Dyke, resigned. Noam Chomsky made the only point that mattered:

“The idea that the state - whether hiding itself beyond a judge’s robes or not - should even have a voice in whether a journalist's report was ‘unfounded’ is utterly shocking, an indication of remarkably low level of respect for freedom of speech and reverence for authority. Just for laughs, can you imagine an inquiry into whether a press report praising state or corporate power was ‘unfounded?’” (Chomskychat, www.zmag.org, January 29, 2004)

Last week, we witnessed the equally unedifying spectacle of David Black, a former commander of the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment, demanding that readers, directors and shareholders call the Daily Mirror to account: “It is time that the ego of one editor is measured against the life of a soldier”, he said. (BBC1, News At Ten, May 14, 2004)

“At that point... he [Piers Morgan] had to go”, Roy Greenslade wrote in the Guardian (‘Over to you, Sly’, May 17). Even though, by this time, the army “had produced only assertion. Military police inquiries were – and are – continuing”, Peter Preston pointed out in the Observer. (‘End of the Piers show’, The Observer, May 16, 2004)

No matter, the corporate puppeteers who define ‘free’ for our ‘free press’ had made their decision. Trinity-Mirror’s Chief Executive, Sly Bailey, “has impressed the City” the BBC’s Business Editor, Jeff Randall, noted, “she had to show who was the tail and who was the dog”. Randall added: “These companies don’t actually shoot high-profile media types for fun, but they certainly don’t lose any sleep over it.” (BBC1, News At Ten, May 14, 2004)

Of tails and dogs: An editor is fired / 2

Like the rest of the media, Randall appeared to find nothing shocking in the idea that corporate power – notably Trinity-Mirror’s “American shareholders”, who despise Morgan for his anti-war stance – can simply dismiss editors at will. “Corporate influence within the media is part and parcel of a ‘free’ press”, Emily Bell wrote in the Guardian – a statement rendered meaningless by the inverted commas around the word ‘free’. (‘Why shareholders can be a menace’, Emily Bell, The Guardian, May 17, 2004)

In reality, the globalisation of business power, and Blair’s demolition of the parliamentary left, mean that dissident journalists now face the full weight of state-corporate flak with essentially zero organised political support. In the absence of this support, establishment mud sticks.

Unsurprisingly, then, a cowed media lined up to heap invective on the sacked editor, and to declare the decision ‘correct’, ‘necessary’, ‘inevitable’. Melanie Phillips of the Daily Mail said of Morgan’s crimes: “I think it’s an act of treachery, actually, against the interests of this country. At a time of war, to publish a lie which puts our troops in such an appalling light is unforgivable.” (Newsnight, BBC2, May 14, 2004)

In which case, the offices of the media should now be empty with journalists having resigned en masse after publishing government lies that not merely *risked* British soldiers’ lives, but resulted in scores of actual deaths, and in the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis. Leave aside the appalling light cast on British troops sent to fight an illegal war without UN backing on completely fraudulent pretexts. Phillips continued: “And that there is a separate question mark over the behaviour of a tiny minority of these troops is entirely irrelevant.”

Imagine if, following Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations on February 5, 2003, WMDs really had been found in Iraq. Imagine, further, that these finds had not matched those claimed in photographic and other evidence presented by Powell to the UN. Powell would have been in essence right but, as the media have been tirelessly reminding us, ‘you can’t prove a truth with a lie’. Clearly, according to Phillips, the discovery of WMD would have been “entirely irrelevant” – Powell, Bush, Rumsfeld, Blair and others would have to go.

Eve Pollard, former editor of the Sunday Mirror commented: “It was inevitable – he had to go.” (Newsnight, May 14, 2004) Imagine Pollard declaring of Bush and Blair: ‘It’s inevitable – they have to go.’ In fact Pollard’s comment merely reflects the balance of power in society, while suggesting some kind of moral truth, which in fact is nowhere in sight. Crude power aside, there is no reason whatever why it was “inevitable” that Morgan should have gone, but not Bush and Blair.

The BBC’s Nicholas Witchell was happy to confuse the issue of the Mirror’s pictures with the wider issue of British abuse of Iraqis: “After the appalling *reality* of what the Americans

Of tails and dogs: An editor is fired / 3

have been doing, the Mirror's pictures threatened to compromise the work of every British soldier." (BBC 1 News At Ten, May 14, 2004, original emphasis)

By contrasting the "reality" of US abuses with the "Mirror's pictures", Witchell gave the impression that claims of British abuse and torture are unreal – an outrageous distortion, given recent Red Cross and Amnesty reports (see below).

In similar vein, a day earlier, Andrew Marr, the BBC's political editor, said that if photographs published by the Daily Mirror prove to be fakes, then "Mr. Morgan's position would be very difficult indeed." (BBC 1 News, 6:00, May 13, 2004) In response to the suggestion that the government's problems "go beyond these Mirror pictures", Marr said that "the bigger issue for the government are these ghastly American pictures and the reaction that that has produced across the Arab world, particularly in Iraq".

Marr's claim that the American pictures represent our government's "bigger issue" is a textbook example of what we have called Feigned Media Psychosis (See: Media Alert, Feigned Media Psychosis, September 5, 2003, www.medialens.org).

According to the Red Cross report ignored by Marr, married father of two Baha Mousa, 28, was among nine men seized at a hotel in Basra by British troops last September: "Following their arrest, the nine men were made to kneel, face and hands against the ground, as if in a prayer position," the report said. "The soldiers stamped on the back of the neck of those raising their head." ('Red Cross report details alleged Iraq abuses', Agencies, The Guardian, May 10, 2004)

Soldiers confiscated the men's money before moving them to al-Hakimiya, a former office of Saddam Hussein's secret police. There, they were "beaten severely". Before he died, fellow captives heard Mousa "screaming and asking for assistance". Eyewitnesses told the Red Cross that Mousa had a broken nose, several broken ribs and cuts to his face that were "consistent with beating".

Amnesty International launched "a scathing attack on the British military in Iraq", the Guardian reported just two days before Marr's report, accusing British soldiers of the unlawful killings of civilians and of failing to investigate shootings. Amnesty produced evidence of eight cases in which Iraqi civilians, including a girl aged eight, were shot dead by British soldiers in southern Iraq: "In a number of cases UK soldiers have opened fire and killed Iraqi civilians in circumstances where there was apparently no imminent threat of death or serious injury to themselves or others", the report added. ('Amnesty details killing of civilians by British soldiers', Rory McCarthy, The Guardian, May 11, 2004)

All of this is allowed to conveniently fade to the margins while journalists rage at the Mirror's sins. On Newsnight, Andrew Neil described how Morgan had made the Mirror "an anti-war propaganda paper. I mean, it wasn't straight journalism – it was very slanted and

Of tails and dogs: An editor is fired / 4

skewed journalism.” (Newsnight, May 14, 2004)

This, from a former Murdoch employee and current employee of the BBC, which, according to a Cardiff University report, “displayed the most ‘pro-war’ agenda of any broadcaster”. (Matt Wells, ‘Study deals a blow to claims of anti-war bias in BBC news’, The Guardian, July 4, 2003)

The references to “skewed” and “slanted” journalism require interpretation – they in fact refer to journalism critical of powerful interests. Australian academic Sharon Beder explains: “A story that supports the status quo is generally considered to be neutral and is not questioned in terms of its objectivity while one that challenges the status quo tends to be perceived as having a ‘point of view’ and therefore biased.” (Beder, *Global Spin*, Green Books, 1996, p.205)

Everyone now, of course, always knew the Mirror pictures were fakes. Neil said: “They were fakes from the start, they were clearly fakes. I said [so] within two days of seeing them.” (Newsnight, May 15, 2004)

Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger, said of the Guardian’s picture editor, Eamonn McCabe: “He was sure they were hoaxes.” (ITN, 10:30 News, May 15, 2004)

Channel 4’s Jon Snow was never in doubt: “It was pretty obvious they were a hoax from beginning to end.” (Channel 4 News, May 15, 2004)

Again, the offices of high-profile media should now be emptying. However foolish Morgan might have been, he at least published the pictures in good faith believing they were authentic. Alas, we now know that many other high-profile journalists published them, so risking British lives, knowing they were fakes. In fact, at time of writing, we have not yet seen incontrovertible evidence that the pictures *were* fakes. Amid the bleating of journalists positioning themselves safely in the centre of the herd, a moment of comparative sanity was provided by the Observer’s Peter Preston: “The pictures of British troops torturing Iraqi prisoners were, indeed, probably phoney. Not obviously, not without supporting evidence, but still duds. The MoD and army, after a fortnight’s investigation, shout as much from the rooftops... But was the case fully made? By no means. Morgan was hanging on, seeking ‘incontrovertible evidence’ of falsehood when his board caved in under him. And the difficulty is that the army, up to the moment the boom was lowered, had produced only assertion. Military police inquiries were – and are – continuing.” (‘End of the Piers show, Morgan lived by the sword, but did not deserve to be stabbed in the back’, Peter Preston, The Observer, May 16, 2004)

And this is what is so staggering about the media’s indifference to Morgan’s sacking – even though the case had not yet been satisfactorily made, an editor of a major UK newspaper was sacked in response to pressure from, of all institutions, the army.

Of tails and dogs: An editor is fired / 5

John Pilger noted the irony: “Not one member of a government found conclusively to have lied, and lied, about its reasons for attacking Iraq and causing the deaths of thousands of innocent people, has been sacked, or has resigned.” (Email to Media Lens, May 15, 2004)

Despite what the media would have us believe, it matters greatly that one of the fiercest critics of a catastrophically immoral and illegal war has been so casually silenced by a combination of political, military and corporate power.

It matters that this comes a few months after a high-profile BBC journalist was denounced and sacked by a combination of political, legal and corporate pressure.

It matters that Morgan was dismissed with unseemly haste by corporate interests clearly waiting for the opportunity.

And it matters that increasingly vulnerable mainstream dissidents are being targeted and silenced by authors of mass violence who, dangerously immune from democratic pressures, remain in place.

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