



## **Reputations to Lose: BBC versus the Blair Government**

### **Case Summary**

Media outlets and journalists frequently elicit criticism for their coverage of an issue or event. Typically, complaints—whether from a source, subject or member of the general public—are expressed via a variety of official and unofficial channels such as online message boards and letters to the editor. News organizations deal with them swiftly, using a range of strategies from publishing corrections to addressing the problem in an ombudsman or public editor column. But not all matters resolve so easily.

This case examines what can happen when a publicly-funded news organization is challenged by the government of the day. In 2003, reporter Andrew Gilligan and his employer, the U.K.-based British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), became embroiled in a dispute with Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party government and its communications chief, Alastair Campbell. The standoff, which centered on Gilligan's contention that the government had "sexed up" its intelligence and probably knew that it had used faulty information to make its case for going to war in Iraq, was notable because of the stature of the parties involved, the sensitive nature of the material in dispute, and the seriousness of the accusations leveled.

The case examines the BBC's history and role as a respected and publicly funded British institution, its leadership structure, and its proud tradition of editorial independence. It describes the Radio Four *Today* program where Gilligan worked, and the evolution of the controversy from an adlib comment on a morning radio show to a public confrontation between the government and BBC, with both sides denying wrongdoing and blaming the other for distorting the truth.

Students trace the BBC's handling of the affair both internally and externally. They follow the story's path from Gilligan's initial interview with his source, to his radio broadcast, to the halls of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FAC), before which both Gilligan and Campbell testified

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about a dossier that underpinned the government's arguments for war. Students consider the BBC's crisis management strategies, and step into the role of BBC journalists and managers who must determine how to handle the situation before it deteriorates further.

### **Teaching Objectives**

This case presents students with an opportunity to examine crisis management within a news organization. The BBC was accustomed to fielding complaints from the government, and had guidelines on balanced reporting and a subject's right to reply. But how adequate were these systems? Should the BBC have secured comment from Downing Street before Gilligan aired his piece? Did not doing so contravene norms of balanced reporting, as Blair's spokeswoman claimed? How could the BBC have managed the stand-off that later developed with Campbell and the Blair government? Students should weigh such questions as part of a broader conversation about the processes by which media organizations deal with disgruntled parties. Students should think about various media accountability systems (codes of conduct, press councils, ombudsmen, organizations, research and audits), consider their efficacy, and discuss what journalists owe outside parties who are disgruntled by coverage that they have received.

The unusual status of the BBC as a state-owned publicly funded body that is by charter editorially independent from government also brings students face to face with the issue of media ownership. Students should consider various forms of media control, how these vary in different political systems, and the possible impact that different ownership structures and funding have on journalistic performance. What is the relationship, for example, of state-owned media to the government in a democracy? What are the advantages or disadvantages of being a state-owned news organization?

The case also lends itself to a discussion of journalistic practice. Gilligan's reliance, for example, on a single informant—which Sambrook later defended on the grounds that he was satisfied the source "knew what he/she was talking about"—can prompt debate on sourcing. What obligation does a reporter have to people who supply him with information? Similarly, Gilligan's use of a PDA (personal digital assistant), rather than a notebook, to take notes during his interview with Kelly, and his failure to notate a conversation with a Ministry of Defense press officer who subsequently disputed Gilligan's version of events, can generate discussion about reporting techniques.

### **Class Plan**

Use the case in a class about crisis management, media ownership and structure, reporting, broadcast media, or journalistic accountability systems.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

i) You are Director of News Richard Sambrook. In a one-page memo to your boss, Director General Greg Dyke, lay out which course of action you would recommend and why.

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion. Asking students to recapitulate their online responses in class—rather than simply reading the homework—keeps the discussion spontaneous and lively.

*In-class.* Before class starts, write a timeline of key events on the board as a visual reference point for students.

#### Suggested Timeline

- Sept. 2002—Government publishes dossier about Iraq WMD
- Feb. 2003—Government publishes “dodgy” dossier about Iraq & terrorism
- May 22—Gilligan interviews David Kelly
- May 29—Gilligan runs dossier story
- May 29—Downing Street protests to BBC News Division
- May 30—Mitchell responds to Downing Street
- June 1—Gilligan piece in the Mail on Sunday
- June 4—PM Blair denies Gilligan story
- June 5—Whittle reports to Dyke, clears Gilligan
- Letter Campbell to Sambrook
- June 11—Letter Sambrook to Campbell
- June 12—Letter Campbell to Sambrook
- June 16—Letter Sambrook to Campbell
- June 19—Gilligan testifies to FAC
- June 25—Campbell testifies to FAC
- June 26—Campbell letter to Dyke
- Campbell letter to Sambrook: 12 questions
- June 27—Sambrook/Dyke letter to Campbell: response to 12 questions
- Campbell on Channel Four w/ Jon Snow

The online posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion. Then ask any of the following questions, ordered by broader topic, as part of an 80-90 minute discussion. The questions will depend on the goals of the class, and what students should learn from the discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

## Opening questions

a) Does the BBC have a problem? If so, what is it? Students should consider a range of possible answers, including faulty newsgathering, confused allegiances, fear of sullied reputations, and concerns over editorial independence.

b) Whose problem is it? The government's? The BBC's? Gilligan's? Marsh's? Campbell's?

### Topic 1. Relationship of state-owned media to government (in a democracy)

c) What are the advantages or disadvantages of being a state-owned news organization such as the BBC? Write student suggestions on the board in two columns. For example:

Pro:  
Steady funding  
Guaranteed wide distribution  
Potential for credibility w/ audience  
Potentially unique access to government sources  
Prestige

Con:  
Government can halt funding  
May be seen as government mouthpiece  
No fallback funding source  
Part of bureaucracy: oversight  
Government resents prestige  
Taxpayer resentment

d) What seems unusual about the BBC's organizational and financial structure? Consider, for example, the BBC's funding by public license fee and its mandate to "serve the public" — including the government of the day.

e) What particular characteristics of the BBC lent itself to the situation unwinding as it did?

### Topic 2. Crisis management

f) Is this a crisis? Definition (Encarta): *a situation or period in which things are very uncertain, difficult, or painful, especially a time when action must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown.*

g) Do the same techniques of crisis management that apply to business and natural disaster response also apply to news organizations? Identify such techniques, and see how well they serve journalism. Create a list on the board as students make suggestions. For example:

#### Elements of crisis management

- Identify a crisis team
- Identify a spokesperson
- Identify your stakeholders
- Anticipate crises
- Develop holding statements (messages designed for use immediately after a crisis breaks)
- Identify key messages

Ride out the storm

### **Topic 3. Complaints process**

h) What was the BBC complaints process and was it followed? Did the BBC, as Campbell asked, have an adequate “process to filter out potential information, gossip, reliable or uncorroborated information”? Write a list as students make suggestions. For example:

#### Elements of BBC complaints process

- Notify journalist (Gilligan), seek correction
- Notify program editor (Marsh), seek correction
- Contact director of news (Sambrook)
- Refer to Programme Complaints Unit (PCU)
- Use chief political advisor (Ann Sloman)
- Appeal to Board of Governors

#### What actually happened

- Downing St. contacted Sambrook (Mitchell responded)
- Campbell and Sambrook exchanged 7 letters June 5-27
- Director-General Dyke involved, bypassing BBC chief political advisor Ann Sloman
- Campbell went to FAC
- Campbell released a letter to public
- BBC released a letter to public
- Campbell went on Jon Snow show, Channel Four

### **Topic 4. Journalistic Practice**

i) What journalistic practices shaped the evolution of the story and the showdown with the government? Should any of these have been different? For example:

#### Practices and Techniques

- Gilligan interviewed a single source known as trustworthy and authoritative
- Gilligan took shorthand notes on a PDA when caught without a notebook
- Gilligan tried but could not find a second source for the story
- BBC did not ask the prime minister’s office for comment before airing the story
- Gilligan adlibbed his 6:07 summary of the interview
- The Today show’s two-way dialogue was neither scripted nor pre-recorded
- Gilligan wrote a piece for the *Mail on Sunday* that was not reviewed by a BBC editor
- A BBC editor would not ask to see a reporter’s original interview notes because the BBC runs on “gentleman’s rules”
- Gilligan revealed his source to Sambrook on June 26, almost a month after the story aired

### **Topic 5. Dilemma**

j) What options did the BBC have? Write a list on the board as students make suggestions.  
For example:

BBC choices

- Ad Hoc
- Export the problem (appoint a commission)
- Locate and use back channels
- Go on the offensive
- Go on the defensive

**Suggested Readings:**

Claude-Jean Bertrand, *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2000.

SYNOPSIS: This book by French academic Claude-Jean Bertrand provides students with a scholarly approach to the issue of media accountability. Bertrand identifies four basic approaches that underpin existing accountability systems—training, evaluation, monitoring and feedback. He argues for the creation of new non governmental media accountability systems or M\*A\*S—which he considers to be one of the three pillars of good news media together with free enterprise and state regulation—to help rebuild public trust in news media.

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Greg Dyke, *Inside Story*. London: Harper Collins, 2004.

SYNOPSIS: Written after he was forced to leave his post as BBC Director-General in the wake of the Gilligan affair, Dyke provides an insider's view of broadcasting, and what he sees as the relationship between the BBC and British government. The book also specifically addresses the Gilligan issue—over which he feels he was unfairly treated—and argues that the BBC's structure should change, including a disbandment of the board governors.

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Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

SYNOPSIS: This book offers a broad analysis of the relationship between media and political systems. Building on a survey of media institutions in eighteen West European and North American countries, Hallin and Mancini identify four main dimensions of media: the development of media markets, political parallelism (or links between media and major institutions in society), the development of journalistic professionalization, and the degree and nature of state intervention

in media. From these Hallin and Mancini develop three major models of media system development that give students a larger context in which to understand the BBC and U.S. media: the Polarized Pluralist model found in the Mediterranean, the Democratic Corporatist model found in central and northern Europe, and the Liberal model found in the North Atlantic region, including America and the U.K.

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David Pritchard (ed.), *Holding the Media Accountable*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

SYNOPSIS: This collection of articles by various contributors examines media accountability systems, their structures and flaws. Chapters such as “The Process of Media Accountability,” and “How a Typical American Newspaper Handles Complaints” provide students with context for the BBC’s own complaint structures and other examples of how other forms of media handle disgruntlement and criticism.

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Michael Schudson and Tony Dokoupil, “The Limits of Live,” *Columbia Journalism Review*. January/February 2007.

SYNOPSIS: This article provides an accessible look at two studies, one American and one British, which criticize the growing emphasis on live, unscripted reporting. The first study, produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, includes a number of elements relevant to the Gilligan case—including results that indicated that 60 percent of live stories are based on a single identifiable source. The second study focuses exclusively on Gilligan and the ensuing debacle, which the researcher sees as part of wider changes in public discourse, and “pressures towards informality, dialogue rather than monologue, improvisation rather than script.”

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