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Reputations to Lose:
BBC versus the Blair Government

In June 2003, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) confronted what it considered one of the most brazen challenges ever to its editorial independence. The stand-off pitted Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party government against the BBC's executive team. On one side stood BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan, who on May 29 had reported—based on a single, anonymous source—that "the government probably knew" that information included in a key intelligence report was unreliable, but used it anyway in order to present a best-case scenario for invading Iraq in March 2003. On the other stood Communications Chief Alastair Campbell and the Blair government, accusing the BBC of biased reporting and lying.

The BBC was an unusual newsgathering organization. It was publicly funded but, under its charter, the government exercised no editorial control over its news programs. Historically, the BBC enjoyed a robust reputation for editorial independence and integrity. Not surprisingly, its non-partisan reporting brought it into frequent conflict with successive governments. Prime ministers and chancellors were not happy to hear their policies—on foreign affairs, the economy, education and so forth—criticized by a news source as influential as the BBC. In most cases, these disagreements flared behind closed doors, or in the press for a few days—and died away. Sometimes, however, circumstances and personalities combined in a particularly combustible way.

That proved to be the case with the Gilligan report. Campbell vehemently denied that any government official had "sexed up" the intelligence report for political purposes. Gilligan, however, stood by his story, and his editors backed him. As the Campbell charges gathered force, escalating steadily over three weeks, BBC editors began to ask themselves if Campbell was pursuing a legitimate complaint, a vendetta, or a diversionary tactic to distract voters from other government misdeeds. Quickly, matters reached a crisis. Each side sent copies of their correspondence to the press, and daily headlines referenced the BBC-government "war."[1]

[1] "BBC and No. 10 in war of words over Campbell," wrote the *Daily Telegraph* on June 27. "BBC blasts No. 10 in row on dossier," proclaimed the *Mirror* the same day.

This case was written by Kirsten Lundberg, Director, for the Knight Case Studies Initiative, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. The faculty sponsor was Professor David Klatell. Funding was provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (0408)

On June 27, the BBC executive team—led by Director General Greg Dyke and News Director Richard Sambrook—published a letter refuting Campbell's charges one by one. The letter, however, only incited Campbell to go on a nationwide television news program to demand yet again that the BBC retract its report and apologize publicly. That weekend, Dyke and Sambrook began a debate over next steps. While both were incensed by what they considered false charges, they were also well aware of the damage that a highly public fight between the BBC and the government could cause to public confidence and trust in both institutions. Moreover, the government ultimately did control BBC funding.

Over the next few days, the two men considered their options. Should they request an emergency board meeting and, if so, what did they want the board to do? Should they steer Campbell forcefully toward the established complaints procedure? Should they try to ratchet down the tension by calling for an independent inquiry? Or should they seek back channels to the government and try to settle this out of the public eye? Each course of action had distinct disadvantages. With each day, however, worsening relations narrowed their choices. They needed to act, and soon.

BBC and Britain

The BBC was perhaps the most beloved and trusted institution in Britain, vying for that distinction with the monarchy. While it had been respected since its founding in 1927, World War II had brought the BBC prominence as a trusted voice for the Allies, eagerly listened to by resistance forces across occupied Europe and wherever its signal reached.[2] It was affectionately known variously as "The Beeb" or "Auntie." Until 1955, the BBC enjoyed a monopoly on television broadcasts within Britain, and its radio monopoly continued into the 1970s.[3] The BBC's stated purpose, as articulated by the turn of the 21st century, was to "to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain."[4]

Its premier product was the BBC World Service, which broadcast radio programs to an estimated 150 million weekly listeners worldwide in 43 languages.[5] In Britain, its programs enjoyed high public approval—in January 2003 it registered a record 7.1 out of 10 confidence rating (the prior year average was 6.8). It reached 92.7 percent of the British population with its broadcasts and other services. While numerous competitors had sprung up since the days of its monopoly, it could still in 2003 claim a 40 percent share of the television viewing audience, and over 50 percent of the radio listening audience.

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2 The British Broadcasting Company radio network was in fact created in 1922; it incorporated under a Royal Charter in 1927, becoming the British Broadcasting Corporation.

3 The BBC's first television competition came from the commercial network ITV.

4 See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/purpose/

5 Ian Burrell, "Media: The BBC's fundamental strength is its independence," *Independent* (London), July 15, 2003, p.11.

By 2003, the state-owned BBC was also a sizeable bureaucracy. It had expanded well beyond its radio roots. Some 26,000 people (7,000 of them journalists) worked for its two television channels (BBC1 and BBC2); five major national radio stations plus a network of local stations; and its website, bbc.co.uk. BBC News, which provided the content for all BBC radio and television news programs, was the largest broadcast newsgathering operation in the world. It had 10 times as many journalists as any national British newspaper, and broadcast hundreds of hours of news and current affairs every day to audiences at home and abroad.

BBC Leadership

This behemoth with its global reach was a quasi-independent, publicly funded, news and broadcasting organization. Parliament had the power to call public hearings to question BBC board members and senior management should the need arise, while the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—a member of the prime minister's cabinet—had to approve new BBC services.[6] But most of its business came under the oversight of a board of governors. The 12 governors were appointed on merit by the incumbent government for a period of four years each (with the possibility of reappointment) on a rotating basis.[7] Parliament renewed the BBC's charter every 10 years; it was next up for renewal in 2006.

The chairman in 2003 was Gavyn Davies , whom an independent panel had selected as chairman in October 2001. Davies had been a former economic adviser to the British government, and a managing director of Goldman Sachs. He was also an acknowledged supporter of the ruling Labour Party. At the time of his appointment, the BBC had to defend itself against Tory Party charges of bias because of Davies' close friendships with Prime Minister Blair and Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown.[8] Other board members came from across the British Isles and included individuals of varying experience and expertise. In 2003, for example, the board included several prominent business executives; a theatre, film and television director and writer; a lawyer and vice-chancellor of Oxford University; a former diplomat; and an historian/broadcaster. Unlike corporate boards, the BBC's board was responsible not to shareholders but to the public interest. It set strategy for the organization, safeguarded its editorial independence, ensured compliance with laws, and held it accountable for the responsible use of taxpayer money. The board met once a month.

The Board of Governors in turn appointed the director-general, the organization's chief executive and editor-in-chief. The director-general in 2003 was Greg Dyke. Dyke took over in

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6 The Department of Culture, Media and Sport was responsible for government policy on the a wide array of matters, including broadcasting, and press freedom and regulation. See: http://www.culture.gov.uk/about_us/default.aspx

7 Technically, board members were appointed by the ruling monarch on the advice of ministers.

8 Paul Peachey, "Andrew Gilligan: Accused of lying by Campbell," *Independent* (London), June 26, 2003, p. 4.

January 2000 from John Birt. Like Davies, Dyke was known to be a Labour Party supporter; from 1995-2000, he had donated a total of £55,000 (ca. $82,000) to the party.[9]

Dyke headed an executive board, which managed the corporation's day-to-day operations. The other executive board members were the directors of the BBC's 16 divisions, appointed by the director-general in consultation with the governors.[10] Among its members was Richard Sambrook, who in 2003 ran the news operation. Mark Byford, another member of the leadership team, was director of the BBC's international division, including the World Service, BBC World Television and the international online news.

Funding. BBC funding came from a license fee—its level set by parliament—levied against each UK household that owned a television set. In 2002-03, it received £2.66 billion ($4.5 billion) in license fee income. The amount of the license fee, as well as the principle of public support for the BBC, was reexamined at regular intervals.[11]

To justify its public funding, the BBC was expected to adhere to the highest standards of journalism and to serve, first and foremost, the public. This requirement was not straightforward, as "the public" comprised numerous constituencies—including the government of the day. The BBC, says Sambrook, "has to be politically sensitive, and you have to court the political constituencies to make sure they're with you, as any publicly funded broadcaster does, without compromising your independence."[12] He adds:

> In the end, politicians decide our funding, they decide our charter, they decide our remit. If you go around saying we're going to ignore you, we don't care what you say and you don't matter, it's going to come home to roost sooner or later.

Independence. Across the board, however, British taxpayers, citizens and public figures recognized editorial independence as the BBC's most precious attribute. Its charter explicitly required the BBC to operate independently of both political and commercial influence. Inevitably, this meant regular conflicts with successive governments. "Our job is to hold government to account to some extent," comments Sambrook. "So whoever is in office is going to hate" the BBC.

The history books were full of examples. In 1926, then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Winston Churchill was furious that the BBC conducted interviews with leaders of a General Strike.

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9 Greg Dyke, *Inside Story* (HarperCollins, 2004), p. 140. Davies' wife worked for Chancellor Brown.

10 The divisions were: television; radio and music; news; nations & regions; sport; factual & learning; drama, entertainment & CBBC; new media & technology; BBC World Service and global news; BBC People; finance, property & business affairs; marketing, communications & audiences; policy & legal; strategy and distribution; BBC Worldwide Ltd.; and BBC Ventures Group Ltd.

11 The World Service, however, was separately funded through an annual allocation from the Foreign Office.

12 Author's interviews with Richard Sambrook, in London, on January 14 and 17, 2008. All further quotes from Sambrook, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

In 1932, the government of the day objected when the BBC wanted to broadcast an interview with a German WWI U-boat captain, and during WWII the government chided the BBC for reporting British losses before the Germans did. The BBC clashed with governments—both Conservative and Labour—in 1956, over Suez; over Rhodesia coverage in the 1960s; in the 1980s over reports of the Falklands War, and the bombing of Libya from British bases; and in 1999 when Britain bombed Kosovo and Belgrade as part of NATO. The problem, as framed by the London *Independent*, was that "each government starts off in a love-in with the media and ends up blaming it for everything that is going wrong. The BBC gets it in the neck because… ministers always feel that the Corporation's primary task is to be a 'neutral'—i.e. uncritical—conduit of government information."[13]

As of February 2003, however, the BBC was feeling confident about its news coverage, its service to viewers and its public approval ratings. While an organization this large had numerous signature programs, among its domestic radio offerings one show was considered a must-listen by policymakers, news organizations, and involved citizens: Radio Four's *Today* program.

Today Programme

The three-hour radio current affairs program, *Today*, ran every morning from 6-9 a.m. The long-established program had a faithful following. It featured a mixture of newscasts, interviews with newsmakers, reports and features. Its hosts were respected public figures. John Humphrys especially was known for his authoritative, sometimes combative, on-air persona.

In 1998, *Today* had taken on a different, more aggressive, character under a new editor, Rod Liddle. *Today*, Liddle felt, was dull. "The BBC has never been well known for breaking its own stories, and there was always an intense suspicion within the Corporation of any journalists who did," Liddle said later.[14] He cut back on the number of producers and instead hired more reporters who would be relentless in their pursuit of stories exclusive to the BBC—and *Today*. However, Liddle left the BBC in September 2002 after a disagreement with his editors.[15]

Liddle's approach on *Today* had alienated some of the very powerbrokers his program sought to interview. Prime Minister Tony Blair was one; after 2001, he refused to appear on *Today*. But Liddle's philosophy did goad editors to consider just what the BBC meant by original journalism. Did it mean in-depth interviews, or analysis, or exclusive stories? Sambrook says he agreed with Liddle's goals, but not his methods. "I had the objective that said we should be

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13 Adrian Hamilton, "No government trusts the BBC for very long," *Independent* (London), June 28, 2003.

14 Tom Leonard and Matt Born, "Is the BBC about to blink first?" *Telegraph*, July 4, 2003.

15 In mid-2002, Liddle wrote a newspaper article criticizing the Conservative Party. His bosses objected strongly, and Liddle chose to leave the BBC rather than refrain in future from writing partisan articles.

delivering original journalism," muses Sambrook, "but not necessarily scoops." BBC coverage had to be distinctive, insists Sambrook.

> My point was if we simply do the same as the commercial channels and the newspapers do, then why have the BBC?... There's no point in having the BBC publicly funded if we don't do something that's different.

Kevin Marsh took over as editor of *Today* in December 2002. He immediately confronted the challenges of covering the lead-up to and invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by the United States and its "coalition of the willing"—chief among them Britain. The war was highly unpopular in Britain; upwards of a million people took to the streets in protest. The government was not happy with the BBC's war coverage, claiming that it was biased and full of editorial comment.[16] The BBC protested that it was giving a "balanced picture."[17]

Gilligan. One of the reporters the BBC sent to Iraq was Andrew Gilligan, who had joined *Today* in 1999 as defense and diplomatic correspondent. Gilligan had earlier been the *Sunday Telegraph* defense reporter. "I recruited Gilligan," Liddle said, "because we wanted *Today* to be able to compete with Fleet Street on its own terms."[18]

Gilligan acquired a reputation as intelligent and daring, though his editors felt he sometimes overreached. He inspired the ire of the Blair government in November 2000, when it dubbed him "Gullible Gilligan" for a story on a draft EU constitution.[19] But Gilligan was excellent at ferreting out unusual, colorful stories about the secretive defense establishment and broader arms community. On one occasion, he entrapped an arms salesman into offering to sell him land mines, which were banned in Britain—and then reported on it.

In Iraq, Gilligan wrote some powerful stories in the wake of the invasion about ordinary Iraqis and the chaos that had engulfed their lives. The government was again incensed, and complained to the BBC, when Gilligan asserted that Iraqis were more fearful under the US-led coalition than under Saddam. Back in London, *Today* Editor Marsh appreciated Gilligan's enterprise and energy, but also learned to monitor him for overstatements. In one example, Gilligan reported that British troops in Iraq had dysfunctional radios. "You got the impression, listening to the story, that no servicemen had a working radio. In fact, it was a tiny number," says

16 See Dyke, *Inside Story*, pp. 253-254.

17 Ibid, p. 254, letter from Dyke to Prime Minister Blair.

18 Leonard and Born, *Telegraph*, July 3, 2003. By 1999, individual program editors hired their own staff. In earlier periods, a central BBC office hired reporters and then assigned them to programs.

19 Downing Street said it was a months-old document; Gilligan retorted that subsequent events proved the document's importance.

Marsh. "I was always very, very careful to read absolutely everything" Gilligan reported.[20] But the majority of Gilligan's work was fine.

Birth of a story

By May 2003, Gilligan was long returned from Iraq. But the war, and the justifications for it, continued to be controversial policy issues in Britain. One of the key unanswered questions was whether Saddam Hussein had in fact possessed an arsenal of biological and chemical weapons, as the US and UK governments had alleged. To try to get answers, Gilligan arranged on Thursday, May 22 to meet with a senior UK weapons inspector, David Kelly.[21] They met in the Charing Cross Hotel, near Trafalgar Square and the Thames River. Both men understood that the meeting was off the record. That meant Gilligan could use the information, but not attribute it to Kelly. It was common practice for government officials to use this method to make public information they felt was important--but which was classified or otherwise restricted.

45 Minutes. Kelly told Gilligan that a September 2002 government report on Iraq's military capabilities had contained information which depended on only a single source, who was most likely misinformed. He alleged that with such thin evidence, some members of the intelligence community had been loath to include that information in the report—known to the public as the "September dossier." The disputed information, said Kelly, was that Iraq could deploy biological or chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in a very short time—45 minutes. But government officials, stated Kelly, had insisted that the dossier include this information. When Gilligan asked him who in particular had pushed for this, Kelly responded: [Alastair] Campbell.

Gilligan did not have a notebook with him, so when he realized that Kelly was giving him newsworthy information, he took notes on his PDA (personal digital assistant). A PDA was clumsy to write on; the notes were not complete sentences but single words or phrases. When he got home, Gilligan transcribed the PDA notes onto his computer. "Transformed in the week before it was published, to make it sexier," he wrote. And "Campbell."

Gilligan spent the following week trying to verify what Kelly had told him: looking again at the September dossier; checking with other sources. The dossier had been produced by the intelligence community under the auspices of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).[22] It had prominently included the 45-minute claim. In his foreword to the dossier, Prime Minister Blair had chosen to highlight this information. Blair wrote: "The document discloses that [Saddam's]

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20 Author's interview with Kevin Marsh, in London, on January 15, 2008. All further quotes from Marsh, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

21 Kelly had been a weapons inspector for the United Nations in Iraq during the 1990s.

22 The JIC was a Cabinet Office committee, which brought together intelligence and security chiefs with policymakers from the Foreign Office, Defense Ministry and other government agencies. It provided the prime minister and other ministers with regular intelligence assessments. Its reports were normally classified.

military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them."[23] As if to make sure this point was not missed, Blair in spoken remarks September 24 to the House of Commons repeated the 45-minute claim.[24] The implication was that the weapons could reach British troops on Cyprus—and British press headlines had certainly promoted that conclusion. The London *Evening Standard* proclaimed: "45 Minutes from Attack"; the *Sun* wrote "Brits 45 mins from doom."

As for other sources, while no one else could substantiate the 45-minute claim, Gilligan did hear about general dissatisfaction within the intelligence community over government use of intelligence reports. Tellingly, a scandal had just broken about a different government intelligence report, published in February 2003, which came to be known as the "dodgy dossier." The press had reported that the bulk of the dossier was copied, complete with spelling and grammar errors, from a PhD thesis by a student in California. Those changes which the government did make to the text all sharpened the language to make a better case for invading Iraq.[25] The embarrassed Blair government had admitted to a shoddy process for publishing the dossier.

"I looked back and saw the government had in fact quite clearly been doing what David Kelly accused it of doing, in respect to other documents," says Gilligan.[26] "So I thought what Kelly was saying about the September one was plausible." Moreover, Gilligan was inclined to believe Kelly because the arms inspector had, on previous occasions, provided him with information which proved reliable. By Wednesday, May 28, Gilligan felt he had verified the information as far as possible, and that it was time to broadcast the story.

Preparing to Broadcast

On Wednesday, *Today* program editor Kevin Marsh held his usual two daily editorial meetings. At the morning one, editors typically brainstormed story ideas, while the afternoon meeting focused on pinning down the running order for the leading items. On this occasion, there were two big stories—the shooting of a British peace activist on Palestinian land; and a leaked report that British troops in Iraq had used cluster bombs. The second meeting wrapped up about 5 p.m., and Marsh prepared to go home. As he did, the day editor, Senior Assistant Editor Miranda Holt, stopped off to tell Marsh that Gilligan had submitted a story about the September dossier.

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23 Unusually, the dossier cited as its main source the Joint Intelligence Committee, the government's intelligence clearinghouse.

24 Blair said Saddam "has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within 45 minutes." Source: *Commons Hansard*, http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo020924/debtext/20924-01.htm#20924-01_spmin0

25 For example, where the original had said: "aiding opposition groups in hostile regimes," the revised dossier said "supporting terrorist organizations in hostile regimes."

26 Author's interview with Andrew Gilligan, in Greenwich, UK, on January 16, 2008. All further quotes from Gilligan, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Gilligan had told Holt that Marsh knew about the story, but Marsh says he did not. "Andrew's work method was to be very secretive about everything," says Marsh, adding that many reporters preferred to hold work close to the chest until it was ready for broadcast for fear of losing a scoop. Holt explained that the story charged the dossier had selectively cited intelligence which supported the case for war. Gilligan—as was standard practice—had not named his source, but told Holt it was someone involved in drawing up the dossier. The source said claims about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction were exaggerated, and that many of the qualifiers in the original intelligence had been edited out.

Confirming details. Marsh thought he recognized the story. By coincidence, he had had lunch that day with former Secretary of State for International Development Clare Short, who had been in the cabinet when the September dossier was published.[27] Marsh says Short told him that "Alastair Campbell had edited highlights from the intelligence, that she didn't believe that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that as far as she knew… people in the intelligence services were unhappy with the way that the intelligence had been handled." Moreover, on April 9, Marsh had had lunch with MI6 director Sir Richard Dearlove. Formally, MI6 was called the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and was responsible for foreign intelligence, while MI5 (Security Service) controlled domestic intelligence. Dearlove had also hinted that perhaps there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; he cryptically alluded to the fact that the real threats in the region were Syria and Iran.

In this context, says Marsh, Gilligan's story "frankly was not very surprising… It wasn't that exclusive." Gilligan agrees: "It had certainly been in the air. We didn't regard this as a particularly significant story. I thought it was an okay story." Marsh asked Holt whether the source was sufficiently senior to have access to this information; she responded that Gilligan had identified him as a lead United Nations weapons inspector, a scientist and former reliable source for Gilligan. Marsh also asked if there were direct quotes, and Holt replied yes—Gilligan had emailed her one and a half pages of comments in quotation marks from the interview. So Marsh asked that Gilligan write a script for the story—as was standard practice—and asked to review the script before broadcast.

Source reliable. Marsh also gave orders that the direct quotes be voiced over by an actor—making it clear to listeners that they were listening to the actual words of the source. "This obviously gives the quotes greater validity, and therefore you have to be sure they're quotes. And I was assured they were," says Marsh. Gilligan scripted the story, which was scheduled to run at 7:30 the next morning, just at the start of the peak audience hour that ran until 8:30 a.m. Marsh says he "looked over the script overnight, and the two editors looked over the script, and everybody was fine with the script as it existed." Gilligan and Marsh also spoke by phone. Their conversation focused on the wisdom of running a single-sourced story, and just how reliable

[27] Short had resigned on May 12, 2003, two months after announcing her opposition to the Iraq war.

Gilligan considered his source to be. Without disclosing Kelly's identity, Gilligan assured Marsh the source was impeccable. Marsh decided to run the story. "It was not my decision to do it, it was his decision," sys Gilligan. "It's the editor's call, not the reporter's, whether to do the story or not. And he said yes."

Finally, as was expected under BBC guidelines on right of reply, the *Today* program lined up a government official to address the charges in Gilligan's story. *Today* had already approached Armed Forces Minister Alan Ingram to respond to the story about cluster bombs, and had booked Ingram for a live interview at about 8:30 a.m. A *Today* staffer said Ingram was asked to speak to Gilligan's story as well. Moreover, Gilligan says he described his story about the exaggerated dossier to Ministry of Defense press officer Kate Wilson in a Wednesday evening telephone conversation; she is certain he did not. Neither of them took notes and the discrepancy has proven impossible to reconcile.

May 29, 6:07 Two-way

On Thursday, May 29, at 6:07 in the morning, *Today* host Humphrys interviewed Gilligan in what was known as a "two-way"—a dialogue intended to sound like a friendly conversation, not a formal report. It was a "tease," or preview, of the larger story to come later in the program—in this case at 7:30 a.m. BBC reporters understood that any two-way would closely follow the wording of the later news report, but the first hour of the *Today* program was largely done live; it was neither scripted nor pre-recorded. The subject was the September 2002 intelligence dossier.

"*Probably knew."* Gilligan told Humphrys that "one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up that dossier" had told him that "the government probably knew that the 45-minute figure was wrong even before it decided to put it in." Gilligan couched this assertion of government foreknowledge as something the source said, not as Gilligan's own speculation. Gilligan did not elaborate on what was meant by "government"—the prime minister himself, his director of communications, the Defense Ministry, or the MI5 or MI6 intelligence agencies. This phrase—"probably knew that the 45-minute figure was wrong"—was not in the script. Gilligan also reported that his source cited the 45-minute claim as an example of how the government "sexed up"—or made more provocative—the dossier. He also reported that the 45-minute claim was based on a single source of dubious accuracy, which is why it made intelligence officials uncomfortable.

Marsh was one of many BBC officials who listened to the 6:07 exchange. But, he says, "I didn't pick up on the 'probably they knew it was wrong' line. I wasn't sitting there checking it against the script." He did, however, anticipate a protest—because the government protested so much of what the *Today* program broadcast, from the slant of economic news to the use of statistics on the national health service. "In any one day," he says, "you probably get five official-looking letters. In any week, you'll get two from solicitors [lawyers], and 100 phone calls, all from people

telling you you're the stupidest person who's ever walked the face of the earth… Letters from Downing Street were not rare."

Government protest. Prime Minister Tony Blair and his communications director, Alastair Campbell, were at the time visiting Basra, Iraq. So they had no immediate comment. But at 7:15 a.m., a spokesman from No. 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's office, called to protest the story. A statement said:

> These allegations are untrue. Not one word of the dossier was not entirely the work of the intelligence agencies. The suggestion that any pressure was put on the intelligence services by No. 10 or anyone else to change the document are entirely false.

To BBC editors' ears, says Marsh, the double negative sounded like a "non-denial denial." Meanwhile, at 7:30 a.m., Gilligan followed up with the actual news report which he had scripted in advance. He did not repeat the phrase "probably knew." But he did say, "What I have been told is that the government knew that claim was questionable." Gilligan quoted his source directly:

> He said, 'It was transformed in the week before it was published, to make it sexier. The classic example was the statement that weapons of mass destruction were ready for use within 45 minutes. That information was not in the original draft. It was included in the dossier against our wishes because it wasn't reliable. Most things in the dossier were double source, but that was single source, and we believed that the source was wrong.'

At 8:28 a.m., Humphrys interviewed Armed Forces Minister Ingram by pre-arrangement about the cluster bombs story. Humphrys also asked for reaction to the September dossier story. In response, Ingram admitted that the 45-minute intelligence claim was based on a single source. From the BBC's viewpoint, that substantiated Gilligan's report. But Ingram also denied the allegation that there had been any pressure from Downing Street to alter the dossier's language: "That is not the case. There was no pressure from No. 10."

After the program, Marsh asked to see Gilligan's notes. The reporter forwarded the typewritten notes he had provided to Holt the night before, based on the original notations on his PDA.

First protests

Later that day, May 29, Downing Street faxed a letter of protest over to the BBC news division. Blair spokesperson Anne Shevas focused on the BBC's failure to contact, and secure a comment from, Downing Street in advance about Gilligan's "serious and untrue allegations." Furthermore, her statement said *Today* failed to report the government's denial of 7:15 a.m. despite

four phone calls from the duty press officer. Citing BBC guidelines on balanced reporting, the letter asked: "I would like to hear from you how you believe these standards have been met when your reporters failed to give this office a chance in advance to respond to allegations and ignored denials when they were provided?"

Director of News Sambrook, who would normally have responded, was in Moscow to open a new bureau. So the fax landed instead on Stephen Mitchell's desk. Mitchell was head of radio news; all Radio 4 editors reported to Mitchell, although he was not involved in day-to-day decisions.[28] "What you rely on is the delegated authority to the program editor… What you don't want to do is be surprised," says Mitchell.[29]

Mitchell conferred with Marsh about the complaint—and Marsh looked into it. He confirmed that no denial ran during the 8 a.m. newscast, but that it was included in the 9, 10, 11 and 12 p.m. news bulletins. In an email just after 5 p.m., Marsh reported to Mitchell that he had "no reason to believe" that the BBC report "was in any way false or contained any untrue allegation." Marsh continued:

> While it is the case *Today* did not contact Downing Street prior to first running the story at 0607, it *is* the case that we set out its main aspects to Adam Ingram's assistant yesterday evening in connection with the interview with him.

Moreover, Marsh told Mitchell that a *Today* editor had specifically asked the Downing Street press officer who called the program at 7:15 a.m. on May 29 whether an early version of the dossier had in fact been sent back to the intelligence services for revisions. The press officer replied: "We will not comment on processology [sic]"—which Marsh also felt fell short of a denial.

At the time, neither the BBC nor Downing Street mentioned the 6:07 exchange. "Neither the complainant nor the program nor the management were focused on what happened at 7 minutes past 6," says Mitchell. "[The complaint] was about the general gist of the piece, and about the right to reply." Mitchell responded to Downing Street on May 30. He rejected the assertion that the BBC had failed to report the government denial; he also wrote that *Today* had described the story to Ingrams' assistant the evening before. There, he hoped, the matter would rest. However, the story had taken on a life of its own.

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[28] Mitchell's two counterparts were the head of television news, and the head of online news product. Some 700 people worked for his department, which had an annual budget of some £60 million.

[29] Author's interview with Stephen Mitchell, in London, on January 18, 2008. All further quotes from Mitchell, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Upping the ante

Gilligan was among those who kept the story alive. On June 1, he published a piece in the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper which reiterated what he had said in his *Today* program report. But the newspaper article took the story one step further: it named Alastair Campbell as the official responsible for persuading intelligence officials to include the 45-minute claim against their own better judgment. Under BBC written guidelines, any article a reporter submitted to another publication—which they did frequently—had to be reviewed by a BBC editor. Reporters were expected to adhere to BBC standards—they could not write anything for a newspaper that they would not be willing to say on the air for the BBC. Marsh was away at a family wedding when Gilligan wrote his *Mail* story, so told Gilligan to find another BBC editor to review it. But Gilligan never did. On the other hand, Marsh says that had he seen the article in advance, "I wouldn't have changed anything."

Other reports. Meanwhile, other publications, as well as other BBC reporters, published stories which bolstered Gilligan's assertion. BBC reporter Susan Watts on Monday, June 2 broadcast a story on the *Newsnight* program citing "a senior official intimately involved with the process of pulling together the original September 2002 Blair weapons' dossier." Watts, who had taped her interview, quoted her source as saying: "They were desperate for information, they were pushing hard for information that could be released," especially regarding the "45-minute claim." Watts added that "the government's insistence the Iraqi threat was imminent was a Downing Street interpretation of intelligence conclusions."

Numerous other newspapers also carried reports which substantiated the charge that the government had demanded more evidence to bolster the dossier. The *Sunday Telegraph* said: "It [the 45-minute claim] was an extrapolation" from the actual intelligence.[30] Citing "well-placed sources," the *Guardian* reported that intelligence agencies "were deeply reluctant to allow Downing Street to use their intelligence assessments because they feared it would be manipulated for political ends."[31] It named Campbell as instigator. The *Times* wrote that "there was debate amongst intelligence analysts whether the [45-minute source's] claims should have been passed to No. 10, as senior figures doubted whether it was true, but were under pressure to deliver 'compelling evidence.'"[32] Finally, the *Washington Post* wrote that "one official acknowledged that there had been what he described as 'pressured and superheated debates at the time' between Downing Street and intelligence officials over the contents of the dossier."[33]

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30 Francis Elliott and Colin Brown, "The victory lap goes wrong," *Sunday Telegraph*, June 1, 2003. See: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_4_0274to0275.pdf

31 Nicholas Watt, Richard Norton-Taylor and Michael White, "Ministers 'distorted' UN weapons report," *Guardian*, May 30, 2003. See: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_4_0266to0268.pdf

32 Daniel McGrory, "No 10 'pressured' spies on damning evidence for war," *Times*, May 30, 2003. See: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_4_0269to0273.pdf

33 Glenn Frankel, "Blair accused of exaggerating claims about Iraqi weapons," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2003. See:

As the debate sharpened, Gilligan left on a long-planned two-week vacation to the remote Orkney Islands off Scotland. There he had no cellphone reception, no access to national newspapers, and only one telephone line into his hotel. He spent most of his vacation on that phone. Meanwhile, Sambrook finally returned to the office from his Moscow trip on Monday, June 2; by then, a small paper trail on the May 29 story had already accumulated. That trail would only grow.

Review at High Levels

The government was marshalling its forces to refute the reports on the BBC and in newspapers. On Wednesday, June 4, Labour Party Chair John Reid told the *Today* program that Gilligan's story should be attributed to "rogue elements in the security services."[34] The prime minister also announced his willingness to testify to the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) about his role in the matter. That committee, however, was dominated by the ruling party, met in private, and its reports were redacted before release. So later that morning, in his first weekly Q&A with the press since the dossier story had broken, Blair categorically denied the charges. He invoked the additional authority of John Scarlett, chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee which had published the dossier. Blair stated:

> I have confirmed with the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee there was no attempt at any time by any official or minister or member of Number 10 Downing Street staff to override the intelligence judgments of the Joint Intelligence Committee.[35]

Reid's protest and Blair's statement elevated the Gilligan affair to the top of the BBC hierarchy. It was "very unusual" for the director general to handle a complaint, says Mitchell. But Director-General Dyke took a strong personal interest in the unfolding drama. Since an exchange of letters in the spring about BBC coverage of the Iraq war, Dyke had come to feel that Campbell "was looking for revenge… Campbell, while a brilliant operator, has a classic, obsessive personality and he had decided that the BBC was the enemy."[36] Dyke wanted to ensure that if Campbell sought retribution, the BBC would be standing on firm ground.

Dyke in charge. So during their regular Wednesday meeting, Dyke asked the controller of editorial policy, Stephen Whittle, to take a look at Gilligan's story, as well as the reporting behind it, to ascertain that both met BBC editorial and process standards. Dyke was inclined to defend the BBC on this, but first he wanted to be sure of the facts. "I asked Stephen Whittle to take a look at

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http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/bbc/bbc_4_0274to0275.pdf

34 Reid said the same to the *Times* newspaper in an interview on Tuesday.

35 David Hughes, "This question of Blair's integrity," *Daily Mail*, June 5, 2003, p.7.

36 Dyke, p. 256.

Gilligan's original story and make sure we were happy with it, and the process by which it went to air," Dyke wrote later.[37]

That Dyke asked Whittle was, says Radio News Director Mitchell, "not common. It was unusual." More typical was for a complaint to go to the Programme Complaints Unit (PCU), which interviewed the program's producers and reporters, and reported back. If the PCU found the BBC in the wrong, the error would be corrected and an apology offered.[38] If the complainant was still unsatisfied, the matter could be appealed to the board of governors. Some 60 percent of complaints were resolved at the program or departmental level; only a minority went to a formal complaint.

In turning to Whittle, Dyke bypassed Ann Sloman, the BBC's chief political advisor whose job was in part to manage relations with the government. Sloman reported to Whittle. Former Director General John Birt had created the position, says then-Radio 4 Controller Helen Boaden, because "he knew that every so often the BBC gets into conflict with governments of whatever hue. So you want a system that, as it were, protects the journalism and the institution while those allegations are examined."[39] But Dyke, says Sambrook, "didn't like [Sloman] or get on with her, so basically he marginalized her." Adds Mitchell: "It was quite clear that she'd been sidelined from the start."

Then-International Division Director Byford agrees that the political advisor could have played a role. After all, the dispute was between Campbell and the BBC News Division, not the director-general. He says:

> The premise would be that they [News] will handle it. There wasn't a system which says every time an MP or a government minister or the head of communications at Downing Street has an issue with the BBC, then that is handled by the chief advisor, politics… [But] it's true that what they could and should have been is intricately involved in how we were handling it.[40]

But it was Dyke's style to cut through red tape to get things done. Dyke, notes Mitchell, "has no appetite for bureaucracy and process… So it was out with the normal processes and the normal structures very quickly." Not everyone at the BBC found Dyke's methods effective. "That approach is high risk. It leads to incoherence. It leads to emotionalism," notes Mitchell. Harking back to the era of Director-General Birt, Mitchell adds:

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37 Dyke, p. 265.

38 At the time, the unit upheld 17 percent of complaints. Source: Davies hearing, August 28.

39 Author's interview with Helen Boaden in London, on January 15, 2008. All further quotes from Boaden, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview. In 2008, Boaden was Director of News.

40 Author's telephone interview with Mark Byford, on January 29, 2008. All further quotes from Byford, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview. In 2008, Byford was deputy director general of the BBC.

> Birt would have absolutely distanced himself from the whole news machine. He would have taken an overview. He would have been much more distant, much more calculating. He would have used Whittle more to inform him, rather than going on his instincts… Whereas Greg took over.

Controller Whittle himself probably felt that his job was to defuse Dyke. There was a history of directors-general coming after the *Today* show because politicians had complained about its coverage. "I think Stephen Whittle felt, oh, this is another one of those, we just need to calm Greg down," says Sambrook. In response to Dyke, Whittle asked Radio News Director Mitchell for a detailed explanation of how a story got onto the air. He also asked whether BBC procedures had been followed in the Gilligan story.

At 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 5, Mitchell reported back with a lengthy email detailing the process in general of bringing a story to the *Today* program; and the steps in particular followed for the Gilligan report. He recounted that before the broadcast, *Today* Editor Marsh had discussed with Gilligan the reliability of the source, as well as the context of the source's allegation. Mitchell himself also knew about the story in advance of broadcast, but only in general terms. That was common. The director of news or his deputy was personally involved only in preparing a difficult policy or legal story; this was not deemed necessary for the "sexed-up dossier" story.

Whittle report. Early that evening, Whittle gave Gilligan a clean bill of health. A 6:23 p.m. email to Dyke, Sambrook, Deputy News Director Mark Damazer, and Mitchell restated what Marsh had told him. Whittle concluded: "As you can see, a strong and well-sourced story." Sambrook, for one, was reassured by Whittle's email: "My reaction was, somebody outside of News has had a look at this, a serious person who's decided it's okay. Fine, that gives me some comfort."

Whittle did not—and had he done so it would have been highly irregular—ask Gilligan for his original interview notes. "You'd have to have a reason to say to Andrew [Gilligan], 'I want to see your original notes,' because you would never ask that of another correspondent," explains Marsh.

> The BBC runs on kind of gentleman's rules, that you don't ask to see someone's notes… Because you trust that if you work for the BBC, you've got to the stage where you don't tell fibs about what somebody said to you… We probably culturally take far more on trust than the editor of a newspaper would do. But then again, we probably get far less wrong than the average newspaper.

A more thorough investigation seemed uncalled for, although Sambrook discussed that possibility with Dyke. Sambrook had listened to a tape of the 6:07 two-way, and judged it to be

"obviously not very good. It's a very hesitant, live interview." But Gilligan was standing by his story. "It's always a bit uncomfortable when you've got a single, anonymous source," comments Sambrook. "But the reporter was very much sticking to it."

The BBC also took encouragement from reports in other news outlets about disquiet in the intelligence community. Moreover, the government had not said the story was wrong. So far, it had objected only to BBC failure to follow its own procedures, specifically to notify the government before broadcast to allow it an immediate reply. "This felt as if they were trying to find something to complain about because they were uncomfortable," Sambrook adds.

The BBC was also getting signals through informal channels that the story was right. A Labour MP contacted Dyke and BBC Chairman Davies with that message; while at a dinner with one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a very senior military officer told them they were correct and not to back down in the face of bullying. "That stiffened our spine a bit," says Sambrook. Finally, the BBC was well accustomed to getting strongly-worded letters from Campbell. Since January alone, Sambrook had received some 17 letters of complaint from the prime minister's communications chief, only one of which proved on investigation to have merit. He adds:

> Just because you got a letter from the prime minister's spokesman hadn't meant for some years that you automatically assumed oh, we got something terribly wrong here, we must do something about it. What you assumed was, they're a bit pissed off with this, but we need to stick to our guns.

Back and Forth

A June 5 letter from Campbell seemed to confirm Sambrook's observation. In the letter, faxed on Friday, June 6, Campbell complained that Gilligan's story was based on "the false claim of a single uncorroborated source that Gilligan claims to be reliable." Campbell further noted that Gilligan himself, in his own reporting when the dossier was released in September 2002, had dismissed the 45-minute claim as "little that was new." He also mentioned, in an apparent *non sequitur*, that Gilligan in a news report that day (June 5) had demonstrated ignorance of the intelligence community, specifically the status of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). "Do you accept that what Gilligan said this morning about the composition and role of the JIC is inaccurate?" asked Campbell. Finally, he asked about BBC processes:

> Do you have a process to filter out potential misinformation, gossip, unreliable or uncorroborated information? What is that process?

Yet again, *Today* Editor Marsh followed up on the complaint. His first reaction was that "it's all drivel… Downing Street has never explicitly denied the central charge—that the '45-minute claim' was single sourced." Nonetheless, Marsh looked especially into Campbell's

assertion about Gilligan's September 2002 reporting. Marsh found that while Gilligan had judged there was little new in the document as a whole, he did identify the 45-minute claim as the "tabloid" headline of the dossier. Moreover, Gilligan had said the claim was "not really backed up by any evidence." But the more compelling point, as Marsh noted in an email to Mitchell on Monday, June 9, was that "whatever Gilligan said at the time is irrelevant." He continued:

> I don't think Campbell has anywhere to go on this--he isn't going to shift our story: not by endless transcripts, not by regurgitating producer guidelines. Shouldn't we be taking the view from now on that only if he makes a genuinely new point do we reply to him?"

On Wednesday, June 11, Sambrook replied to Campbell that "I see no likelihood of us agreeing on this matter." He addressed in particular the charge that Gilligan's story was invalid because it relied on a single source. "If we had thought the single source incredible we would not have reported the allegation at all," he wrote. "I am satisfied that the source knew what he/she was talking about." He added that "there was no breach of the producer guidelines." As to the government's right of reply, Sambrook pointed out that the BBC had broadcast Armed Forces Minister Ingram's reply by 7:30 a.m., then "inadvertently" missed including it in the 8 a.m. headline news, but later cited the rebuttal throughout the day. He clarified that at no point did the BBC assert that "the 45-minute point was *invented* by anyone in Downing Street"; instead, Gilligan's reporting had raised questions about "the *presentation* of the intelligence material."

Quieting down? On Thursday, June 12, Marsh, Sambrook and Sambrook's deputy Damazer went to a luncheon at Downing Street attended by Blair and Campbell. To all appearances, the Gilligan spat had run its course. "Nothing was said about this at all," says Marsh. But as Sambrook left the lunch, a Campbell aide, Tom Kelly, took Sambrook aside to say quietly that "we're very serious about this complaint." It was a brief exchange. "We knew they were very unhappy about the story," recalls Sambrook. "We felt that their complaint was a bit unfocused."

Later that day, however, there was another letter from Campbell. The communications director referred to the denial of Gilligan's charge by the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. "Would you accept that an emphatic denial from the Chairman of the JIC carries more weight than Mr. Gilligan's single uncorroborated anonymous source?," asked Campbell. He also claimed that a separate report from the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) "confirms Mr. Gilligan's story was wrong."[41] Campbell called for an internal inquiry at the BBC: "You have made very serious allegations which, if true, would amount to serious wrongdoing by me and my staff. Furthermore, you have continued to repeat them with little reference to denials by the Chairman of the JIC and vindication by the ISC."

[41] On June 10, the ISC published its 2002-2003 annual report.

On Monday, June 16, Sambrook again tried to appease Campbell. Addressing the issue of a single source, he wrote that "our programme makers should be reluctant [*emphasis in original*] to rely on only one source. This guideline is not an outright ban." He also challenged the assertion that the ISC report vindicated the government. "I am sorry that we still seem far apart on the validity of our reporting on the concerns about the September dossier," he wrote. Sambrook then invited Campbell to follow established channels for complaints:

> I should remind you that we have a Programme Complaints Unit which functions completely separately from production arms of the BBC… If you feel it would help, you could make a formal complaint to the Head of the PCU, Fraser Steel.

There the matter seemed to rest, until both Gilligan and Campbell made appearances before the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Foreign Affairs Committee Hearings

On Thursday, June 19, Gilligan—accompanied by Deputy News Director Damazer--went before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FAC), which on June 3 had opened an inquiry into the lead-up to the Iraq war. The parliamentary committee had taken an active interest in Gilligan's report of May 29. Gilligan's editors had been working with him to ensure he would only respond to questions, not go on the offensive against Campbell. "We were very worried about Andrew," says Sambrook. "He was under intense pressure."

Gilligan testimony. In his testimony, Gilligan explained his view that one reason "why this story took on the life that it did was that Downing Street denied a number of things which had never been alleged. They denied, among other things, that material had been fabricated. Nobody ever alleged that material had been fabricated."[42] He testified that his source had stated that the 45-minute claim "was included in the dossier against our wishes because it was not reliable. It was a single source and it was not reliable." Gilligan said his source had emphasized that the dossier had been transformed in the week before its publication and, when asked why, answered in one word: "Campbell."

Committee members asked Gilligan point blank whether he was accusing Foreign Secretary Jack Straw of lying. Straw had testified earlier to the FAC that the government had not altered the wording of the intelligence assessment.[43] Gilligan responded matter-of-factly that "I would simply say that it is not my business to say whether the Foreign Secretary is lying or not.

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42 Source: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/evidence-lists/evidence-fac.htm

43 Straw's quoted words were: "The same report was reflected in almost identical terms in the JIC's classified work. There were no further caveats used." Gilligan responded: "I note the words "almost identical" in the Foreign Secretary's response."

All I would say is that I invested strong credibility in my source, who is a person of impeccable standing on this issue."

Campbell testimony. But any hope that the matter might end there was dashed on Wednesday, June 25. That day, Campbell appeared before the FAC. He had been summoned to answer questions about the "dodgy dossier" of February 2003, and had at first declined to appear. But he changed his mind. At the hearing, it became clear why. He used the occasion to launch a broadside against the BBC and Gilligan's report. During almost three hours of questioning, Campbell accused the BBC and Gilligan of lying, and demanded an apology. He said:

> When you put in the prime minister, the foreign secretary, the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the head of Secret Intelligence Service, the government's Security and Intelligence Coordinator, all saying emphatically this story is not true, and the BBC defense correspondent on the basis of a single anonymous source continues to say that it is true, then I think something has gone very wrong with BBC journalism.

Campbell charged the BBC with "an agenda" before the war: "Their rationale is that the prime minister led the country into war on a false basis… When you are dealing with the BBC, I am afraid they just will not admit that they can get things wrong… If that is BBC journalism, then God help us." Finally Campbell, who was himself a former journalist, stated:

> I find it incredible—and I mean incredible—that people can report based on one single anonymous uncorroborated source, can report—and let's get to the heart of what the allegation is—that the prime minister, the cabinet, the intelligence agencies, people like myself, connived to persuade parliament to send British forces into action on a lie.

BBC Response

Campbell's accusations caught the BBC unawares. As Campbell was testifying, the broadcaster's leadership team was on retreat in Surrey. "I… watched Campbell, and I could see we were in trouble," recalls Radio News Chief Mitchell, who remained in London. He called Sambrook to brief him. The BBC immediately put out a statement, which read: "We do not feel the BBC has anything to apologize for. We regret that Alastair Campbell has chosen to accuse Andrew Gilligan and the BBC of lying. We have always been clear in our reporting."

But that was only a first salvo in what they felt had to be a more robust response. The BBC leadership's initial reaction was that Campbell was trying to divert public attention from his own slip-up with the "dodgy" dossier. "Internally, part of our thought process was 'hang on, is he just trying to divert the fire here?' It was a very strong, vitriolic attack on the whole of the BBC, not just this particular story," says Sambrook.

> At that point, I felt he was redefining what our story was. Which was a very classic Alastair tactic. He kept defining it as, you have accused the prime minister of lying. Well, we hadn't… [We said] that someone in government probably knew the intelligence was wrong.

The leadership team discussed Wednesday evening how the BBC might respond. Sambrook asked Dyke: "Do we want to build bridges?" But Dyke wanted to play hardball. Sambrook remembers that Dyke responded: "I want to jab both fingers in their eyes." Sambrook rushed up to London in order to appear on the *Today* program the next day, Thursday, at 8 a.m.

Today played excerpts from Campbell's testimony, and Sambrook tried to answer the charges one by one. Saying that Campbell had "seriously misrepresented the BBC's journalism," he denied that the BBC had pursued an anti-war agenda, or that it had accused the prime minister either of lying or misleading the House of Commons, or of leading the country to war on a false basis. He agreed that the BBC should be held to the highest journalistic standards. Sambrook reiterated that "I'm entirely satisfied that [Gilligan's source] is a senior, credible, and reliable source." As to an apology, he observed that "we're not going to apologize for something we haven't said, it's as simple as that… This isn't the BBC's own allegation, we're reporting what a senior intelligence source has told us." In closing, he summarized the stand-off:

> Alastair Campbell's job is to try to put the government's case in the best light, and that's absolutely legitimate, that's what he's paid to do and he does it extremely well. The BBC's job is to raise issues of public interest and discuss them, and that's what we've done and we'll continue to do it.

"This was a huge escalation," notes Sambrook. "From the moment that Alastair went public at the Foreign Affairs Committee, we saw this as an attack on the independence of the BBC… Alastair was trying to bully us into bending to a political narrative, which we had got very strong grounds to think was at least flawed, if not wrong."

Not unanimous. Not everyone at the BBC agreed with Sambrook and the leadership team. Radio 4 Controller Boaden and another colleague had listened to the 6:07 two-way and reached a different conclusion. "If you say someone did something bad, probably knowing it was wrong, you have to be inside someone's head," observes Boaden. "The 6:07 was basically saying the prime minister was a liar. Yet we didn't have the evidence, really, to demonstrate he knew it was wrong… We had to make sure that what we were defending we actually thought was right." As one BBC newsroom source told the *Guardian*: "Everyone just hopes [Gilligan]'s sure of his grounds because it'll reflect so badly on all of us if he isn't."[44]

[44] "War claims row; the background; united response from a broadcaster caught on the hop," *Guardian*, June 28, 2003, p.4.

Others tried to tell Dyke that the BBC might have a problem, but their arguments went unheeded. Byford, then-head of international news, says that "once it was a matter of major controversy with Campbell and the government, we should have definitely been saying, 'what did Gilligan's notes say, and can you show me that that's right?'" Adds Boaden:

> What you wanted someone to do is go and listen to the tapes, and then talk to Andrew Gilligan at length [and say] 'Let's look in detail at what happened, who knew what, what was going on around it, why did we do what we did?

But Dyke, Sambrook and their team considered that this had already been done, first by Controller Whittle and subsequently over the many conversations Sambrook, Deputy News Director Damazer, and Radio News chief Mitchell had all had with Gilligan about the grounds and strength of the story.

On a roll

Later in the day Thursday, June 26, it became clear that Campbell was not satisfied. He did send a conciliatory private letter to Director General Dyke. "I was sorry that I had to say what I said about the BBC," wrote Campbell. But private correspondence had been "pointless. I am regularly assured by Richard Sambrook that when the BBC makes mistakes, you admit it. I'm afraid that is not the case." He asserted forcefully that: "This story is 100 percent wrong." Further, he objected to Sambrook's statement on *Today* that the BBC was only reporting allegations, not making them. "That is not accurate. And if it were, it means you don't know if the story you broadcast was true… That is not [*emphasis in original*] journalism."

Campbell reserved stronger language for a written response to Sambrook's *Today* appearance.[45] Campbell emphasized again that, despite Sambrook's protestations to the contrary, the BBC had in fact alleged that the government misled Parliament about the cause for war in Iraq. He posed 12 questions, to which he requested an answer by the end of the day. He informed Sambrook he was releasing the letter to the press. Campbell also used that day's daily press briefing, known as "morning questions," to reinforce his attack on the BBC. In addition to several questions about relying on a single source, Campbell asked:

- Does the BBC still stand by the allegation it made on 29th May that Number 10 added in the 45-minute claim to the dossier? Yes or no?
- Does it still stand by the allegation made on that day that both we and the intelligence agencies knew the 45 minute claim to be wrong and inserted it despite knowing that? Yes or no?
- Does it still stand by the allegation, again on the same day, that we ordered the

[45] The questions were first read out at the daily morning Prime Minister's Office press briefing; the letter was faxed to the BBC only in the afternoon.

September dossier to be "sexed up"?

Sambrook's office issued a placeholder response Thursday night. It read: "We stand by our entire story. In my experience, this is an unprecedented level of pressure on the BBC from Downing Street… The BBC will respond properly to these matters but not to a deadline dictated by Mr. Campbell."

Letters Flying

The BBC took 24 hours to respond. Sambrook, Dyke and Damazer spent most of Thursday and early Friday drafting a reply. Occasionally, they summoned Gilligan to clarify one point or another. On Thursday, they also discussed the need to know Gilligan's source. Sambrook was resolved that only one BBC editor should know, in order to prevent leaks. Sambrook, they decided, should be the one. The discussion among editors was, recalls Marsh, "almost a casual conversation… 'We are going to have to know who the source is, aren't we?' It wasn't a big deal."

Name source. To ask a reporter for his source was, says Sambrook, "very rare." Only once before during 15 years in management had he done so. Often, says Marsh, the name of a source means nothing: "Very often the best sources, and the most reliable sources, are those who've got nothing to prove themselves. The best people to cultivate are the secretaries who see all the papers, rather than the people who write them."

Gilligan had no problem revealing his source to Sambrook: "I've always understood that your editor… has a right to ask who your source is, and you have to tell them… Obviously, he wasn't going to tell anyone else." When Sambrook learned the source was Kelly, he felt reassured. Kelly was "clearly an eminent British expert in WMD. And very much in the intelligence and government circles that would be consulted and know about these things. From that point of view, it felt like a pretty good source," recalls Sambrook. He told Dyke that the source was credible.

The BBC delivered its reply to Campbell's 12 questions on Friday, June 27. While he did not contribute to it, Chairman Davies had seen a draft. The letter, he would later say, "was giving, on behalf of BBC management, our best and most truthful explanation to Mr. Campbell of what we had reported." In the long and detailed letter, Sambrook sought to refute or answer each of Campbell's charges. He devoted several pages to the context: the charges of biased BBC reporting from Iraq; the news about the "dodgy dossier" of February 2003; and the reports throughout the media about unease within the intelligence community. He then denied that the BBC had accused the prime minister, the foreign secretary or other cabinet members of lying; or that the BBC had accused the prime minister of leading the country to war on a false premise.

Sambrook said Gilligan had reported simply the assertion of one senior and credible source that the 45-minute claim was wrong and included late into the dossier. "The allegation was

not made by the BBC, but by our source," he wrote. "We do not report everything that every source tells us. In this instance, we believe that the source is credible and that it was legitimate to place his concerns in the public domain." Gilligan, said Sambrook, "accurately reported the source telling him that the government 'probably knew that the 45-minute figure was wrong' and that the claim was 'questionable.'" The BBC would have preferred the source to be on the record, and corroborated. "But you well know," he added, "that in this field sources very rarely—if ever—choose to speak on the record."

Sambrook concluded by rejecting Campbell's charges against it and Gilligan. "We have to believe that you are conducting a personal vendetta against a particular journalist whose reports on a number of occasions have caused you discomfort," he concluded. He once again referred Campbell to the standard BBC complaints channels.

Campbell on Channel Four

The letter had an immediate impact. Campbell had been invited earlier to appear Friday on Channel Four's evening news program with host Jon Snow. Campbell had turned down the request, and instead gone to Wimbledon to watch the tennis championship matches. But when he got the BBC response, he changed his mind.

First Campbell put out a statement from his office. It said that Sambrook's response "confirms that the BBC broadcast a story that was hugely damaging to the integrity of the government and the prime minister without knowing that story to be true and without any effort to check whether the story was true or not." He alleged that the "lie" was "broadcast many times on many BBC outlets." The original story, he declared, was "outrageous. So is Mr. Sambrook's reply… I do not want 12 pages of weasel words, sophistry and a defense of unethical journalism. Far better would be a 12-word apology." He continued:

> If the BBC are now saying that their journalism is based upon the principle that they can report what any source says, then BBC standards are now debased beyond belief. It means the BBC can broadcast anything and take responsibility for nothing… Their reputation is being undermined by its institutional failure ever to admit it is wrong.

Then Campbell headed for the Channel Four broadcast facility. He arrived after the 7 p.m. news program had started. The first Snow knew he had an on-air guest was a message in his earpiece, informing him that Campbell was in the building.[46] During the interview, Campbell made the argument that the BBC had changed the rules of journalism. He said:

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[46] Andrew Sparrow, "Campbell goes on television news to deny BBC vendetta," *Daily Telegraph*, June 28, 2003, p.10. Snow lamented that "here was this person I had wanted to interview for years, but I had not been able to prepare for the interview."

> They now say you can say anything you want on the television because somebody said it to you. It doesn't matter if it's true. It doesn't matter if you check it. It doesn't matter if it's corroborated. You can say it.[47]

Moving to a more personal level, Campbell added that, "a lot of journalists see their mission to discredit politicians in the political process." At the same time, he clarified that "I have never met Andrew Gilligan. I don't have a vendetta against him."

> I do believe that anybody with an interest in good, decent journalism, of which there is a huge amount in this country, should understand that when allegations are made, when lies are broadcast, when as that letter shows, there is not a shred of evidence to substantiate the allegations, they should apologize and then we can move on.

Defuse or fight?

By Saturday, June 28, the British press was full of headlines about the stand-off between the BBC and Campbell. Sambrook, for one, was dismayed at the turn matters had taken. He and Dyke were resolved to defend the BBC against unjust attack, and the vitriol had become unprecedented. "I had no doubt that this was an attack on the independence of the BBC as an institution," says Sambrook. BBC Board Chair Davies concurred: "I took this as an attack on the impartiality of the BBC and the integrity of the BBC, done with great vigor."[48] As Radio News Chief Mitchell observes:

> This is between the government and a national institution. It's incredibly high profile. I think it therefore goes atomic early on, and the stakes are so high… This was the government's reputation at stake. This was the future of the BBC and its independence at stake. As both sides perceived it, of course.

But how could matters continue in this vein? Prime Minister Blair, the BBC heard unofficially, was uncomfortable with the situation. Nor would the BBC benefit from the mudslinging on both sides. What did Campbell want—resignations at the BBC? For that matter, what did the BBC want? For Blair to fire Campbell? Finally, while no threats had been made, it was the fact that the government controlled the BBC's funding, and the broadcaster's charter renewal process would begin shortly. Sambrook felt obliged to take a close look at what alternatives to escalation the BBC might have.

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47 Jon Snow, "Campbell Interview," *Channel Four News*. Source: Hearings (BBC/5/0132

48 Hutton Commission, Minutes of hearing Thursday, August 28, 2003, Gavyn Davies. See: http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans23.htm.

Call board? One choice was for Dyke and Sambrook to ask the board of governors for a statement of support. But the board was not scheduled to meet again until July 17. That was too far in the future. To be effective, Chairman Davies would have to summon the governors for an emergency meeting—an action historically reserved for only the gravest matters. On the other hand, with the BBC's independence and editorial integrity at stake, a statement could send a strong message that the BBC governors fully supported the management.

But there was a risk. The board might find that the evidence did not support a statement. In that event, BBC management would be at the least embarrassed, and perhaps obliged to resign. The board's role, clarifies International Division Director Byford, was to "defend the independence of the BBC and its distance from government… The role of the governors is certainly not to say, 'Well, anything you say Greg, is right.' Or 'we've got to get out there and just defend it.'" Moreover, notes Sambrook, "I knew that some of the governors were critical of Andrew Gilligan as a reporter, and his track record. Some of them felt there was an overly aggressive culture on the *Today* program, in other words that this had been an accident waiting to happen."

It was also possible that the board would recuse itself. It had a strong incentive to do so, because the board not only exercised oversight over the BBC; it was also a court of appeals for complaints to the Program Complaints Unit. Should Campbell choose—as he had every right to do even at this late date--to lodge an official complaint, board involvement in the altercation could invalidate it as a neutral panel of judges.

Process. Sambrook considered some of the BBC's other options. One was to instruct Campbell more forcefully than Sambrook had been able to so far to follow the established process for complaints, and assure him it would rise immediately to the board of governors' level. The case was straightforward: Campbell had made complaints to the BBC. Sambrook's replies were unsatisfactory to Campbell. "He has the right for that complaint to be fast-tracked to our own governors' complaints committee… He can go for independent assessment," says Byford.

> You're not telling him, 'get lost.' Nor are you telling him, 'Yes, we agree.' You're saying we believe that's what should happen now, and we can fast track it to that level.

Back channel. A second possibility was to open a back channel to the government in an effort to settle the matter privately. "One of the options you have is to open a back channel and try and do a deal, and sort it out," remarks Sambrook. The BBC leadership knew Prime Minister Blair as a strong supporter of the broadcaster. They did not think he relished this fight. There was even a candidate for go-between: Peter Mandelson, a Labour member of parliament and close ally of Blair's. "I'm not sure we should be doing deals with the government," concedes Sambrook. "That's not what an independent broadcaster should be about. But the real politics of it is that sometimes you have to find ways out of corners, and we were all in a corner." Sambrook adds that "I certainly raised [this option] with both Greg [Dyke]and Gavin [Davies]."

> The advantages are that by the time Alastair had gone public, you had him on the government side and I suppose me fronting for Greg and Gavin, in a very dug-in position. The option is to have a sensible conversation between the two parties with people who aren't as dug in and publicly committed, that say 'come on, this is going to damage both of us… Let's just sort out how we get out of this mess.' If you could find cooler heads on both sides to do that, it's quite possible you could come to an agreement.

Davies, however, was skeptical about putting in a personal call to the prime minister. His close personal ties to Blair made it all the more difficult to contemplate. He was reluctant "to pick up the phone to the Prime Minister directly because I had felt that this was a public conflict, there was public interest in it, and we should not seek to settle it in a clandestine manner."[49]

Investigate. Finally, the BBC could call a time out. They could appoint an inquiry, either internal or using a distinguished outside figure, to examine the complaints against the BBC and issue an opinion. Sambrook sums up this approach as: "Let's just stop the clock. We're going to get a third party to come and arbitrate in some way on this." An inquiry, he says, "concedes to the government that there's something here that needs to be properly looked at, non-defensively… That could have de-escalated it, bought some time, everyone can calm down and think about what's going on, what the issues are and what the complexity is, and sort themselves out."

There was support within the BBC for this tactic. "The key is always to try and take the temperature down, but not do it in such a way that you look like you're backing down," says Radio 4 Controller Boaden.

> You just needed to say, as of this point, we're standing by our journalism, but clearly we want to find out if it's right. This is a very serious allegation… You let everybody calm down. You let the testosterone levels fall. And then you can find out what really happened… They could have got someone from outside who had no vested interest in the news being right.

Radio News Director Mitchell agrees. "Arguments were being played out in faxes, rather than face to face," he remembers. "Nobody [was saying] let's look at the whole thing. Let's take every word that we broadcast. Let's be forensic about this." He adds:

> The trouble with journalists is, we live by short-term deadlines. We live by snap decisions, broadcast journalists especially. Our next deadline is only hours away. You have to go with what you've got. We live by that. We

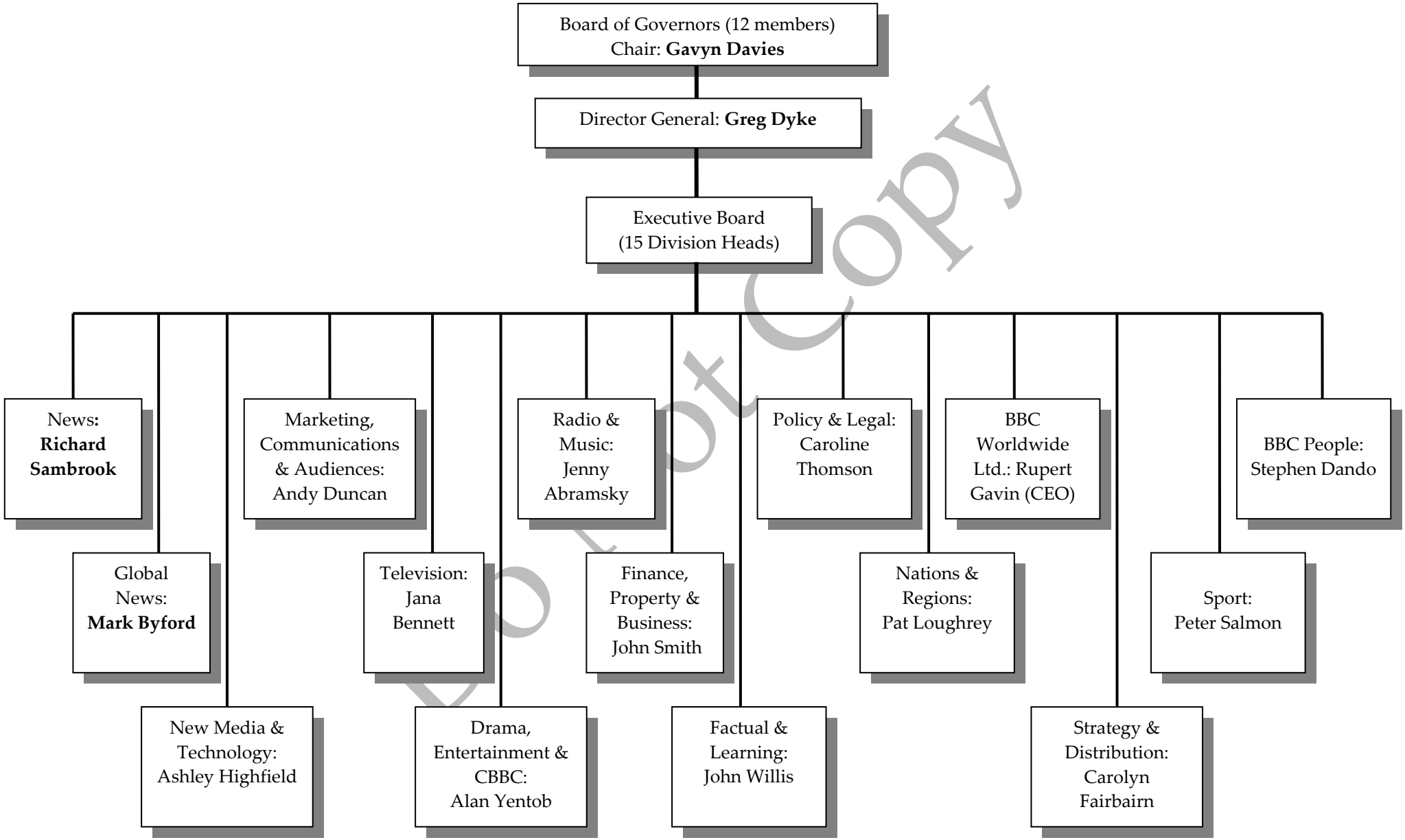
[49] Davies testimony.

> spend our careers doing it. It's not surprising, therefore, when we're into a confrontation like that, we respond in the same quick, instinctive way.

But others argued that, in the prevailing climate of hostility and distrust, an inquiry would have allowed the government to claim victory, implicitly turning the very fact of an inquiry into an admission of BBC guilt. Sambrook recalls that the affair had escalated to the point that the government could see only "black or white, all or nothing." Campbell and Blair, he feared, would accept nothing other than an abject apology: "This story is 100 percent wrong, it's a mountain of lies, take the whole thing back, roll over and beg, BBC." That was unacceptable. As Sambrook recalls: "We believed we were right, and that we had to stand our ground."

Appendix 1

BBC Organization Chart, June 2003



For a view of the BBC's organization chart in 2008, please see: http://www.bbc.co.uk/foi/docs/organisation_and_management/how_the_BBC_is_Run/BBC_Organisational_Chart.pdf