

# Reputations to Lose: BBC versus the Blair Government

## Abstract

This case is about the choices a publicly-funded news organization has to make when the government of the day attacks its editorial independence. In June 2003, what had been a short, live, early-morning exchange between a radio host and a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporter escalated into a full-scale war which pitted the BBC against Prime Minister Tony Blair's government. 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. As the dialogue became more heated, the BBC executive team faced decisions about how to handle the deteriorating relationship with one of its most important constituents—the government.

The case offers students an opportunity to learn about the structure and administration of one state-owned media organization. It offers insights into how the editorial leadership functions, including how it balances responsibility to the public against its reliance on public funds authorized by government. Students will be asked to consider whether the BBC plays a special media role because it is publicly funded. They can also discuss the pros and cons of using unattributed sources. Finally, students will grapple with the frustration, anger and difficulty in achieving a calm perspective that arises in the midst of a heated argument with ad hominem attacks on the rise.

The case can be used in a course about international journalism; about editorial management; about broadcast news; or on the ethics of journalism.

## Credits

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