

16 April 2003

Mrs Alice Mahon MP  
House of Commons  
LONDON  
SW1A 0AA

Dear Mrs Mahon

I have received your letter of 23 March addressed to the Head of Programme Complaints Unit, about the BBC's coverage of the war in Iraq. As your comments fall outside his remit, it has been passed to me for reply.

In preparation for the possibility of a war in Iraq, the BBC's Governors approved guidelines intended to help us manage our responsibilities to audiences in the UK and across the world. Governors agreed that coverage should enable viewers and listeners to make sense of events by providing impartial analysis and by offering a range of views and opinions, including the voices of those who oppose the war in Britain and elsewhere. They also agreed that matters involving risk to, and loss of, life required the utmost regard to the mood and feeling of audiences. Stories which would be painful, but central to understanding, should be handled sensitively and with care. These guidelines have been published on the BBC's website.

To answer your points in turn, on the date you wrote to the Programme Complaints Unit, our programmes reported the Iraqi claim that 77 civilians had been killed and more than 300 wounded in Basra. Information from British military sources was also broadcast, questioning the figures but confirming that bombing raids had taken place on Basra the previous night.

You ask why the BBC did not show the picture of a child with head injuries – an image which was reproduced in newspapers. As you would expect, the question of what violent images should be shown on news programmes is one which has exercised our editorial staff at all levels for many years, in the differing contexts of war, terrorism, and situations such as famine and train or rail disasters. The degree of horror which audiences will find tolerable is carefully considered. BBC guidelines also emphasise the need to respect the dead and injured, and this must apply whether they are in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.

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On the other hand, we believe it is important that audiences are given an honest account of what happens in war, without sanitising its horror. Programmes have therefore been showing images in this context which would be unacceptable in a different situation. However in this case, our senior management agreed that it was right not to show the image of the child.

On the question of Iraqi casualties, verifiable figures can only be given if casualties or fatalities are witnessed by BBC correspondents, or if information is supplied by a reliable third party. News programmes can, and have, broadcast casualty figures resulting from the bombings in Baghdad, as provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Information. But while it is possible to be reasonably accurate about the number of prisoners taken – because they can be seen in reception centres behind coalition lines – detailed information of casualties and damage within non-coalition areas is not open to scrutiny and therefore cannot be verified by the BBC.

I hope this answers your concerns.

Yours sincerely

(Richard Sambrook)

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