

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING

Wednesday 30 April 2003, 9.00am to 1 00pm
in the Sixtn Floor Suite, Television Centre

PRESENT:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Gavyn Davies | Chairman |
| Richard Ryder | Vice Chairman |
| Ruth Deech | (for minutes 36 to 42 only) |
| Richard Eyre | |
| Dermot Gleeson | |
| Sarah Hogg | |
| Merfyn Jones | |
| Fabian Monds | |
| Pauline Neville-Jones | |
| Angelā Sarkis | |
| - Robert Smith | |
| Ranjit Sondhi | |
| | |
| Greg Dyke | Director-General |
| Jenny Abramsky | Director, Radio & Music |
| Jana Bennett | Director, Television |
| Mark Byford | Director, World Service & Global News |
| Rupert Gavin | Chief Executive, Worldwide |
| Pat Loughrey | Director, Nations & Regions |
| Richard Sambrook | Director, News |
| John Smith | Director, Finance, Property & Business Affairs |
| Caroline Thomson | Director, Public Policy |
| Alan Yentob | Director, Drama, Entertainment & CBBC
(from minute 40 onwards) |
| | |
| Simon Milner | The Secretary |
| Tina Stowell | Head of Business Administration |

38. COVERAGE OF WAR IN IRAQ: UPDATE

ORAL

1. National News

Introducing the item, Richard Sambrook said the war in Iraq had been more difficult to report than other recent conflicts for a number of reasons, not least the division of public opinion in Britain and around the world. The BBC had much to be proud of - our teams had demonstrated the highest levels of professionalism, impartiality, independence and accuracy, reporting the war without fear or favour and often at significant personal risk. It had been the largest ever deployment by the BBC, with at one time just over 200 people working in the region across all services. Richard Sambrook then briefed the Board on specific issues in turn

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a Safety

Kaveh Goleston and Kamaran Muhamed were killed whilst working independently of the military in Northern Iraq. A number of staff sustained injuries, including Stuart Hughes - a radio producer who lost part of his left leg after a land mine explosion - and John Simpson and members of his team. Full reviews of these incidents had been conducted and at this stage it was hard to see how any could have been avoided.

b. Embedded Reporting

Journalists had always worked alongside the armed forces in an accredited capacity, but never as many as in Iraq. The increased number of correspondents 'embedded' with the military and equipped with lightweight transmission technology meant frontline conflict was effectively broadcast live. But it was never more than a snapshot from one place at one time and contributed to some erroneous information being broadcast early on that had not been corroborated by the military. An independent academic study of the embedded reporting operation had been commissioned from Cardiff University School of Journalism to help the BBC understand the issues this method of reporting raised

c Context

The BBC's main priority was to provide audiences with the 'big picture' and a sense of perspective. Great effort was made to contextualise our reporting on all major programmes, with particular success on News 24 through Brian Hanrahan and on *Newsnight* and the *World at One* via Mark Urban. But more could have been done to provide context on the 6 and 10 o'clock BBC One bulletins.

d. Tone

The BBC's coverage had been criticised - especially early on in the campaign - for adopting a "negative tone". Richard Sambrook was satisfied that BBC News employed no more than appropriate scepticism - reflecting the questions and sometimes the anxieties of the audience. There had been one or two individual phrases used that had caused some concern amongst management, but they were not typical of the generality of coverage and indeed, scepticism about the first week of military action was justified

e Impartiality

One of the distinguishing features of the conflict was the weight and organisation of the anti-war lobby. The BBC had been criticised for some of its reporting from Baghdad, especially the interviews with the Iraqi Information Minister, which were deemed as inappropriate 'moral equivalence'. On the other hand, opinion polls had found the majority of the British public perceived the BBC's coverage to be slanted slightly in favour of the Government.

Daily editorial meetings with representatives from Global News and Nations & Regions - in addition to the Director-General's daily editorial review meetings - ensured our output was constantly reviewed and any necessary changes implemented swiftly. In all the BBC could be properly proud of the independence it showed and be secure that its reporting was accurate, fair and perceptive. Newspaper criticism only surfaced towards the end of the campaign from the Daily Telegraph.

f Competition

Sky and ITN both enjoyed increased audiences and some applause for their coverage, but the BBC still dominated in audience share, in spite of effective scheduling by ITV at 9pm and a strong performance from Sky in multichannel homes. We averaged around 5 additional news

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hours of television each day on BBC One and Two, plus current affairs special programmes in peak *Newsnight* broadcast a special edition each weekend, and Radio 5 Live and World Service became rolling news services, with Radio 4 extending all its news programmes

In ICM and MORI polls, the BBC was rated highest for news across all media, with 93% of the population using BBC News services to follow the war. News 24 was seen by 70% of the population (40 million people) in the first week of the war, and in Sky Digital Homes, 48% said the BBC was their main source of information compared to 24% for Sky News. For the first time, News Online audiences matched those of other BBC broadcast outlets – 7 million daily reach – and doubled its average page impressions per week from 65 to 112 million. And 72% of those who used radio chose a BBC network service

g. Looking ahead

Having established a bureau, the BBC would remain in Baghdad to report on the peace and establishment of a new Iraqi authority.

h. Budget

News had made a provision of £5m from within its budget, matched by a similar amount from the Corporate Centre. Although some bills had yet to be received, the forecast showed that expenditure was close to budget.

Finally, Richard Sambrook said News and Global News had worked more closely and more profitably together over the course of the conflict than at any time previously.

2. Global News

Mark Byford said the previous eight weeks more than justified the creation of the BBC's Global News Division, providing good quality reporting and strong analysis in a collaborative process across all three media. This served as a reminder of how great an impact the BBC could make by working together.

In Iraq, the public listened to the Arabic Service; the troops on the battlefield listened to the World Service in English as they progressed through the country and the military staff at the Command Centre followed the news on BBC World. In the US, 353 radio stations took extended World Service input. The Arabic Service expanded its coverage, broadcasting live from Cairo and offering interactive forums for debate each day, this was the only service for the Arab world of its kind to exchange opinions throughout the war.

The quality of BBC World's output had significantly increased; and this was something to build on going forward. Viewing around the world increased, where an extra 70 million homes watched the service. In the US World audiences were up 30% matched by a decline in network news audiences there.

Online users increased from 7 to 13 million in one month, but awareness of the BBC's international facing news website could be improved and methods for promoting the site would be addressed. BBC Monitoring played an important role and their work was recognised each day on the BBC's national and international news services. Audience research in six countries was underway to analyse the reaction of audiences to the BBC and other international competitors and this was due back in June.

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An extensive editorial review was scheduled for later that day and would examine impartiality and editorial policy issues in detail. Management would consider if enough attribution was given and a range of voices heard; and whether the 'big picture' provided was always accurate and available to audiences often enough. Finally, the meeting would look at whether the coverage provided by embedded journalists was relied on too heavily.

There was a real need for the BBC to continue to cover the implications of the war – from the peace in Iraq, to wider issues like the impact on the future of the UN and Europe. The BBC would also seek to work with Iraq to reconstruct its media operations via the World Service Trust, in much the same way it did with great effect in Afghanistan.

3. Discussion

Gavyn Davies asked that the Board's thanks be passed to all members of staff involved in the BBC's coverage of the war. The significant safety risks had compounded the pressure on journalists and the fact that the BBC's fundamental principles of independence and impartiality were upheld throughout was a testament to the professionalism of management and staff alike. The Board agreed and paid tribute to Greg Dyke, Richard Sambrook and Mark Byford for successfully piloting the organisation during the period of war in Iraq.

During discussion, Governors made the following points:

- The BBC's international reputation had been enhanced, particularly BBC World's, which had offered a distinctive service through the breadth and quality of its coverage anchored from around the world.
- On the other hand, nationally there was not sufficient understanding of the BBC's achievements. This stemmed from MPs' misconception of an endemic 'anti-war' opinion amongst BBC staff, coupled with disapproval of the BBC's interviews with Iraqi government officials like the Minister of Information. Going forward, demonstrating that journalists were not necessarily 'taken in' by something they were reporting on should be addressed. Likewise, the tone of reporting major risks should be examined.
- Polling evidence that demonstrated a modestly higher proportion of the public considered the BBC to be in favour of the war should be made available to the Board and senior managers to enable them to respond more robustly to those critics that believed the BBC to be biased the other way.
- The BBC's relationship with the military needed strengthening and, to enable this, management should consider raising the profile and seniority of defence correspondents. Indeed, defence would continue to be an important subject and therefore journalistic expertise in this area was essential. In addition, the BBC should consider inviting the military to hold a joint broadcaster/military seminar to discuss coverage of the war in Iraq and identify lessons to be learned. For example, the use of 'embedded' journalists and whether the coverage they provided helped or hindered analysis of the wider picture.
- Going forward, the BBC must continue to analyse the issues that had arisen from the war – for example, the future of Iraq; implications for international institutions like the UN, EU and NATO; and what the war would mean to the future of Europe and the Middle East – and this should not be left only to Radio.
- Over-staffing of journalists following the same story needed to be avoided – as did allowing only the 'stars' of news to file reports, if more junior correspondents were in possession of better information. In addition, management needed to examine how to avoid the 'Chinese whisper' effect of a comment on one news outlet becoming the perceived wisdom for all commentary.

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Leading the response, Greg Dyke said his daily editorial group meeting had been effective in spotting mistakes and taking corrective action. He was aware that the increased use of live links between anchors and correspondents in the field gave rise to journalists commenting rather than reporting on events and this would be monitored. Other points made by the Executive in response included:

- Television and Radio were committed to following-up the issues arising from the conflict, but this could mean the BBC's relationship with the Government would remain difficult in the months ahead.
- During the war, simulcasting News 24 on terrestrial channels had been successful. Also, special News 24 programmes, adapted for the terrestrial channels, had transformed BBC One and Two's service, and Current Affairs had produced several special programmes at short notice.
- The output from embedded journalists had fed the audience's hunger for live news; the challenge was creating a hybrid through that to analysis providing the context.
- On Radio, more experienced radio presenters were deployed in the field and it was therefore necessary for less experienced staff to anchor programmes, causing some mistakes on-air. The Asian Network had provided a platform for Muslim communities to put forward their opinion and this had led to some serious debates.

Concluding the response, Richard Sambrook said the criticism about 'moral equivalence' in relation to interviews with the Iraqi Minister for Information were somewhat exaggerated as it was unlikely that audiences were not able to distinguish between him and UK Government ministers. Effort had been made to strengthen the BBC's dialogue with the military, success had been limited and support from the Governors would be welcomed in this area. The BBC's defence correspondent, Mark Urban, was excellent, but needed a wider profile on all news programmes and this would be addressed. It was surprising that some junior correspondents had complained to Governors about limited air-time, as all had been deployed. Finally, in response to a request from Governors, details of the compensation and care the BBC as an employer was providing to the families of those killed and employees injured would be circulated.

Concluding the discussion, Gavyn Davies noted that the Board was united in its view that the BBC's best principles of impartiality and independence had been upheld and this had been achieved in difficult circumstances, backed up by strong leadership from senior management. This year's Annual Report should include a special section on the BBC's coverage of the war in Iraq.

Account of the BBC Board of Governors' Meeting held on
Wednesday 30 April 2003

1. Main Business

Editorial issues dominated the business of this Board meeting in three different ways

War in Iraq

The Director of News, Richard Sambrook, and the Director of Global News, Mark Byford, briefed the Board on the BBC's domestic and international coverage of the Iraq War. They highlighted the editorial, logistic and safety aspects of newsgathering and programming, and discussed reactions to the BBC's coverage from the public as well as political and other opinion formers.

Issues raised in discussion included: how relations between the BBC and the military might be further improved; the variation between the public's and some politicians' perceptions of the BBC's coverage; and plans across BBC Radio and Television to produce programmes to analyse the issues that had arisen from the war (for example the future of the UN; what the war means for Europe and the Middle East)

The Board congratulated Greg Dyke, Richard and Mark on their stewardship of the BBC's coverage throughout the period of military conflict. They concluded that the significant safety risks had compounded the pressure on journalists and therefore the fact that the BBC's fundamental principles of independence and impartiality were upheld throughout is a testament to the professionalism of management and staff alike.