



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Mr Stephen Whittle
Controller of Editorial Policy
BBC

July 1st 2003

Dear Stephen,

As you may be aware, I have been engaged in correspondence with Richard Sambrook over the BBC's conduct on the Iraq Weapons of Mass Destruction dossier story - originally broadcast by the Today Programme on May 29th and repeated endlessly by the BBC in the following days and weeks.

I believe that the BBC has ignored or broken many of its own public guidelines on this story. I know that there are many journalists in the BBC who agree with me.

But despite the fact that the very grave allegations broadcast are false, that they were based on a single anonymous source, that no attempt was made to corroborate them, that no attempt was made to put the charges to the Government before they were broadcast, Richard continues to claim that the BBC acted properly. As such, there seems no point in continuing my correspondence with him.

As a great admirer of the BBC and a former BBC journalist myself, I remain seriously concerned at the damage that this controversy is doing to the Corporation's deserved reputation for accuracy, impartiality and fairness. It is, I'm afraid, only too clear that Richard is unable to admit even obvious errors of judgement and conduct - such as the failure to put any of the allegations to the Government before they were broadcast - for fear of the whole of the BBC's defence crumbling.

As you are both Controller of Editorial Policy and helped write the Producers' Guidelines, I would like you to investigate whether you agree with Richard's claim, in his letter to me, that "an entirely proper editorial process was followed in advance of the broadcast".

In particular, I would like you to consider the process followed against the following guidelines:

- 1) *General: All BBC programmes and services should be open-minded, fair and show a respect for the truth.* Do you believe it is fair that serious allegations can be broadcast without any effort being made to get a response from those who are accused prior to broadcast? Most importantly, do you believe the allegations are true?
- 2) *General: The Agreement accompanying the BBC's Charter specifies that the Corporation should treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality both in news programmes and other programmes that deal with matters of public policy or of political and industrial controversy.* Do you accept that there could hardly be a more controversial subject than the allegation broadcast by the BBC that

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Downing Street had inserted information into the WMD Dossier against the wishes of the intelligence services and in the knowledge that the information was probably untrue? This was the allegation broadcast by the Today Programme on May 29th. Do you agree, then, that it was even more important that efforts be made to ensure the accuracy of the story, to corroborate it and, at the least, to put the charges to the Government in advance of broadcast?

- 3) *Right of reply: Where a programme reveals evidence of iniquity or incompetence, or where a strong, damaging critique of an individual or institution is laid out, there is a presumption that those criticised be given a fair opportunity to respond.* I am sure you agree that the allegation was both damaging and purported to show iniquity. Why then was no attempt made to give those accused any opportunity to respond before the allegations were broadcast?
- 4) *Accuracy: The BBC must be accurate. Research for all programmes must be thorough. We must be prepared to check, cross check and seek advice to ensure this* The BBC has admitted that this story came from a single source. Could you investigate what efforts were made to check this story before broadcast? If no efforts were made - and we know no effort was made to check it with the Government before broadcast - how does this fit in with the guidelines? (To save Richard's embarrassment, I won't comment on his remarkable suggestion in his letter to Alastair Campbell that newspapers reporting the BBC's story after it was broadcast somehow offers corroboration. Nor on his claim that the BBC somehow met demands for accuracy by accurately reporting the false allegations of an anonymous source.)
- 5) *Programmes should be reluctant to rely on only one source.* We know that the BBC had only one source for this story. But it was always my belief when I worked at the BBC that that these guidelines referred to an attributable source. There was not only just a single source for this story but it was - and remains - anonymous. No effort was made to corroborate this story. No effort was made to ask the Government to respond prior to broadcast. Could you investigate how this shows any *reluctance* on behalf of the BBC to rely on one source?
- 6) *Anonymity: A deliberate decision to withhold or disguise the identity of a significant contributor raises difficult issues. The authority of programmes can be undermined by the use of anonymous contributors whose status the audience cannot judge.* I accept that there are occasions when the anonymity of sources may need be protected. But I find it hard to imagine the guidelines envisaged a situation in which such serious allegations were made on the basis of a single anonymous source without any efforts being made to corroborate or check the story or that, when firm and widespread denials were given, the allegations continued to be given such credence and prominence for weeks afterwards.
- 7) *Defamation: If we broadcast anything that injured the reputation of an individual, a group or an organisation we may be libelling them. The BBC is liable no matter who speaks the words in its programme.* Could you investigate how this corresponds with

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Richard's claims that the BBC behaved properly because it accurately reported someone's false allegations.

These are, in my view, clear instances where the processes followed on this story – a very serious story – flouted, ignored or pushed to the extreme the Producer Guidelines. I believe the more serious the story, the more seriously these guidelines should be followed. That was certainly the case when I worked at the BBC.

They were drawn up, as you will know better than me, to prevent the sort of damage done to the BBC's reputation as well as the unfair damage done to others that we have seen in the last few weeks. I look forward to your investigation and your reply. In the mean-time, I am releasing this letter to the press.

With very best wishes,

Ben Bradshaw MP



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