

Sambrook

28th June

Iraq Dossier - BBC row

Sambrook, Richard and Phil Woolas, Interview, MMU, 28 June 2003

TRANSCRIPT

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Sky presenter: *In the last few moments the director of BBC News, Richard Sambrook, has responded to a minister's criticism of the BBC. This is what he said.*

Richard Sambrook: It's unacceptable. Mr Bradshaw has again misrepresented our journalism, both in what we said and in the way we conducted it. The item was entirely in line with the BBC's producer guidelines. It was properly referred to senior management before the broadcast. In addition to that we did outline what we would be saying in advance to the Ministry of Defence. We spoke to an MoD press officer on a mobile phone call the evening before and outlined what would be in Andrew Gilligan's report in order that the minister Adam Ingram could respond the next morning which he duly did. I really think it's time to stop misrepresenting what we said and take a hard look at what actually .

Presenter: *The BBC once again standing by its side of the story. Well, to join us now for more on that live from Manchester is Labour's Phil Woolas, deputy leader of the Commons. Hello to you, sir. This is an unprecedented spat, isn't it, between senior figures in the political world and each side has a great deal to lose if one backs down. Could no-one see the sense of perhaps compromising?*

Phil Woolas: It's not unprecedented, but I agree with you, it's very serious. I don't see why we should. It's an established principle in journalism that you check your sources with other sources and you give the person you are making allegations against the chance to respond. The Government responded to these allegations very quickly and they were not broadcast with equal weight. And since then the BBC has been digging itself further in a hole, which I am very, very sad about. I think it would be better if they did what Alastair Campbell had the common sense to do which was when he made a mistake he said: I'm sorry, I made a mistake.

Presenter: *To be fair the BBC have published on the internet - and to everybody concerned who wishes to look at it - a nine-page statement fully covering themselves on just how they have balanced their reporting and how they do substantiate their claims in this respect.*

PW: I've read the nine-page statement and as an ex-BBC producer, I'm not convinced by it. It's not good enough to say that they took one source and

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reported that it was a source's allegations. You can't run journalism or democratic politics on the basis that if one person makes an accusation, it's then legitimate for the BBC to give that prominence. I think that's why we have, as I hope everybody in journalism and certainly politics knows, that you have to check your sources and give the people who you're making accusations against the chance to respond. And that did not happen. And that's at the essence of this row. And I think from my own point of view I can quite understand why Alastair Campbell and his colleagues are very angry indeed.

Presenter: *But the BBC are saying that they do check their sources and the source that they did quote was a reliable one they have used in the past and they took it more seriously in the light of the February dossier.*

PW: And, and, they've said that they checked that allegation with the Government and they did not do that. And that is the problem. You can't base journalism on one source. You just can't do that .. otherwise ..

Presenter *All right, by, by the same token .*

PW: Everybody who's got an axe to grind would then make accusations against their political enemies, wouldn't they, and we'd be the first ..(inaudible)

Presenter. *By the same token, Alastair Campbell is making a very serious allegation against the BBC accusing BBC journalists of lying.*

PW: Well, let's see what the Foreign Affairs Committee says, then. Er, and it's interesting in Richard's note to Alastair Campbell, he says he will await the outcome of the Foreign Affairs Committee's report and if it finds against him he will express regret. Does that mean that anybody who makes a serious accusation in this country against anyone else can get huge coverage for that and that we have to have a select committee inquiry? No, that's not in my understanding what the BBC producers' guidelines say - and it's not what Peter Woodall, who is the senior political columnist of *The Times* said in his column where he said the BBC standards of journalism, making no comment on the arguments for and against the conflict in Iraq, but he said, and he's independent from the BBC, that that was just not good enough.

Presenter: *Can I just get one last comment from you? Of course, getting lost in all this, which is essentially a row between two men and eventually they will sort it out between themselves, is the issue of weapons of mass destruction, if they indeed exist. Isn't that more important? Isn't that what Sky News viewers would like to know about?*

PW: I very, very strongly agree with you. As an elected Member of Parliament I think that's very true. But I would say this. It is the BBC who have given this story prominence. When Alastair appeared before the committee, there were over 50 journalists present at that committee. Down the corridor at the other select committee about very grave matters to do with international affairs, there was no coverage. I think one of the reasons why we are so angry about this is that we're frankly fed up with political gossip becoming news stories and the very serious issues. And I've watched your programme and I saw your

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coverage of the tragic, awful killings of the British soldiers, and they were given due prominence. And I think that's the sort of journalism that we would like to see and I think the BBC should look at their own news values and make some changes.

Presenter: *Mr Woolas, thank you.*

Ends

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**Mr Richard Sambrook
Head of News
BBC**

June 28th 2003

Dear Richard,

During my interview on the Today programme this morning your presenter, John Humphrys, asserted the BBC had checked out the allegation made by Andrew Gilligan on the Today Programme on May 29th beforehand with the Ministry of Defence.

I have spoken to the MOD at some length, including with the official the BBC claims was given the opportunity to respond to this allegation. The MOD remains certain that the only contact between the Today programme and the MOD press office related to an interview on the use of cluster bombs. Mr Gilligan was asked whether any other issues would be raised in the interview. He mentioned a separate story on WMD, gave no further details and, critically, made it clear that this was not an MOD issue and he was not seeking a response from them.

I would be grateful if on Monday morning the Today programme corrected the false statement that the MOD was given an opportunity to respond to this allegation prior to its broadcast.

With very best wishes,

Ben Bradshaw MP

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