

The BBC and Iraq: Myth and reality

Greg Dyke, the BBC's director general, has attacked American television reporting of Iraq. "For any news organisation to act as a cheerleader for government is to undermine your credibility," he said. "They should be... balancing their coverage, not banging the drum for one side or the other." He said research showed that, of 840 experts interviewed on American news programmes during the invasion of Iraq, only four opposed the war. "If that were true in Britain, the BBC would have failed in its duty."

Did Dyke say all this with a straight face? Let's look at what research shows about the BBC's reporting of Iraq. Media Tenor, the non-partisan, Bonn-based media research organisation, has examined the Iraq war reporting of some of the world's leading broadcasters, including the US networks and the BBC. It concentrated on the coverage of opposition to the war.

The second-worst case of denying access to anti-war voices was ABC in the United States, which allowed them a mere 7 per cent of its overall coverage. The worst case was the BBC, which gave just 2 per cent of its coverage to opposition views - views that represented those of the majority of the British people. A separate study by Cardiff University came to the same conclusion. The BBC, it said, had "displayed the most pro-war agenda of any [British] broadcaster".

Consider the first Newsnight broadcast after the greatest political demonstration in British history on 15 February. The studio discussion was confined to interviews with a Tory member of the House of Lords, a Tory MP, an Oxford don, an LSE professor, a commentator from the Times and the views of the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw. Not one marcher was invited to participate, not one representative of the two million who had filled London in protest. Instead, a political reporter, David Grossman, asked perversely: "What about the millions who didn't march? Was going to the DIY store or watching the football on Saturday a demonstration of support for the government?"

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A constant theme of the BBC's Iraq coverage is that Anglo-American policy, although capable of "blunders", is essentially benign, even noble. Thus, amazingly, Matt Frei, the BBC's Washington correspondent, declared on 13 April: "There's no doubt that the desire to bring good, to bring American values to the rest of the world, and especially now to the Middle East... is now increasingly tied up with military power." The same "good" military power had just slaughtered at least 15,000 people in an illegal, unprovoked attack on a largely defenceless country.

No doubt touched by this goodness, Newsnight's Kirsty Wark asked General Sir Mike Jackson, Chief of the General Staff, if "coalition" troops "are really powerless to help civilians targeted by Iraqi forces in Basra". Clearly, she felt no need to check the veracity of the British claim that Iraqi forces had been targeting civilians in Basra, a claim that proved to be baseless propaganda.

During the bombing of Serbia in 1999, Wark interviewed another general, Wesley Clark, the Nato commander. The Serbian city of Nis had just been sprayed with American cluster bombs, killing women, old people and children caught in the open: the horrific handiwork of one of Nato's "precision-guided" missiles, of which only 2 per cent hit military targets. Wark asked not a single question about this, or about any civilian deaths.

These are not isolated examples, but the BBC "style". What matters is that the received wisdom dominates and is protected. When a US missile killed 62 people at a market in Baghdad, BBC News affected a fake "who can tell who's responsible?" neutrality, a standard technique when the atrocity is "ours". On Newsnight, a BBC commentator dismissed the carnage with these words: "It's a war after all... But the coalition aim is to unseat Saddam Hussein by winning hearts and minds." His voice trailed over images of grieving relatives.

Regardless of the spat over Andrew Gilligan's attempt to tell the truth about the Blair government's lying, the BBC's amplifying of government lies about a "threat" from Iraq was routine. Typically on 7 January, BBC1's 6pm news bulletin reported that British army reservists were being called up "to deal with the continuing threat posed by Iraq". What threat?

During the 1991 Gulf war, BBC audiences were told incessantly about "surgical strikes" so precise that war had become almost a bloodless science. David Dimbleby asked the US ambassador: "Isn't it in fact true that America, by dint of the very accuracy of the weapons we've seen, is the only potential world policeman?"

Dimbleby, like his news colleagues, had been conned; most of the weapons had missed their military targets and killed civilians.

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In 1991, according to the Guardian, the BBC told its broadcasters to be “circumspect” about pictures of civilian death and injury. This may explain why the BBC offered us only glimpses of the horrific truth – that the Americans were systematically targeting civilian infrastructure and conducting a one-sided slaughter. Shortly before Christmas 1991, the Medical Education Trust in London estimated that more than 200,000 Iraqi men, women and children had died in the “surgical” assault and its immediate aftermath.

An archive search has failed to turn up a single BBC item reporting this. Similarly, a search of the BBC’s coverage of the causes and effects of the 13-year embargo on Iraq has failed to produce a single report spelling out that which Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton’s secretary of state, put so succinctly when asked if the deaths of half a million children were a price worth paying for sanctions. “We think the price is worth it,” she replied.

There was plenty of vilifying of the “Beast of Baghdad”, but nothing on the fact that, up to July 2002, the United States was deliberately blocking more than \$5bn worth of humanitarian and reconstruction aid reaching Iraq – aid approved by the UN Security Council and paid for by Iraq. I recently asked a well-known BBC correspondent about this, and he replied: “I’ve tried, but they’re not interested.”

There are honourable exceptions to all this, of course; but just as BBC production values have few equals, so do its self-serving myths about objectivity, impartiality and balance have few equals – myths that have demonstrated their stamina since the 1920s, when John Reith, the BBC’s first director general, secretly wrote propaganda for the Tory Baldwin government during the General Strike and noted in his diaries that impartiality was a principle to be suspended whenever the established order and its consensus were threatened.

Thus, *The War Game*, Peter Watkins’s brilliant film for the BBC about the effects of a nuclear attack on Britain, was suppressed for 20 years. In 1965, the chairman of the BBC’s board of governors, Lord Normanbrook, secretly warned the Wilson government that “the showing of the film on television might have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent”.

Generally speaking, outright bans are unnecessary, because “going too far”, which Watkins did, is discouraged by background and training. That the BBC, like most of the Anglo-American media, reports the fate of whole societies according to their usefulness to “us”, the euphemism for western power, and works diligently to minimise the culpability of British governments in great crimes, is self-evident and certainly unconspiratorial. It is simply part of a rich tradition. **JP**