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Straitjackets and flak jackets: the BBC, 'boundary work' and the failed 2009 DEC Appeal for Gaza

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Abstract

This article, which is part of larger research project, considers the justification discourse of BBC Executives following the public outrage over the BBC's decision not to air the 2009 Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) Appeal for Gaza. The BBC's justification is characterised by a recurrent conceptualisation of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as embedded in an 'ongoing news story'. The article analyses media interviews with BBC Executives together with relevant BBC documentation to consider three affordances used to justify the controversial decision. We argue that the discourse of 'ongoing news story' allows the BBC to situate itself as a key agent in the Middle East conflict which necessitates invoking journalistic impartiality to all BBC output; facilitates boundary work between journalism and humanitarianism and thus allowing discourses of impartiality to unfold strictly in journalistic terms. This leads, we argue to the construction of 'journalistic inviolability' whereby the pursuit of principled journalism is presented as a greater humanitarian achievement than airing the DEC appeal.

Keywords: British Broadcasting Cooperation, Disaster Emergency Committee, Middle East, humanitarianism, journalism, public controversy

Introduction

On 19 January 2009, the British Disaster's Emergency Committee (DEC) submitted with the BBC a request to air a charitable appeal in the wake of large-scale civilian casualties and infrastructural damage in Gaza caused by the Israeli Defense Force's 'Operation Cast Lead'. The DEC coordinates major media campaigns to raise funds for international disaster relief appeals on behalf of leading British charities. The BBC is a member of the DEC's 'Rapid Response Network', and has produced and aired emergency appeals for places such as Kosovo, Darfur, Burma and Haiti. The relationship between the BBC and the DEC dates back to the 1960s, but was formalized in an 'Aide Memoire' produced in 1971 (Thompson 2009b).

Yet, the BBC denied the request for the Gaza appeal. In addition to initial logistic concerns, the BBC's main argument was that airing the appeal would undermine 'public confidence in the BBC's impartiality' (Thompson 2009b). Even though the DEC proceeded without the BBC's support and the appeal was eventually aired on ITV and Channel 4, the BBC's decision quickly became a source of public controversy

and protest and the subject of over 40,000 complaints submitted with the BBC Trust, the body overseeing the work of the Corporation's Executive Board¹.

According to the Trust's summary of complaints (British Broadcasting Cooperation Trust 2009), grounds for appeal focused on the BBC's 'impartiality' argument, which was seen as flawed given the 'apolitical' nature of DEC appeals; critiqued for privileging the BBC's reputation alleviating humanitarian suffering; seen as inconsistent with the BBC having previously aired appeals for victims of conflicts, thus Palestinians should not be treated differently; critiqued for being 'pro-Jewish/Israeli' or feared being seen as 'pro-Palestinian', and failing to reflect the views of BBC license-fee payers.

In response to the controversy, Caroline Thomson, Chief Operating Officer, and Mark Thompson, Director-General, launched a media campaign, mostly on BBC platforms, justifying the decision. In their accounts, the Executives consistently alluded to the idea that there was something *distinct* about the context of this humanitarian crisis which threatened to damage the impartiality of the BBC:

But there is a second more fundamental reason why we decided that we should not broadcast the appeal at present. This is because Gaza remains a *major ongoing news story*, in which humanitarian issues ... are both at the heart of the story and contentious. (Thompson 2009a, emphasis added)

This is a very *live story*, and, you know, it's not that the BBC is trying to ignore the story. (Thompson 2009d)

... We believe that ... *this story is best told* in the context of journalistic programmes where ... assertions can be challenged, where claims can be tested and where everything can be put into a balanced context ... (Thompson 2009c, emphasis added)

... Giving time on behalf of a body to appeal for things is a decision which has to be taken very carefully. In the case of ... natural disasters ... it's easy ... In the case of man-made disasters and wars the issue is much more complicated ... *particularly if we are carry on covering it*. (Thomson 2009b, emphasis added)

These characterizations all point towards an understanding of the conflict in the Middle East as not only a highly complex and contentious referent whose complexity is to be acknowledged in media representations, but also as both the subject and result of processes of mediation (Silverstone 2007). Given the prominent role of institutionalized media in contemporary warfare (Hammond 2007) and, closely tied in with this, the particular complexities and political economy of war reporting (Carruthers 2000; Allan and Zelizer 2004), the mediation of the Middle East conflict could further increase its 'mimetic' complexity by circulating different and often competing versions of the conflict. The Executives, then, can be seen to imply that by

¹ For a more background on the events surrounding the relationship between the BBC and the DEC and specifics pertaining to the failed Gaza appeal see: Engelbert and McCurdy (2012).

not airing the appeal, the BBC can try and resist colonization by these problematic dimensions of the media order of discourse, and instead pursue a *journalistic* representation of the conflict that is as true to the referent as possible.

We *could* argue that the cautionary reflection on the role of news media generally, and its own contribution especially, illustrates the BBC acting in accordance with the Independent Panel Report's recommendations (Independent Panel 2006) on how to safeguard impartiality in covering the Middle East conflict, as the report considers the conflict as a 'dual narrative', in which particular sides are typically 'favored' by the two 'protagonists', by key stakeholders and audiences, and, problematically, by different media outlets alike.

However, we claim that the BBC's invoking of the term 'ongoing news story' is not indicative of a novel approach to covering the Middle East, nor an articulation of institutional self-reflection (cf. Born 2002). Instead, we argue for the importance of recognising and assessing the pragmatic affordances of this discursive. We assert that the conceptualization of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as embedded in an 'ongoing news story' – a term we use to include all those descriptions drawn on by the Executives that allude to the *extraordinary* complexity of both the conflict itself and the mediation of that conflict – foremost provides a very appropriate means to deal with justifying a highly controversial decision, a decision that further elicits a number of hurdles and challenges for the BBC.

Overcoming hurdles and meeting challenges

A particular focus of the criticism was, as outlined in the Trust's summary, the BBC's perceived unwillingness to intervene in a humanitarian crisis. The BBC's decision is thereby part of a ceaseless dialogue, in which every argument *for* the validity of qualifying the BBC's decision as a testimony to the pursuit of impartiality can be countered by an assessment of the decision as 'a-humanitarian'. This is apparent in two contrasting opinion pieces on the Gaza controversy. Suzanne Franks and Jean Seaton (Franks & Seaton 2009), an ex-BBC journalist and the official BBC historian, affirm the BBC's decision arguing that journalists must not offer moral judgment, but should engage in necessary indifference or 'a-morality'. On the other hand, former BBC journalist Martin Bell (2009), in line with his call for a 'journalism of attachment' (Bell 1998), considers the BBC's stance 'indefensible'. He argues for the substitution of the traditional notion of journalistic balance with fairness to acknowledge the humanitarian asymmetry in the conflict. In justifying its decision, the BBC is thus to actively negate the validity of accusations that not airing the appeal would signal undermining Palestinian humanitarian suffering or would entail a violation of the BBC's long-standing charitable record. The justification is thereby to navigate what Tester (2001:25)

refers to as journalism's 'ambiguous ethical position' of 'being torn between objectivity and human attachment'.

In that navigation, however, the BBC is to further overcome two 'hurdles' that are inevitably invoked. Firstly, even in denying the dismissal of Palestinian suffering, the BBC is to actively refute charges that not airing the appeal would be symptomatic of the BBC systematically privileging the Israeli perspective. This accusation, is prominent in complaints submitted with the Trust. Moreover, the charge ties in with academic explorations of BBC's Middle East coverage. Such studies have identified inequality in coverage afforded to Israeli and Palestinian actors; the power of Israeli lobbyists and professional PR machineries; problematic consequences of lexical choices in describing actors and processes, and an overall lacking historical context of news reports (cf. Philo *et al.* 2003; Philo & Berry 2004; Gaber, Seymour & Thomas 2009).

The BBC has visibly engaged with such critical assessments. For example, in 2005, a year after the internal 'Balen Report', the Board of Governors assigned an Independent Panel to review the impartiality of BBC news coverage of the conflict. The Panel commissioned scholars from Loughborough University (Downey *et al.* 2006) to undertake a content analysis of the BBC's reporting of the conflict. Despite refraining from making any normative claims about the degree of impartiality, Downey and colleagues (2006) report similar findings to Philo & Berry (2004) around the lack of historical context provided in news reports and quantitative and qualitative 'disparities' in coverage. As part of its recommendations (Independent Panel 2006), and in an attempt to overcome these disparities, the Panel produced a style guide for BBC journalists and editors. Yet, assessments of the pragmatics and effects of prescriptive glossary on online reporting, news and documentaries (cf. Barkho 2008; Richardson & Bharko 2009) highlight how the BBC, in an attempt to get things right, in fact upholds the asymmetrical nature of the conflict and the unequal division of (discursive) power within it. Consequently, even if there might indeed be 'little to suggest *deliberate* [emphasis added]... bias' (Independent Panel 2006:3), the BBC remains vulnerable to charges of privileging the Israeli perspective at the expense of Palestinian suffering.

The second hurdle is that the BBC's decision not to air the appeal could be perceived as failing to reflect the views of those license-fee payers who would expect the BBC to take a stance on this humanitarian crisis. This charge, similarly included in the Trust's summary of complaints, points at the complex position of a public service broadcaster in a context where traditional notions of audiences and of the BBC offering 'something for everyone' have been substituted by the idea of increasingly critical audiences who mandate the BBC and, consequently, judge its performances. In the words of the BBC Trust (2007:78), 'The days of blind trust in Auntie are over. In today's world, the BBC has to keep on earning trust from increasingly savvy audiences'.

This discourse of 'consumer sovereignty' (Born 2004; Born & Prosser 2001) posits the BBC's public service as a raw commodity, which continuously has to be reshaped and aspire to 'public value' (Collins 2007; Thumim & Chouliaraki 2010) if it is to continue receiving the key currency of customer approval: audience trust. The challenge for the BBC in justifying its decision, then, is that it will have to challenge the validity of charges brought on the BBC without being seen to be complacent about the concerns of *any* of its 'stakeholders'.

The justification discourse of BBC Executives is thus to enable rebutting accusations that its decision signals a dismissal of Palestinian suffering, while also meeting the two challenges that are inevitably posed by this task: that the BBC is to negate perceptions of privileging the Israeli perspective and that the BBC is to position itself as an organization that is bound by and complies with the mandate of its audiences. We assert that conceptualizing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as part of an 'ongoing news story' permits meeting these challenges.

We elucidate this by demonstrating in our analysis how the 'ongoing-news-story-logic' works to necessitate a particular kind of journalism, a journalism (1) in which the BBC is to assert a particular sensitivity to audiences expectations and capacities, (2) in which the BBC is to apply the concept of journalistic impartiality to *all* of its output, and (3) in which the BBC is, even more prominently than in other occasions, to fiercely secure its independence from stakeholders and interested parties. Our argument is based on an 'eclectic' (Wodak 2004:200) and contextualized analysis of the media offensive BBC Executives Mark Thompson and Caroline Thomson launched on BBC radio, TV and its website. Our corpus thereby entailed the following media appearances by Chief Operating Officer Caroline Thomson:

- January 23rd interview on BBC *Newsnight* (Thomson 2009a)
- January 24rd interview on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme (Thomson 2009b)
- January 24rd interview on BBC *News 24* (Thomson 2009c).

It also includes the following media texts and appearances by BBC Director-General Mark Thompson:

- January 24th posting on the *Editors' Blog*, BBC website (Thompson 2009a);
- January 26th interview on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme (Thompson 2009c)
- January 26th interview on BBC *Breakfast* (Thompson 2009d)

Lastly, the analysis also includes a letter that Mark Thompson wrote in response to a legal challenge by London law firm Hickman & Rose on behalf of three UK and Gaza residents (Thompson 2009b). The texts analyzed in this article are purposefully restrictive focusing on BBC discourse as we explore the larger contextual nature of the events in other publications (Engelbert and McCurdy 2012; Engelbert and McCurdy 2011; McCurdy 2012). The above interviews and media texts were examined in order to identify and consider a broad range of discursive practices that we deemed essential in the construction of particular

accounts, such as the use of recurrent repertoires, terms and typical ways in which actors and actions are described, the certifying or warranting of claims and the structuring of responses and arguments. Where relevant, we compared and contrasted the themes and patterns with BBC and DEC documentation, most notably with the already heavily referred to 2006 Independent Panel Report on impartiality in BBC's coverage of the Middle East. The extracts from the justification discourse presented herein, in which we occasionally italicized sections we considered particularly significant, are those which most aptly illustrate a larger discursive pattern.

From self-reflection to audience protection

The first affordance of describing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as part of an 'ongoing news story' is that it allows the BBC to display an *extraordinary* sensitivity to the expectations and capacities of its audiences and to, consequently, invoke audiences as a structural constraint by which the BBC is to be bound. Central to this argument is the assumption that an ongoing news story automatically implicates the BBC as a key actor, one that can let that story unfold and continue into certain directions.

An awareness of how its own news journalism might impact on the shaping of the Middle East conflict has already entered the peripheries of the BBC's institutional discourse. For example, a critical and self-reflexive view of news is articulated in a recommendation of the Independent Panel Report on impartiality in BBC's reporting of the Middle East (2006:13),

... it is important that the BBC as an institution ... should be fully conscious both that an account of events and issues – a *human construct* – is being created, and that [the BBC] has a crucial role in that process.

This view of the BBC as a 'structuring agent' (Rutherford Smith 1997:325) corresponds with 'classic' academic considerations of news as construct (Tuchman, 1978) and narrative (Bennett & Edelman 1985). They are the two key characteristic of news the Independent Panel Report recommends (2006:11-12, author emphasis) as requiring particular attention in the context of this specific conflict,

... the media themselves are part of the contested ground, and *it is a strategic objective of the protagonists to secure coverage which reflects and reinforces their version of reality*. Since the conflict is not only local but engages also widespread international support and sponsorship, *the BBC*, which is regarded and influential internationally as well as in the UK, *and the nature of its coverage, are important prizes*.

The assertion that the constructed nature of news can be exploited by the two 'protagonists' as a site for political struggle leaves room for transforming the *suggestion of self-reflection*, in which the BBC is to be

aware of its broad journalistic impacts, into a *proposal for caution*, in which the BBC is to be aware of how others might exploit these journalistic impacts. Similarly, it would allow for converting the idea of the BBC contributing to a story into the BBC potentially privileging highly interested versions of reality. In other words, the recommendation in the report paves the way for invoking a 'be-cautious-of-coverage-as-a-trophy' discourse.

And indeed, BBC Executives draw heavily on this 'threat' repertoire when justifying their decision not to air the Gaza appeal. However, they appropriate it by consistently foregrounding how the BBC, as an inevitable actor in the unfolding of the incomplete story, is thereby drawn into a situation where all of its output concerning the story might be understood in these political terms by its *audiences*. For example, Mark Thompson argues,

The *danger* for the BBC is that this could be interpreted as taking a political stance on an ongoing story. When we have turned down DEC appeals in the past on impartiality grounds it has been because of this *risk* of giving the public the impression that the BBC was taking sides in an ongoing conflict. (Thompson 2009a, author emphasis)

Thompson draws on the notion of a threat in relation to BBC audiences in two senses: danger lies in what *audiences can do to the BBC* by interpreting the act of airing the appeal as political, as well as in the risk of *what the BBC can do to its audiences* by leading them towards a political interpretation. The BBC binding its actions to its relationship with and responsibilities to its audiences ties in with the Corporation's key value that the audiences are 'at the heart' of everything it does (BBC 2010a) and especially with key sociological shifts that have gradually transformed audiences into critical consumers, requiring the BBC to even more prominently satisfy audience demands. Mark Thompson articulates the *particular* centrality of audience desires and customer satisfaction in the context of the Middle East conflict,

We get criticized, as you know, particularly around this story Israel-Palestine, of bias from both sides. My job, in our coverage, in our news but also more broadly is to make sure that, whatever happens, *the BBC really does feel as if it's been impartial*. (Thompson 2009d, author emphasis)

Impartiality is not presented as an inherent quality of BBC coverage, but as an ability that may or may not be attributed to the BBC by its audiences. Consequently, anticipating audience dissatisfaction is to be a focal point of BBC's 'relationship building' (Meech 2001), in which the BBC is to be experienced and indeed to *feel* as impartial. In their consumption of the BBC brand then, audiences act as ultimate 'connoisseurs of impartiality'. The idea that (im)partiality is a value judgment made by audiences, rather than necessarily a characteristic inherent to BBC programming or even an enshrined ethos (cf. Schlesinger 1987), constitutes an important discursive move, which allows BBC Executives to then also carefully challenge the validity of these audience judgments,

This is part of a general policy where one of the things we do is we think very hard about appeals of any kind ... The danger is that the BBC gets drawn into appearing *as if it's in some way* losing its impartiality. (Thompson 2009d, author emphasis)

If we lose the trust of the audience by appearing *however curious it may seem* to support one side rather than another, then we will have lost it for the charities. (Thomson 2009b, author emphasis)

This discursive move permits withstanding accusations that the BBC, by means of its programming, can be fundamentally biased. It thereby attributes all responsibility principally to the *mis*perception of audiences. Yet, this accomplishment does of course prompt the danger that the BBC is seen to undermine the intelligible capacities of its audiences, the very people it considers as highly critical and savvy consumers. The Executives' discourse circumvents this by accomplishing audiences' potential perceived partiality as explicable and therefore justified. BBC Executives offer as the key motive for reasonable confusion the similarity in imagery in both BBC news broadcasts and a potential appeal. For example, Caroline Thomson asserts,

So, for example, if you just think about it, if we broadcast, if we gave up this unique thing, we don't do lightly of giving our airtime to charities to appeal for money, they would be running in their charitable appeal, *the same or very similar pictures* to the pictures *our audiences would have seen in the news bulletin just before*, because we're having to put so much effort into reporting it. That wasn't the case in the Congo. *And, what were audiences to think, you know, "which are the news pictures, which are the charitable pictures?"* (Thomson 2009c, author emphasis)

Thomson presents imagery in the news broadcast as seen 'just before' imagery in an appeal, which invokes different associations than for example stating that 'pictures would resemble those in a preceding news bulletin' would. Yet, the most important way in which Thomson validates confusion or audience inability to distinguish between different output is her performing solidarity with BBC audiences by posing the rhetorical question, 'what were audiences to think?'. Interestingly, this rhetorical question is in fact answered, by means of a move to direct speech that enables Thomson to speak directly from the perspective of audiences, 'which are the news pictures, which are the charitable pictures?'. This practices of audience exoneration by means of performing solidarity is also manifest in Mark Thompson's assertion,

I think you have to imagine seen seeing maybe the same pictures or certainly very similar pictures.

First of all, you know, in a BBC news bulletin where there are claims and counter-claims, all sorts of political questions about what's going on. *And then immediately afterwards* you'd see the BBC transmitting something which is asking for money and is putting it in a very different context. (Thompson 2009d, author emphasis)

Thompson realizes his 'doing solidarity', similar to Thomson, by means of transforming from an *animator*, who reports on audiences' possible perceptions, into a *principal*, a participant in and direct witness of audience perceptions (Goffman 1981). In addition, Thompson establishes a stark contrast between a BBC news bulletin – as synonymous for enabling reflection, a broad spectrum of 'claims and counter-claims', and 'all sorts of political questions' – and the appeal, which is narrowly defined as 'asking for money'. This contrast, in combination with Thompson stressing the certainty of 'very similar pictures' and describing the appeal as 'immediately after' (as opposed to, for example, merely 'following') the news bulletin, creates a sense of two incompatible and irreconcilable domains that are problematically brought together and forced upon audiences. Misperceptions and audiences' inability to distinguish between sources, thereby, are inevitable.

The accounts of both Thomson and Thompson, then, attend to validating the likely occurrence of the misperceptions of its audiences. They accomplish this by exempting audiences from having any (positive or negative) agency in interpreting the appeal as it will be undermined by a much bigger force – the overlap between imagery. Accomplishing audiences as wrongly yet reasonably confused further warrants typical claims by the Executives that the BBC is to ultimately be held accountable for actions that would elicit confusion and misperception,

If we do things which endanger that trust, and we believe that giving our airwaves over to this sort of appeal might do that to certain parts of the audience at the moment in a very difficult and very fraught conflict, then we lose our value ... (Thomson 2009c, author emphasis)

... I believe that many members of the public certainly could understand the distinction. However, the fact that the BBC, had it decided to broadcast such an appeal, might nonetheless *make them believe* that the BBC was sympathetic to or was taking some ... what is *the message that the BBC sends out* by taking the decision to broadcast such an appeal? (Thompson 2009c, author emphasis)

Striking in both Executives' accounts is the practice of attributing a kind of explicit 'damaging agency' to the BBC – highly problematic actions, such as endangering and misleading audiences, which are at extreme odds with the remit of a public service broadcaster. In other words, for the BBC, in its engagement with the conflict in the Middle East, to act in accordance with its audience mandate and public service remit, is to construct and uphold a fissure between its explicitly journalistic endeavors and its overtly charitable and humanitarian ventures. Airing the appeal would force these two domains to merge; not airing the appeal, then, articulates the BBC binding its actions to its relationship with and responsibilities to its audiences.

Towards a straitjacket: privileging journalistic impartiality

Despite the BBC implying the incompatibility of journalism and humanitarianism and despite discussing the DEC appeal from within the field of journalism, the appeal, given its principal 'free-standing' nature, can equally be conceptualized within the domain of *humanitarianism* and thus be subjected to the relevant corresponding conventions and interpretations. The crisis over the Gaza appeal can therefore be understood as a clash between these two domains, which unfolded on journalistic 'turf'. This is most apparent in the competing and clashing discourses of 'impartiality' and the rhetorical affordance within each field². Consequently, this section begins by contrasting and defining the perspectives of humanitarian impartiality and journalistic impartiality through a dialectic of *action* and *inaction*. Next, the implications of consistently making reference to the appeal as part of an 'ongoing news story' – a story which is currently the subject of BBC News coverage – is considered. Describing it in this way, while seemingly natural for the BBC as a news organization, is an important discursive achievement as well as a discursive articulation of 'boundary-work' (cf. Fakazis 2006). It both necessitates and legitimates a journalistic treatment of the DEC appeal against BBC news conventions allowing its reasonable dismissal against concerns of 'impartiality', while delegitimizing humanitarian claims for impartiality.

The issue of impartiality was the key factor in the BBC's decision to deny the DEC Gaza Appeal sparking a public debate over the interpretation of impartiality. Contributing, or perhaps responding, to this debate the DEC published the following statement concerning the Gaza Appeal and impartiality on its website:

The DEC members are committed to humanitarian principles including independence and have confirmed they are able to work without hindrance from the Hamas controlled authorities both to identify who are the most needy and to channel assistance to them directly, either through their own staff or well established local non governmental partners. The DEC members have submitted lists of partners and their banking arrangements, to insure proper systems are in place. (Disasters Emergency Committee 2008a)

Above, impartiality is presented as a condition of work; the ability to safely access the conflict area and engage in humanitarian activity without interference, pressure or favor from the controlling authorities or other stakeholders. Anderson (2004) has labeled this use of impartiality as 'humanitarian inviolability' defined as 'the ability of humanitarian relief agencies... to act in situations of extreme human need and suffering, particularly in circumstances of armed conflict, with the assurances that their personnel, their property, and their activities will not be made the object of attack' (Anderson 2004:41). Impartiality here also refers to offering nonpartisan assistance based on need, irrespective of political creed. All DEC member agencies are signatories of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's "Code of

² For a detailed analysis of how BBC executives capitalized on the 'semantic plasticity' of impartiality in constructing their arguments for not airing the DEC appeal for Gaza, see: Engelbert and McCurdy (2011).

Conduct" which advocates this 'nonpartisan' humanitarian view of impartiality (Disasters Emergency Committee 2008b). In summary, impartiality as presented by the DEC, lays the foundation for undertaking apolitical humanitarian action in Gaza.

Impartiality is also a key signifier of international journalism and a 'hallmark' of the BBC (BBC Trust 2007). While the BBC's Editorial Guidelines outline its 'commitment to impartiality' (British Broadcasting Corporation 2010b), the precise meaning of impartiality is left open. This 'commitment' is articulated via references to the related journalistic concept of 'balance' – the need to cover an issue, especially a controversial one, from a range of angles and perspectives – and the need to approach such topics 'fairly', 'accurately' and without 'bias', political or otherwise. The guidelines also affirm the independence of the BBC giving it the 'editorial freedom' to produce content to, and within, its own standards of impartiality and the context-dependent latitude towards 'achieving impartiality'. Impartiality, a BBC Trust report argued, can be likened to alchemy whereby there is no single 'formula' for it but there are 13 ingredients that can be drawn upon; 'Accuracy, Balance, Context, Distance, Evenhandedness, Fairness, Objectivity, Openmindedness, Rigour, Self-Awareness, Transparency and Truth' (BBC Trust 2007: 5). Like humanitarian impartiality, journalistic impartiality is presented by the BBC as a part of its mandate and, while vague, defines the parameters that BBC can work within and reinforces the BBC's responsibility to its audience.

Broadcasting the appeal would risk compromising public confidence in the BBC's impartiality in the context of an ongoing news story where the issues of responsibility for civilian suffering and distress were intrinsic to the story and highly contentious. (Thompson 2009b:5)

Above captures what Director General of the BBC, Mark Thompson referred to as the 'Impartiality Reason', the primary rationale for not broadcasting the DEC appeal. By arguing that the DEC Appeal could compromise the BBC's impartiality, Thompson invokes impartiality as a means for *inaction*. This is done on two fronts. First, impartiality is used as a means to prevent the BBC from doing something; from broadcasting an appeal in support of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. It is also a means to prevent the BBC from being perceived as having done something: creating the appearance of bias in the perceptions of audiences by airing the appeal. In both instances impartiality is used as a means to justify not airing the appeal.

The BBC's privileging of journalistic impartiality is, on its own, perhaps not surprising given the Corporation's dogma of impartiality (Schlesinger 1987). Of interest concerning the DEC appeal is the application of 'balance' whereby news items must reflect the major perspectives on the issue and be equitable in airtime awarded within a piece and overtime (Independent Panel 2006). Below, Mark Thompson invokes this conceptualization of balance in an interview on Radio 4 by making reference to the

'humanitarian dimension' of the war on Gaza as a 'very contentious side of the story', thereby implying the DEC appeal – via its focus on Gaza – would only deal with one 'side' of the conflict,

The problem with this particular appeal is it's in the middle of a story where the humanitarian dimension of the story, and what is happening in Gaza, is not only an intrinsic part of the story, it is also a very contentious side of the story. (Thompson 2009c)

Further evidence of a 'see-saw' application of balance can be seen in a subsequent interview with Thomson on BBC Breakfast,

If the situation was the other way around and the principal humanitarian concern was in Israel rather than Gaza, our view would've exactly been the same. (Thompson 2009d)

By comparing the Gaza case with a hypothetical humanitarian catastrophe in Israel, Thompson is attempting to show that his decision was not political – caused either by external pressure or internal bias – but *journalistic* taken to preserve the Corporation's impartiality. In summary, Thompson argues that no matter how grave the humanitarian suffering is, as long as it occurs in a disproportionate or 'unbalanced' way only on one 'side' of the conflict the BBC will not sanction an appeal. This argument is grounded on a 'traditional' interpretation of balance; one which assumes equality between both sides. Yet, this standpoint overlooks what the Independent Panel (2006:13) described as the 'asymmetrical' nature of the conflict. Moreover, the Independent Panel also presents evidence which cautions the application of such logic.

The crude application of balance is justified by Thompson as part of a larger strategy to protect the BBC's impartiality. This duty also required the BBC to be vigilant of the potential threats posed by 'non-news' output to the reputation of its News output as impartial. This argument is reflected in the following letter by Mark Thompson to law firm Hickman and Rose,

News is central to the BBC's purpose and...any decision that undermines the BBC's impartiality risks destroying the BBC's reputation and its unique relationship with its audiences both in the UK and overseas ... The BBC's obligation to remain impartial is not limited to its news output. It applies to its services as a whole and indeed to its overall reputation as a broadcaster ... It is for these reasons - the broad obligation of impartiality and the particular risk of bias or perceived bias in non-News output undermining confidence in the BBC's impartiality in its News output - that the BBC takes a 'safety first' approach when considering whether to broadcast on its airwaves any material which does not derive from BBC sources in the first instance (Thompson, 2009b: 6-7)

Thompson positions the production and broadcast of BBC News – domestically and abroad – as the most important activity of the BBC. Consequently, while the BBC produces both news and non-news output, it is the journalistic interpretation of impartiality that all content must be tested against. By valuing impartiality in this way, the assertion is that the reputation of the BBC is tied primarily to its reputation as a news

broadcaster and that the merits of the DEC appeal must not be judged by any reading of impartiality, other than that the BBC ascribes to news.

In the same letter Thompson offers specific insight into how DEC appeals are assessed by the BBC against impartiality. Thompson summarizes the BBC's approach as follows,

The BBC should only broadcast appeals which it can be confident will be broadly noncontroversial. In other words, it should only broadcast those appeals in which neither the causes of the humanitarian distress, nor the character and balance of distress between the combatants (in the case of a conflict), nor the delivery of the aid itself, nor the relationship between the humanitarian distress and the political or diplomatic debate about what should happen next, are themselves the subject of significant partisan controversy... In the case of wars or other human conflicts, the BBC has distinguished between those conflicts where it believed that the humanitarian distress... could be sufficiently separated from the issues pertaining to the conflict itself that the risk of an appeal compromising the BBC's impartiality could be avoided, and those where it believed it could not. (Thompson 2009b: 7)

DEC Appeals requested for conflict situations are recognized by the BBC as problematic and therefore requiring individual scrutiny not just against the three DEC Appeal criteria, but for the threat that an Appeal poses to the BBC's impartiality. Whereas, argued above, a humanitarian approach to impartiality would not differentiate between sufferers, the BBC's stance necessitates editorial differentiation based on factors such as the degree of 'controversy' as a means of organizational preservation [and maintenance of audience (domestic and global) trust]. What the above extract illustrates is that the highest operational value at play for the BBC is 'trust'; a concept enshrined as the 'foundation' of the BBC. In order to preserve this trust, the BBC has shown that it is prepared and capable of affording impartiality differently, that some instances – the Middle East in particular – requires a different version of impartiality³.

From straitjacket to flak jacket

We have seen how an 'ongoing news story' allowed the BBC to assert a particular sensitivity to audience expectations and capacities, as well as to privilege journalistic impartiality. Both 'logics' were foremost oriented at justifying BBC's *inaction*. This final section focuses on how journalism in an ongoing news story is also drawn on as permitting the BBC to claim an entitlement to journalistic and even humanitarian *action*. Central to this argument is that journalism in an ongoing news story would inevitably imply a particular way of successfully dealing with multiple stakeholders and interested parties. This journalistic mode of persisting

³ Of course, the issue of "trust" in the BBC is fundamentally tied to the BBC's news brand. For an analysis of the "risk" that the DEC Gaza appeal presented to the BBC's news brand see: McCurdy (2012).

and resisting is one that the BBC would be principally equipped for. This way of conceiving of BBC journalism in an ongoing news story can be considered as an application of a key finding in the Independent Panel Report,

Audience research ... shows that the impartiality requirements are widely supported. It also suggests that ... the generality of viewers and listeners are less than convinced by its importance to them ... They want the BBC to be impartial and believe that it is. By contrast, those who put evidence to us appear to regard the [conflict] as very important, to identify with one side, to feel knowledgeable about it and want BBC coverage to be more supportive of their favored protagonist. (Independent Panel 2006:5)

The finding confirms audiences as mandating the BBC to be impartial, yet asserts that there are kinds of audiences who may have different expectations of coverage due to their level of personal investment in the conflict. Having such an investment, furthermore, is presented as leading towards particular expectations regarding the versions of the conflict and the two “protagonists” BBC news coverage should *favorably* postulate. By contrasting this investment with the ‘generality of viewers’, a sense is created of these expectations, as passionate and spirited as they might be, being deviant. That is, these expectations would stand in the way of rationally assessing the BBC’s journalistic pursuit of impartiality and balance, and in fact would, were they to be met, lead to the BBC undermining its strict audience mandate. BBC Executives draw on this logic of having to resist audiences with unreasonable expectations and favored versions, but appropriate it somewhat. Firstly, by extending the notion of BBC ‘unreasonable audiences’ to key stakeholders on both sides of the conflict, and, secondly, by extending the ‘object of expectations’ beyond explicit BBC news output.

Not once in the Executives’ media performances is Israel’s military offensive alluded to, let alone mentioned, as responsible for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Yet, ‘Israeli’ agency *is* invoked in the context of physical constraints BBC journalists have to endure. This is illustrated in Caroline Thomson’s (2009c) response to an accusation that the BBC’s decision not to air the appeal would dismiss Palestinian humanitarian suffering,

Interviewer: But the truth is that more than a thousand people have been killed. The truth is that they’re living in terrible conditions. And the truth is they need humanitarian assistance ... Those are facts, aren’t they?

Thomson: Yes, those are facts and those are facts we know partly because of the work of our journalists in reporting them. *We were the only people that had journalists in Gaza when the Israelis weren’t letting journalists there.* That’s how we know it ... (Thomson 2009c, author emphasis)

Thomson establishes the very reasons for the interviewer's critical charges as enabled by the BBC's pursuit of journalistic principles. More importantly, this pursuit is presented as having had to surmount physical constraints posed by one of the 'protagonists'. Thomson challenges the legitimacy of those constraints by explicitly describing Israeli agency as 'not letting journalists there', thereby packaging the accusation that the Israelis were actively undermining the conditions for impartial and balanced journalism. In line with the earlier identified 'coverage-as-a-trophy' discourse, Thomson's account thus infers the Israelis as a force with a vested interest in the conflict, which, consequently, tries to physically limit the symbolic scope of reporting.

Various interviewers also allude to Israel as an agent that not so much poses physical hurdles, but rather as one that puts the BBC under symbolic pressure to not air the appeal. *Newsnight* presenter Gavin Hewitt, for example, asks Caroline Thomson,

... you might do with this decision because people might say this is actually fundamentally a pro-Israel stance. I mean, I know you're damned if you do and damned if you don't, but many people will think this is fundamentally pro-Israeli. (Thomson 2009a)

Thomson negates this voiced accusation by reducing this kind of political pressure *outside of* Gaza to a physical equivalent *in* Gaza,

Well, it's absolutely not fundamentally pro-Israeli. As I said we're broadcasting from both sides of this conflict and ... *we've been almost unique amongst journalists and broadcasters in having people inside Gaza when the Israelis weren't letting us ...* (ibid, author emphasis)

Thomson refutes the potential influence of broad Israeli lobbyists by alluding to the fact that Israeli armed forces at the Gaza border were unable to hold back BBC journalists. What follows from this is that BBC journalism is not only to conquer physical constraints, but is, thereby, simultaneously to trounce the *very possibility* of political lobbying by those with a vested interest in the conflict.

The BBC is thus permitted to take a stance on protagonists in the conflict (in this case, Israel) when they undermine the physical or symbolic pursuit of impartial and balanced journalism. However, BBC Executives extend the range of actors with a 'preferred' representation of the conflict beyond Israel to 'public opinion' generally, and the government in particular. For example, when interviewer Martine Croxall refers, on BBC *News24*, to the charge made by Tony Benn that the BBC's decision not to air the appeal 'will cause people to die', Caroline Thomson asserts,

... The importance of journalism is on reporting it and I don't think that, you know, *emotive language* or like that, *or indeed the levels of government discussion*, of this subject *is really very appropriate* for something that's an independent broadcaster, not a state broadcaster, with really important duties of impartiality ... (Thomson 2009c, author emphasis)

Even though it is interesting how Thomson challenges the legitimacy of Benn's charge by 'euphemistically' describing it as 'emotive language'; it is more notable to see how Thomson, almost habitually, aligns Benn with the realm of government. This is remarkable as the former Labour Party member left politics a long time ago and is now known for his advocacy work for the *Stop the War* coalition, but especially as this equates 'public' outrage with governmental upset over the BBC's judgment. Both kinds of criticism are subsequently implied as 'inappropriately' perceiving of the BBC as a broadcaster that is to succumb to some kind of editorial censorship.

BBC Executive discourse thus conceives of journalism in an ongoing news story as invoking a context in which 'physical' protagonist(s), symbolic lobbyists acting on behalf of protagonist(s), public opinion, and governmental judgment act as extensions of an 'invested audience'. They are parties with different vested interests in the conflict and with subsequent, often contrasting, 'favored narratives' and normative expectations as to what the BBC is (not) to do and cover, *both in and beyond its explicit news output*. Yet, rather than stressing how the BBC is to negotiate these expectations, BBC Executives consistently present BBC journalism, both in and on an ongoing news story, as *resisting by persisting*. They postulate the pursuit of the journalistic principles of impartiality and balance as the ultimate means to withstand these kinds of invested expectations.

For example, Mark Thompson transforms generic journalistic practices, such as hearing both sides and critical questioning, into particularly penetrative modes of enquiry, which enable BBC journalists to 'call the shots' when dealing with parties that would try to enforce a favored narrative,

This is a very live story, and, you know, it's not that the BBC is trying to ignore the story. I mean in programmes like this [one], where *we can we can test the claims, we can put people on the spot, make them accountable*, we can put things in their broader context, absolutely we will bring. You know, eighty percent of the British public is using BBC news every week, they will hear all about the conflict ... (Thompson 2009c, author emphasis)

Thompson establishes journalistic scrutiny as having the potential to put invested parties in awkward positions, to disable them from employing their tendency to try and shape the coverage of the conflict. Moreover, by framing journalistic scrutiny as bearing the visible traces of the BBC not *ignoring* the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Thomson implies that the pursuit of a journalism of persisting and resisting – in the context of an ongoing news story and characterized by multiple heavily interested and invested parties – can be considered as an act of 'journalistic humanitarianism'.

Caroline Thomson also conceives of 'principled journalism' as a means to challenge invested parties, as well as to form the journalistic equivalent to the overtly humanitarian act of airing the DEC appeal. When radio

interviewer Ed Strouton argues that Thomson is privileging the BBC's own reputation over Palestinian suffering, she asserts,

No, I'm not saying it's more important than that ... The most important thing we can do for the people who are suffering is *carrying on reporting it*, and we've done exemplary work in reporting the suffering of the people in Gaza, as well as the other sides on the issue of this conflict. And that is the most important thing we can do with the trust of the British audience. (Thomson 2009b, author emphasis)

By stressing the importance of *continuing* covering the humanitarian crisis, Thomson implies that actual coverage is already an extraordinary achievement, as it would show that the BBC – in taking on a normative and 'exemplary' role – does not succumb to the (physical) constraints. This resisting and persisting is presented as preserving audience trust, the very attribute we diagnosed earlier as 'the highest operational value at play for the BBC' and that BBC Executives were seen to draw on to legitimize humanitarian inaction. Yet, by suggesting the pursuit of principled journalism here as principally a mode of action, as an extraordinary journalistic achievement, and as a mode of journalism that might have positive bearing on the fate of Palestinian victims, Thomson transforms this *straitjacket* into a *flak jacket*.

In wearing this shield, the BBC can still treat its audiences as inviolable, but this time by protecting them, through journalistic action, against the kind of distorted representations of the humanitarian crisis that would be so typical for and almost inevitable in this particular ongoing news story, with its powerful stakeholders and multiple interested parties. The BBC is, consequently, in its continued coverage or its penetrative inquiry seen to above all acknowledge the Palestinian suffering where other broadcasters might or could not because of their inability to resist and persist. In this sense, the BBC's pursuit of impartiality would be a far cry from a journalism of indifference, a charge that featured so prominently in criticism of the BBC's decision not to air the appeal.

At the same time the approach by the BBC is not one of a 'journalism of attachment' (Bell 1998) but, instead implies a 'journalistic conscience' (Tester 2001: 11) that does *not* require morally *overt* journalism, nor letting go of traditional conceptualizations of journalistic impartiality and balance. The BBC, then, can be seen to discursively construct the category of 'journalistic inviolability', which is accomplished as the journalistic equivalent of 'humanitarian inviolability' (Anderson, 2004). Journalistic inviolability, with its emphasis on traversing and indeed operating on the territory of 'belligerents' of all sides of the conflict, justifies privileging the maintenance of audience trust over assisting with the immediate alleviation of suffering (airing the appeal). Moreover, it legitimizes the claim that principled journalism in the context of an ongoing news story is in fact (more of) a humanitarian achievement than airing the appeal (ever) would be.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Executive justification discourse has identified three practical affordances permitted by the term 'ongoing news story'. Firstly, an 'ongoing news *story*' invokes a context of the BBC as a key agent in the discursive unfolding of the conflict in the Middle East. And that ability comes with responsibilities, particularly as this unfolding is wrongly, yet understandably so, understood by audiences as a site where the BBC can actively privilege one protagonist's interests over those of the other. The BBC, then, is to avoid any such implication by refraining from activities, such as 'humanitarian intervention', that would foster this perception. This necessitated creating an explicit fissure between the journalistic and humanitarian ventures of the BBC so as to comply with its constructed mandated from, and responsibilities towards, to its audiences.

Secondly, an 'ongoing *news story*' can be drawn on to refer to a story which is currently the subject of BBC News coverage. This apparently straightforward characterization is in fact a discursive articulation of boundary work, in which the natural alignment of the crisis in Gaza with the BBC's journalistic ventures is achieved at the expense of being colonized by a humanitarian order of discourse, in which the principles of indiscriminate action prevails. This allows the BBC to apply its standards of journalistic 'impartiality' to all BBC output concerning the crisis in Gaza, in which the pursuit of impartiality functions as a *straitjacket* and a rationale for *inaction*. Consequently, not airing a DEC appeal, which inevitably would draw attention to just one protagonist, is accomplished as fundamentally compatible with this pursuit and is, thereby, actively negated as being symptomatic of an alleged privileging of the Israeli perspective.

Thirdly, an '*ongoing news story*' allows for invoking a context of multiple stakeholders and interested parties, all with particular stakes in proposing reasons and futures for the 'unresolved' and continuing story. These 'invested audiences' necessitate a principled journalism that sets out to persist and resist these expectations and requirements. This mode of journalism thereby is constructed by the BBC as an extraordinary achievement, one in which the BBC does not shy away from explicitly challenging and problematizing protagonists, and will not succumb to any form of symbolic or physical pressure. Consequently, the BBC can claim an entitlement to uphold 'journalistic inviolability', in which the pursuit of principled journalism becomes a *flak jacket* for *action* that allows for the BBC's journalistic venture to be presented as more of a humanitarian achievement than its explicit humanitarian ventures would allow for. The BBC, then, can attempt to resist accusations that its decision is dismissive of Palestinian humanitarian suffering though the moral and ethical implications of this require further scrutiny. Scholarship should also explore how media organizations transform constraints posed by processes of cultural-economic change – such as the gradual penetration of public news services by discourses of consumerism, accountability and

public value – into pragmatic opportunities for securing and legitimizing its continuance in the light of ever-mounting public scrutiny.

In conclusion, the denial of the 2009 DEC Gaza Appeals reinforces the fact that the highest operational value at play for the BBC is the maintenance of audience 'trust' – a concept enshrined in the 'foundation' of the BBC of which impartiality is a key currency. Thus what made the 2009 DEC Gaza appeal distinct was the perception by BBC Executives that airing the appeal threatened the core of the BBC's brand: its journalistic impartiality (both real and perceived). The labeling of the DEC Gaza appeal as part of an 'ongoing news story' – as opposed to a free standing and apolitical humanitarian appeal – provided a discursive means which allowed the BBC to justify its controversial decision on journalistic terms. It also allowed the BBC to present the pursuit of principled journalism as a greater humanitarian achievement than airing the DEC appeal and thus avoid engaging with the moral and ethical quagmire opened by its differentiation of suffering based on degrees of impartiality.

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