
BBC's *Panorama*, war coverage and the 'Westminster consensus'

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Keywords: Journalism, media production, newswork, media sociology, new media

Abstract

Relations between the British government and the BBC are often fraught at times of armed conflict, particularly in the absence of national consensus. A pattern of pressure on, and intimidation of, the BBC underlies efforts by successive governments to set the agenda for reporting 'in the national interest'. The effects of such pressure is considerable and, some claim, has led to over-dependence on official and 'establishment' sources in the BBC's coverage of conflicts. Such over-dependence, it could be argued, is typified by the 'flagship' current affairs series *Panorama* which has been accused by current affairs practitioners and media analysts of generally reflecting a 'Westminster consensus'.

This paper examines *Panorama's* coverage of the invasion of Iraq to explore claims that Britain's longest-running current affairs series largely reflects 'elite opinion'. Textual and content analysis of an archive of *Panorama* programmes related to the war is used to examine the charge that *Panorama* draws on a limited range of 'establishment' views and perspectives in its war coverage, whilst marginalising more critical opinions and explanations.

Introduction

This paper on the BBC current affairs series *Panorama's* coverage of the Iraq war forms part of research by Bournemouth University's Centre for Broadcasting History into an archive of videos from the series broadcast between 1987-2004. This period was a politically volatile one for the BBC, beginning with the sacking of one Director General, Alasdair Milne, under Conservative government pressure and ending with the resignation (effectively a sacking) of another, Greg Dyke, under Labour government pressure. The wider research identifies a number of factors shaping *Panorama's* evolving representation of stories and issues during the period. These include: changes in the public service broadcasting environment; regulatory mechanisms and institutional constraints; competition from other news and current affairs programmes; and the legacy of particular management regimes

and personnel within BBC in general, and *Panorama* in particular. The focus of this paper, however, is to assess the possible impact on *Panorama*'s coverage of the Iraq War of two other factors considered significant in critical accounts of the period: the government's relationship with the BBC, and journalistic culture and practices at the Corporation's News and Current Affairs Department.

Journalistic culture and practice

Journalistic training, practice and ethics vary considerably around the world. Concepts of 'objectivity' or 'neutrality', for instance, have traditionally been prized more highly in broadcast journalism from the UK than from Germany. Lucy Küng-Shankelman makes this point in her comparative study of broadcasting organisations:

'British journalists exhibit fewer scruples than their German counterparts about 'creative' methods of gathering information, such as paying informants or pretending to be someone else. Whereas German journalists see their primary role as drawing attention to potential dangers or threats and communicating their personal interpretation of events, their UK peers feel their professional role is to report neutrally on events, even ones they privately judge as alarming.' (Küng-Shankelman, 2000, 62)

Critics of British broadcast journalism assert that simplistic notions of 'neutrality' underpinning news and current affairs make it easier for governments, or powerful elites, to manage and manipulate media coverage because of reporters' reliance on 'official sources', 'experts', and 'mainstream' representatives of the political and business world to provide contrasting points of views on any given subject (see Negrine 1989; Miller 1993; McQueen 1998; Allan, 1999). Accusations that over-reliance on official sources distorts news and current affairs output towards the viewpoint of ruling interests go back to the work of the Glasgow University Media Group in the 1970s and beyond, with many examples drawn from the BBC's own coverage (see Eldridge, 1995).

Critical accounts of the BBC's news and current affairs output have frequently noted the Corporation's tendency towards a 'mandarin-like' conception of journalism which stresses the disinterested mediation of information, a cautious, defensive 'rhetoric of constitutionalism' and the so-called 'impartial' umpiring of differences of 'legitimated opinion' (Born, 2005.). This tendency is exacerbated, it is said, by entrenched elitism in the News and Current Affairs Department, a defining characteristic that remains almost untouched by recruitment policies that have attempted to widen the social and ethnic background of BBC staff generally. The accusation has been partly acknowledged by senior figures within the BBC. Director General Greg Dyke admitted in a BBC Radio Scotland interview in 2001 that the BBC remained 'hideously white' (BBC, 2001) and was in need of widening

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its recruitment base to reflect the diverse interests and perspectives of the nation. Richard Sambrook, Director of BBC News during the Iraq War, relates this problem to his department's output and describes BBC audience research which indicated deep dissatisfaction with the perspectives offered:

There is a new political divide: no longer 'left' and 'right' – it's now 'us' and 'them', with 'them' being politicians, the establishment and the broadcasters and media. (Sambrook, 2002. p 19-20)

This concern, while not new, is now widespread at the BBC (Graham, 2004; Marr, 2004) and *Panorama's* recent move towards shorter more populist topics (see Gaber, 2008) may reflect a strategic attempt to win back mainstream audiences which had been effectively written off as unreachable by previous schedulers and *Panorama* editors. Notions of 'impartiality' are moving away from '*soundbites in precise celestial balance*' towards:

'[...] an openness of mind and approach that ensures fairness and proportionality to a range of views.'
(Sambrook, 2004)

The Government and the BBC

It is one of the great hypocrisies of British public life [...] that the BBC is independent of government control.
(Harris, 2004)

Accounts of the British government's relationship with the BBC written within the critical tradition of Media and Communication Studies have stressed the corrosive effect of government influence and pressure, either direct or indirect, on the Corporation's public service broadcasting values and journalistic independence, particularly in times of conflict.

Roger Bolton former editor of *Panorama* (editor of *This Week* during Death on the Rock) expressed the issue succinctly:

'The BBC either is independent, or it isn't.'
(Bolton, 1997)

According to Bolton's clear-cut standard (and based on his own experience working in current affairs) the BBC is, demonstrably, not 'independent'. It could be argued, in opposition to Bolton, that the Corporation has, on occasion, broadcast material that has infuriated the government, indicating some degree of autonomy. However, this level of autonomy is dismissed as a 'very short leash' in

the most critical accounts (see Edwards and Cromwell, 2006). This highly sceptical view of the BBC's independence is at least partly supported by the work of media scholars and historians who have catalogued government interference and pressure on the BBC from every administration since the Corporation's earliest days, as well as formal and informal 'ties' of various kinds – including the appointment of The Board of Governors responsible for 'deposing' Milne and Dyke (see Miller, 1994; Barnett, S. And Curry A., 1994; Abercrombie, 1996; Rawnsley, 1996; Philo, 2002).

Roger Bolton was the *Panorama* Editor behind some of the investigations that particularly angered Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The first, a *Panorama* programme made in Northern Ireland but never broadcast, included footage of an IRA roadblock in the village of Carrickmore and led to the seizure of film under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In Parliament Mrs. Thatcher called on the BBC to '*put its house in order*'. As Miller notes:

The legacy of the Carrickmore affair, 1979 assassination of Airey Neave, and the 1984 Brighton bombing (in which Mrs Thatcher herself narrowly escaped death), coupled with the major rows over the Falklands [particularly a *Panorama* report 'Can We Avoid War?'] and the coverage of the miners strike in 1984/85, sets the context for government relations with the broadcasters.

(Miller, 1994. pg.35-36)

Roger Bolton was sacked over the issue on the orders of the Board of Governors, but was later re-instated. It is also claimed by Alasdair Milne that another *Panorama* investigation – 'Maggie's Militant Tendency' - into alleged links between the Conservative party and racist right wing political groups contributed to his sacking as BBC Director General, the first in the Corporation's history (see Snoddy, 2006).

In fact, despite assertions of the Corporation's independence, the BBC itself has carefully documented a long history of 'pressure' from the British government which goes back as far as the General Strike of 1926 which underlines the compromises sometimes made to maintain its funding and 'independence' ('The BBC Under Pressure' BBC, 2006). Notable examples described in the same overview of the Corporation's clashes with British governments during its history include 'The Suez Crisis' (1956); David Dimbleby's documentary on Harold Wilson 'Yesterday's Men' (1971); the *Panorama* investigations around the so-called 'Carrickmore Incident' (1979) and the Falklands Conflict (1982); *Real Lives* (1985); The Libyan Bombing (1986); The Zircon Affair (1986-87) and, finally, what is introduced as 'the most damaging row' - Iraq, Gilligan and Hutton (2003).

These accounts are, in some respects, an unusually honest admission by the BBC that the relationship between the British government and the Corporation is one

frequently defined by struggle at times of national conflict. This struggle is at its sharpest when the British public is divided on the issue, as the accounts of Suez and the Falklands War make clear.

A recurring challenge for the BBC is its stance when the country goes to war. In World War 2 its programmes and journalism had reflected a nation squarely behind the struggle against the Nazi threat. But the question is less clear cut when the nation itself is divided over the decision to mobilise. The Falklands War in 1982 was a case in point, as was Suez 26 years earlier. (BBC 2006, 7)

Richard Lindley a former *Panorama* reporter argues that at times of armed conflict, disputes with the government of the day are to be expected:

[...] when the BBC takes an independent view on something the government is quite jumpy about, then the situation quickly turns nasty.' (Lindley 2003)

Over the Iraq War, British public opinion was very divided and there was an awareness amongst senior BBC managers, even before the first shot was fired, that relations were likely to get very 'nasty' between the Corporation and the government (Dyke, 2004). It is important to note however that no *Panorama* journalist has yet admitted that government pressure had any effect on their coverage of the war. John Ware's view that 'flak' only made journalists more careful about accuracy, but did not affect the substance of any investigation, was typical of opinion sampled on this issue (interviewed February 2007). Post-Hutton however, one *Panorama* journalist has admitted to this researcher, but only 'off-record'(!), that there was a distinct chilling effect on investigative reporting for a period, a view supported by the author of *Flat Earth News*, Nick Davies at Westminster University's *Investigative Journalism Conference* (2008).

***Panorama* and Iraq**

The issues of 'information management' and government 'pressure' on the BBC twinned with concerns about a BBC culture of 'shared political assumptions' and uncritical over-reliance on 'official' sources frame many of the debates around the Corporation's handling of the Iraq War. A question raised by research into coverage of the run up to, invasion and continuing occupation of Iraq was the extent to which *Panorama* conformed to models of conflict coverage within the critical tradition, including those by Hallin (1989), Chomsky (1994), Bennett (1999), Altheide and Grimes (2005) and others. Altheide and Grimes' model of 'War Programming', for instance, describes a pattern of war reporting that includes the demonising of certain individual leaders, such as Slobodan Milosevic or Saddam Hussein, in the pre-war phase; a focus on the battle front during the war;

and a post-war shift to more critical coverage on the conduct and questions on the necessity of the war.

According to this model the mass media play an integral part in the support of conflict. The mass media do not 'start' the war, but they do shape the context, the audience expectations, the discourse and the 'production of symbolic meanings'. War Programming is therefore a 'package' in which propaganda is effectively joined to the news process. This occurs because journalists and news sources operate with 'media logic', share in the government or military's construction and emotional performance of events and limit the public forums for debate, especially dissent.

For Altheide and Grimes this is a picture of communication control that cannot be corrected by changing individual reporters, passing new codes of ethics, or revising the journalism curriculum. They are features of an 'ecology of communication'.

Studying *Panorama's* coverage of the Iraq War can help determine how far such a critical model applies to the world's longest running current affairs programme and to what extent the BBC's 'flagship' series exhibits the features of an 'ecology of communication' as identified above. Running since November 1953, and covering all the major events of that long period of recent British history, *Panorama* has always had to represent the BBC on matters of national importance. Its flagship status has meant investigations have, historically, had a bigger impact than similar investigations by *Newsnight* or *Channel 4 News*, for instance, where a daily slot and the sheer volume of output has protected these programmes from serious charges of bias or partiality. As already mentioned, *Panorama* has also been the cause of a number of serious disputes between the BBC and several governments over its history which partly explains the 'Pride and Paranoia' title of Richard Lindley's inside account of the series. The programme's special, somewhat anxious status was explained to me by *Newsnight* journalist Michael Crick, formerly a *Panorama* reporter.

M.C. You always got the sense that it was a highly political programme and that the BBC was constantly worried about *Panorama* in a way that it doesn't seem to give a toss about other programmes like *Newsnight* and we get away with things on *Newsnight* that you'd never get away with in a million years on *Panorama*.

D.M. That's curious because they are both described as 'flagships'. Why is that?

M.C. Yes I know, it's an historical thing, *Panorama* certainly used to have this kind of status. If *Panorama* said it, it was sort of holy writ, I mean you couldn't make jokes on *Panorama*. [..]

In light of previous clashes over its war coverage and mindful of the programme's potential impact on the BBC's relationship to the government and the wider public *Panorama* journalists and producers approached the topic with some caution. Bound by the BBC's statutory duty to provide 'impartial' and 'balanced' news and current affairs coverage, reporting proved especially difficult to meet to everyone's satisfaction in the case of the Iraq war because the opposing positions were so far apart and so entrenched. The BBC and *Panorama* were accused of being, on the one hand, anti-war, if not pro-Saddam. One US journalist at the time described the BBC as the '*Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation*' (Sullivan, 2004). They were also accused by some who were opposed to the war as being slavishly uncritical and of being cowed by a hostile government who were muttering threats about the license fee and their charter, (the threat was, allegedly, made directly by Tessa Jowell according to *Panorama* reporter John Ware). For some critics the charge extended to BBC News and Current Affairs effectively legitimising the war through the systematic exclusion of dissenting voices (Edwards and Cromwell, 2006). Charges of bias by either side were vigorously denied by those working in the wider industry (Tait, 2004.), the BBC (Sambrook, 2004) and *Panorama* (Simpson, 2003), specifically.

Is there evidence of 'bias' or the 'exclusion of voices' in *Panorama's* coverage of the war? An examination of the actual titles of the thirty programmes that deal with the topic of Iraq since 2000 reveals a sense of how the invasion and occupation unfolded as a series of debates about the justification for war, the conduct of the war and the aftermath of the war. A focus on personalities ('Saddam', 'Blair' or 'Bush') is apparent in the titles of ten of thirty of the programmes, such as: 'Saddam - A Warning from History', or 'Blair's War'. There are also an unusual number of programmes with audience participation in them – interactive specials, national and international audience debates which reflect one *Panorama* strategy for dealing with public and establishment divisions around the subject. The qualitative, textual analysis of the broadcast material that follows below is supported by a small quantitative study which sets out to determine an objective measure of *Panorama* airtime allocated to the range of views that existed in relation to the war.

Pre-War

A key aspect of the framing of the Iraq war was the use of fear. This was evident from the earliest *Panorama* report which dealt with Iraq, 'Bin Laden's Bomb' (transmitted in October 2001) which made a link (later shown to be false) between the Iraq regime and Al Qaida operatives. The introduction sets the scene

TOM MANGOLD: The fear is as old as history. The plague doctor of the middle ages helpless in the continent where disease killed millions. Today

the images have returned and with them the fear that disease may walk the land once more.

Evidence brought forward in this programme of meetings between the 9-11 plotter and Iraqi officials has subsequently been denied by the CIA and widely discredited, but in 2001 it is presented in Tom Mangold's report as fact:

MANGOLD: [...] The reason we know the terrorist and the Iraqi spy met here at Prague Airport on at least one occasion is because they were photographed together by the Czech Security Services on the day that Atta flew to the United States. But what was Mohamed Atta plotting, and why did he have to come so far out of his way just to meet the man who was Saddam Hussein's station chief in Prague?

JIM WOOLSEY

Director, CIA, 1993-95

It looks extremely suspicious and I doubt very seriously if Mr Atta was in that lovely city of Prague as a tourist and just happened to chance upon an Iraqi intelligence officer as his tour guide on two occasions, and I also, I rather doubt that his interest in crop dusting was at that point because he was interested in a second career. He knew he had no second career. Those are both extremely suspicious acts on his part.

While the programme only dealt with the 'threat' from Iraq in part, no counter-arguments were set forward to cast doubt on the link between Saddam's regime and Al Qaida. An examination of transcripts shows that the use of senior former or serving US and UK government, military and intelligence agency staff is a defining feature of *Panorama* investigations in coverage of the lead up to and subsequent invasion of Iraq. This over-reliance on 'official sources' has been noted as characteristic of mainstream media's coverage of conflict by a number of studies (Herman and Chomsky 1994, Hoskins 2004, Andersen 2006) and in the case of *Panorama's* investigative reporting was certainly not balanced by giving airtime to senior figures from the anti-war movement who were exposing flaws and falsehoods in these arguments.

In September and November 2002 two *Panorama* programmes were made about Iraq that produced evidence broadly supportive of the government's hard-line strategy. The first of these 'The Case Against Saddam' used old *Panorama* investigations of the Iraqi regime to build its case alongside information from a government dossier which was yet to be released to parliament. This suggests that government or intelligence services cooperated extensively with *Panorama* in the making of the programme, a view supported by statements within the programme, by Jane Corbin, such as 'The CIA believes Saddam is up to his old tricks'. Corbin's conclusion at the end of the programme is indicative of the evidence presented:

CORBIN: The dilemma is that if politicians do not act, Saddam will continue down the nuclear path. But if he's attacked, then he may use his chemical or biological agents. The hawks are clear where America's interests lie. Well, if containment has failed with Saddam Hussein, what message does that send to other states seeking weapons of mass destruction about the attitude America will take towards them?

PERLE: Well, I hope it sends the message that if you pursue weapons of mass destruction and if you are a threat to the United States, we will not stand by and allow you to achieve your objectives.

CORBIN: The Bush administration has put Saddam and the rest of the world on notice. This is a new era. Time for Saddam Hussein is running out.

The interview with the hawkish Richard Perle was one of five appearances in separate *Panorama* episodes in which he laid out the neo-conservative strategy (a total of 1,593 words).

Corbin's concluding remarks make three assumptions based on this 'evidence': firstly, that the 'Saddam's regime' had an active and potentially threatening nuclear programme, secondly, that it was in possession of chemical or biological agents and thirdly that 'containment' has failed to prevent Saddam Hussein developing these weapons. As Scott Ritter and other former weapons inspectors not interviewed by Jane Corbin had argued, none of these assumptions were correct. The coding of pro- or anti-war statements and views aired by *Panorama* in this study exclude any comment by the presenters or journalists (coded simply as (7) reporter's comment), but any assumptions about the 'objectivity' or 'neutrality' of such comments need to be set aside.

The second *Panorama* investigation 'Saddam: A Warning from History' in November 2002 was described by one media watchdog as 'all but indistinguishable from government propaganda' (MediaLens, 2002). The programme used intelligence sources, the accounts of Iraqi defectors and graphic close up footage of Iranian victims of Iraqi poison gas attacks and bloated bodies of women and children at Halabja to '*draw lessons from Saddam Hussein's past conduct in order to discover what he is likely to do now*'. Media Lens wrote to John Simpson to ask:

'Why he failed to interview, or represent the views, of even one person such as the former weapons inspector Scott Ritter who has reported that the Iraqi regime cooperated in delivering fully 90-95% disarmament of its weapons of mass destruction by December 1998, that any remaining biological weapons would be useless sludge, that attempts to reconstitute a WMD programme would be immediately detectable to western technology.'

They asked why he used just sixteen words to comment on Western responsibility for the ‘one million Iraqis civilian deaths’ as a result of sanctions. Media Lens also quoted from a Guardian article written in 2001 that implied that John Simpson had paid a career price for critical reporting in a *Panorama* investigation in the lead-up to the Falkland’s War indicating that UK foreign policy had invited the invasion. They suggested that he had learnt his lesson and had rebuilt his career by toeing a more cautious ‘establishment’ line. This prompted a furious response by John Simpson and it is very revealing of journalists’ attitudes to such charges to read the exchange in full on the Media Lens website and compare Simpson’s defence with his own account of his demotion in his book *Strange Places, Questionable People* (1999, 258-59).

Until December 2002 *Panorama* had mainly relied on official US and British government spokespersons, Iraqi dissidents and intelligence sources for the ‘evidence’ of its investigations. As Miller (1994) notes:

‘Journalists continue to mistake authority and status for credibility and are orientated towards the state in their work practices and their reportage. However, the extent to which the state or the government comes in for criticism from the media is variable. It depends among other things on the balance of political forces at any time. If the government is weak or divided then it will be easier for journalists to criticise and for the broadcasters to resist pressure and intimidation’
(p.277)

If *Panorama*’s investigations had so far been, in effect, ‘pro-war’ the next investigation was clearly framed to address the perceived imbalance. ‘The Case Against War’ transmitted in December 2002 interviewed several opponents of the war. This was, in a sense, less a *Panorama* investigation than a chance for figures opposed to the war to express their doubts. They included Major General Patrick Cordingley (Commander 7th Armoured Brigade 1988-91); Haifa Zangana, an Iraqi exile tortured by the regime, but still opposed to war; Robert Baer a former CIA agent who worried about destabilizing the region; Sir Andrew Green – former Ambassador to Syria and Saudi Arabia; Jessica Stern (former presidential advisor on the National Security Council); Chuck Hagel (Republican Foreign Relations Committee) a right wing senator and Vietnam veteran who called for more debate; Bishop of Oxford Rt. Rev. Richard Harries who said: ‘I don’t think the traditional ‘just war’ criteria have been met’. Tony Benn, President of the Stop the War Coalition which organized huge demonstrations, is ‘interviewed’ for just 10 seconds compared to several minutes of airtime for each of the other contributors.

The programme dealt mainly with nuances of opposition within the establishment – not the full argument of the anti-war movement. Arguments were largely around the notion that the threat had not reached a level where a war was fully justified,

rather than arguments that the war was completely unjustified, criminal and immoral.

As the story moved to the preparation for invasion, and with conflict more likely with each passing month, the focus increasingly shifted to justification for the coming war. *Panorama* programmes made in this period, particularly phone-ins and live audience debates (*Panorama Interactive Special*, 29th September 2002 and 'Bush versus Saddam', 2nd March 2003) reflect the deep split in public opinion on such a justification. These programmes may have been seen by the BBC as an opportunity to redress the balance towards allowing more dissenting voices which had, until this point, been outweighed in the programme's investigative reporting by pro-war arguments (34.6% pro-war or partially pro-war comments, against 25.6% anti-war or partially anti-war comments, according to this study).

Invasion Phase

'Blair's War' perhaps gives the anti-war movement its best opportunity for making the case against invasion. However, the programme was broadcast on the 23rd March when British and American troops were already deep into Iraqi territory and, to some extent, the arguments had been superseded by events. The film was, in fact, made in the run up to the biggest march in Britain's history and in it *Panorama* goes 'to the heart' of the Stop the War Coalition and contrasts it with Blair's rallying call for support. Screening the programme at all at this time might have been regarded as a 'risk' for the BBC given the furious government reaction to *Panorama's* 'Can We Avoid War?' (1982), when the Falkland's 'task force' was at sea. Perhaps significantly then, *Panorama's* focus is not on, arguably, the most articulate leading anti-war figures such as Tariq Ali, George Galloway or Tony Benn but rather with the unlikely supporters from 'middle England' attracted to the march. Vivien White interviews a novelist, former army Major and a professional female Labour supporter who works for a Birmingham think tank. There are brief appearances by anti-war organizers who are introduced with something of a 'health warning': Lindsay German: 'a long-serving member of the Socialist Workers Party' and Andrew Murray: 'a communist'. Andrew Murray was filmed for a week and interviewed many times but only says 129 words in the programme compared to 462 words by Tony Blair or 721 words by Jack Straw. We do not hear any of Lindsay German's arguments and only 24 words by The Stop the War President, Tony Benn, widely regarded as one of Britain's most eloquent speakers (see Marr, 2004).

By April 27th, more than two weeks after the fall of Baghdad, a *Panorama* report entitled 'The Battle for Basra' was transmitted with Jane Corbin focusing on the British occupation of the southern city. Corbin is 'embedded' with British troops although her report does include some critical assessment of the progress of the

war amongst material favourable to the occupying forces. There is some insight into the effects of civilian casualties, for instance, when Corbin interviews the victims of a British airstrike that was targeting Saddam Hussein's cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, nicknamed 'Chemical Ali'. The strike killed several members of a respected, English-educated doctor's family. The survivors are able to tell their tale in fluent English and show photographs of the children and adults who were killed. Corbin explores the power vacuum in Basra and looks at how the troops are asked to do a 'difficult job' winning a 'hearts and minds campaign' with few resources. There is no water, electricity, fuel, or backup administration, for instance.

Jane Corbin is embedded with British troops in Basra for the report. The process and effect of embedding journalists has raised many questions about the possibility of balance and impartiality. Corbin offers no criticism of the occupying forces and the language employed, including the comparison with Nazi Germany, suggest her loyalties are with British forces she accompanies:

CORBIN: The imam of a local mosque however can't run a city the size of Basra. The Ba'ath Party dominated almost every aspect of life here as the Nazis once did in Germany. It will prove almost impossible to root the Ba'ath out completely. The problem is, how do you know who the good guys are and the bad guys? That's a real problem for you surely?

McSPORRAN: It is but what we're doing is we're deferring to the people that we can identify and particularly as with this gentleman's own case, the sort of religious leaders who the locals obviously respect, we found very quickly in the small villages on the outskirts of town that the key Ba'athist members, the people who've been responsible for enforcing the regime were indicated to us straightaway.

CORBIN: So people here know who the bad guys are.

McSPORRAN: Yes, they do very much so.

CORBIN: The bad guys were still very much in evidence on the streets of Basra as the Irish Guard were finding on their nightly patrols. These young soldiers with experience of Northern Ireland reckoned that some criminal elements were seizing their opportunity as the regime released its grip on Basra. But Sergeant Perry suspected that some of the gunmen were one time members of Saddam's militias seeking to prolong the anarchy.

Ba'ath party members may have had a reputation amongst local Shiites as the 'bad guys' especially given the party's record in Basra, but the simplistic label 'good guys and bad guys' is questionable language, to say the least, for a journalist to use whilst reporting with an occupying army.

In April another *Panorama* examined possible problems with the invasion strategy, including the doubts of former military figures that the coalition had enough troops to take Baghdad. John Ware puts some of the doubts raised to the Minister of Defence Geoff Hoon including this question:

WARE: The Americans have bombed the information ministry. Yet, although its signal has sometimes been shaky, Iraqi TV is still on the air. Do you think it was a mistake not to have taken Iraqi TV off the air straight away?

GEOFF HOON MP
Secretary of State for Defence

What we were trying to achieve in this campaign was both military success but also to leave as much of the infrastructure of the country in place as possible.

WARE: But the TV is a central part of the Saddam regime, isn't it?

HOON: Certainly it has been used for propaganda reasons. It's been used to support the military resistance. It is part of the regime, and certainly I have consistently complained about the way in which Saddam's propaganda has been rebroadcast not least in the Arab world but even in the western world.

This is a remarkable line of questioning for a journalist to ask a Defence Minister and raises important ethical questions about the role of journalists at times of war and their responsibilities to abide by International Conventions protecting civilians from deliberate attack, even when their governments do not. It is also worth asking whether British journalist's unions cover this type of issue in their codes of practice and, if so, to what extent it is enforced.

As in the pre-invasion phase there is some evidence that *Panorama's* investigative reporting favoured pro-war voices against anti-war voices during the invasion period. Coding of statements made in pre-edited *Panorama* programmes (not live debates and phone-ins) shows that 48.2% of statements were pro- or partially pro-war; against 40.4% anti- or partially anti-war. Many of the 'partially anti-war' statements cast doubt on the effectiveness of particular tactics rather than arguing against the legitimacy of the war itself – a position rarely found after 'Blair's War', recorded at the height of the anti-war movement, but transmitted after the invasion phase had begun. Interestingly, statements coded as 'neutral' fell from 30.6% before the invasion to just 11.1% and anti-coalition Iraqi forces statements fell from 9.3% to just 0.3% between the pre-invasion and invasion phase.

Post-war Period

It is after the end of official hostilities (declared on the 1st May 2003) that we see far more critical investigative journalism begin to emerge. 'The War Party' is the first of these transmitted on the 18th of May, but mainly recorded during the invasion. The programme exposes the aims and ambitions of the so called 'neo-conservatives' in Washington, especially those behind the Project for a New American Century. It does this through extensive interviews with 'neo-cons' and their opponents. In fact, a coding of the programme reveals that 68% of the views aired were pro- or partially pro-war, with only 23% given to opponents of the war and the neo-con agenda. However, the neo-conservative position is framed critically in the report with their views shown to be deeply influential, extreme and potentially dangerous. This strongly suggests that coding can only be of limited value in assessing overall degrees of partiality to given views. A more nuanced and contextual close reading is more useful at teasing out framing strategies and the 'positioning' of the *Panorama* audience. In the following excerpt we see how interviews with leading neo-cons are used to clarify their position and present a sense of the possible threat they present to peace in the Middle East and the wider world:

BRADSHAW: How did you feel when the statue came down?

WILLIAM KRISTOL

Project for the New American Century

Moved. It was a moving moment really. Great to see.

BRADSHAW: Looks like you won. What next?

KRISTOL: Well, I think we need to help get Iraq on its feet and help establish a decent government there, and then really work to remove other dictators with weapons of mass destruction and deal with the threat of terrorism around the world, but hopefully not with military action, hopefully through diplomatic pressure, but this is the end to the beginning of this broader war, it's not the end of the end.

KRISTOL: [addressing public] : This was a very important moment I think in all honesty in American history this last 3-4 weeks. After Vietnam many Americans came to think that we couldn't be a force for good in the world, that our military

BRADSHAW: Much of the world peers into the New American Century with anxiety. Neo-conservatives hope we'll rally round their faith in American power. They may not win every battle, George Bush may yet find them a liability. But his ideological shock troops are on a roll. Bad news if you're in the way.

Kristol's contributions is coded as pro-war but the reporter's (Bradshaw's) line of questioning and narration frame the neo-con position problematically '[...] *his ideological shock troops are on a roll. Bad news if you're in the way*'.

Another four months pass in the post-invasion phase before the next *Panorama* during which time the initial euphoria of 'liberation' (shown in some invasion-phase programmes) seems to have worn off. In 'The Price of Victory' *Panorama* reporter Andy Davies spends six months with the American 427 field artillery nickname 'Thunder Battalion' from March 2003 – August 2003. 'The Price of Victory' traces the progress of the occupation over the period. It shows how initial cautious support for the troops from many of those Iraqis grateful to see the back of Saddam, quickly soured as the army was forced into a peacekeeping and law enforcing role for which it was not equipped. Andy Davies' report shows the frustration of Iraqis as months into the occupation there is still no water, electricity or law and order – the provision of which is a legal duty for any occupying power.

We are also shown how violence flares up as a result of poor decision making by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). For example, as large denomination notes lose their value because of falling confidence in the old bank notes, the CPA decides to allow Iraqis to exchange these for smaller denomination notes. But instead of using a network of banks they distribute them through a handful of offices. Consequently there are huge queues outside these offices in the heat of the summer. The US troops have to police these and we see the patience of the waiting crowd and troops snap and the *Panorama* crew films a group of soldiers beating and abusing the angry crowd. Later a protestor is shot dead in a demonstration by former Iraqi soldiers who have not been paid for months. Andy Davies interviews the family of the dead man who we see in dignified grief. They say they want justice, either the man who killed their brother must be punished and blood money paid. If not his brother swears to kill four soldiers for every one they have killed.

Some aspects of the report are possibly affected by the embedding process such as the generally positive representation of most US soldiers who are shown to be doing their best against difficult circumstances. Examples of ignorance, racism or 'trigger-happiness' that have been common allegations against occupying troops are only hinted at, as in an extraordinary brutal sequence which appears to show a 'drive by' shooting of an innocent civilian accompanied by the following understated narration:

A group of American soldiers had just taken a hit on one of their vehicles and they decided to hit back with another overwhelming show of force. But this was a busy shopping district and in the confusion the soldiers opened fire on a group of onlookers.

There are also, as with 'The Battle for Basra' interviews with Iraqis supportive of the invasion. However, Andy Davies is also able to leave the battalion to report on the appalling conditions in local hospitals and (over the six months) show the rapidly deteriorating security condition. Consequently, there is a sense here in which an investigative reporter has given a more 'balanced' and sophisticated view of events on the ground than in previous *Panorama* reports that relied more heavily on official and uncritical sources, or gave a more 'embedded' view.

'The Price of Victory' is typical of many of the *Panorama* investigations in the post-invasion phase that look at difficulties with the occupation and cast doubts on the necessity of the war (as predicted by the War Programming model). These include 'Still Chasing Saddam's Weapons'; 'A Fight to the Death' – John Ware's critical account of both the government and the BBC's conduct over the Gilligan affair; 'Shamed' Jane Corbin's damning investigation into the Abu Graib scandal; 'A Failure of Intelligence' (July, 2004) or 'Iraq, Tony and the Truth' (March, 2005) – Ware's own reports on the 'thin' and 'exaggerated' intelligence that took Britain to war; 'Troops Out?' (October, 2005) a debate on the anti-war arguments for withdrawing troops and 'A Good Kicking' (March, 2007) on the beating and torture of Iraqi prisoners by British soldiers.

Programmes in the post-invasion period still contained statements partly supportive of the invasion although they are almost always tempered by criticism of the conduct of the occupation. Reporter John Simpson's observations at the end of 'Exit Strategy' (January, 2005) following the elections suggest that while deeply flawed, the occupation can bring about some benefit to the Iraqi nation with his own prediction of the long-term outcome:

SIMPSON: A lot of Iraqis must have reflected today that these elections would have been far more peaceful if only the Coalition had agreed to hold them before the Sunnis were so alienated and the insurgency grew so strong. I don't think it ever occurred to me in all the years I've been coming to Baghdad, that the first time Iraqis were able to cast their votes in a free and fair election that it would be in an atmosphere like this, half empty streets and the noise of explosions every now and then, and a general sense of anxiety and fear. But I do think it's important not to assume from what's happening today that the entire process is bound to fail, in fact on the contrary I think it's bound to succeed. It's just that it's been so badly botched along the way by so many people.

Nevertheless, pro- or partially pro-war statements and arguments are found in far fewer proportions amongst *Panorama* programmes transmitted after George Bush declared an end of major hostilities.

Conclusion

Panorama is not a monolithic entity. In fact, speaking to former *Panorama* journalists – one of the criticisms of the programme is that reporters work in separate teams. Michael Crick who now works for Newsnight said:

‘I mean on Newsnight everyone sort of gets on with each other as far as I can tell. You know everyone’s sort of cooperative, whereas on *Panorama* there was almost a sort of quiet glee if somebody else did a programme that wasn’t very good.’

Consequently, the type of investigations that get made can be quite different from each other with journalists and producers following up their particular interests. Nevertheless, some quite consistent patterns emerge from a study of *Panorama*’s coverage of the war that tie in with some models and frameworks of understanding developed by critical media theory.

Panorama’s pre-war coverage was neither overwhelmingly pro-war nor anti-war. The BBC’s legal obligation to provide ‘balance’ can, at one level, be found in the range of opinions found in the programmes transmitted, particularly if live debates and phone-ins are included. This partly supports Tumber and Palmer’s (2004) study of the Iraq War which shows a high degree of scepticism in the run up to the war in sections of the media. As Hallin (1989) argues, the way the media reports events is closely tied to the degree of consensus among the political elite or the ‘sphere of consensus’ as he labels it and such a consensus was not apparent in the same way that it was in previous conflict, such as over Afghanistan or Yugoslavia. *Panorama* was able to respond to the strains in the foreign policy elite by producing far higher amounts of critical coverage without abandoning ‘objective journalism’ for some dissident or anti-establishment conception of their role.

However, the question of ‘balance’ in the pre-war phase is not so easily answered. Simple quantitative analysis, for example, cannot clearly account for the ‘quality’ or types of arguments excluded, or the context for arguments put forward. Examination of (post-war) ‘The War Party’ shows there is no easy correlation between the number of pro- or anti-war statements and the overall framing of the programme, a process which evades simple categorisation of this kind. Chronology also needs factoring in to any assessment of balance in the pre-war phase. Programmes in the early pre-war phase were generally supportive of a pro-war viewpoint, while anti-war voices were heard more clearly as war approached. The crucial period for influencing public opinion in order to prevent war may well have passed by the time British troops were being sent to the region.

This study of *Panorama*’s coverage of the Iraq conflict generally supports theories of source behaviour which are used in critical studies to explain how the media can

‘support’ a war without abandoning their ‘objectivity’ in a technical sense. Media-government relations are explained by Bennett’s (1990) ‘indexing hypothesis’:

Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to index the range of voices and both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic. (1990)

According to the hypothesis, non-official sources only appear in news stories when their opinions are already emerging in official circles. When institutional opposition collapses, even if public opinion is opposed to a particular policy, the volume of opposition in news and editorials is indexed accordingly. Hence, as the war began the media reduced access to anti-war voices, or they were reported at a distance. Only ‘organisationally endowed claims makers’ got consistent access once hostilities began. This view was partly confirmed by this study, although ‘Blair’s War’ and a live debate ‘Questions from a Divided World’ transmitted in the early stages of the war offered an opportunity for a range of dissenting voices as well as pro-war voices to be heard. The contents of ‘Questions from a Divided World’ and ‘After Saddam’ supports the ‘War Programming’ model’s prediction of coverage in wartime as dealing with ‘international reaction and anticipation of the war’s aftermath’. ‘The Battle for Basra’ and ‘The Race to Baghdad’ confirm the model’s prediction of ‘coverage of the current war [...] to capture the various aspects of the battle front, the home front [and] the media coverage’.

Jonathan Mermin’s (1996) elaboration of Bennett’s indexing theory suggests the media are able to claim they are fulfilling journalistic ideals of balance and objectivity when a conflict is underway by switching to presenting and analysing the ability of the government to achieve the goals it has set. Reporters offer critical analysis inside the terms of the apparently settled policy debate. In the case of *Panorama*’s coverage this was articulated along strategic questions such as: Can the coalition forces capture Baghdad with the relatively small number of forces they have? Shouldn’t the coalition forces have taken out the Ba’athist dominated television station? Do they have enough men to maintain control after the fall of Saddam’s regime?

This study lends support to the view that it is in the ‘post-war’ phase that ‘critical’ investigative journalism is most likely to take place and confirms the pattern of coverage anticipated by the ‘War Programming’ model. Why should this be? Did the media operate as ‘co-conspirators’ in the preparation for war? The evidence of this study suggests a more complicated process at work.

While government pressure on the BBC was certainly a daily reality in the lead up to and execution of the invasion, there is less evidence that such pressure directly

influenced *Panorama* journalists. It certainly made individual reporters more careful in checking facts that might embarrass the government, but testimony from current and former *Panorama* staff suggests that investigating government claims on WMD or the case for war was never discouraged at senior levels. The chilling effect of the Hutton Inquiry on the BBC may have tempered investigations for a time in the post-war period, but as we have seen it is in this period that the most critical material on the war is produced.

Was 'journalistic culture and practice' at fault for allowing government claims about the Iraqi regime to go relatively uncontested until just four months before war? Certainly the social composition of *Panorama's* managerial infrastructure and its programme makers supports the view that 'those in charge of mass communication tend to share similar backgrounds to those in control of economic and social systems' (Johnstone *et al.* in McQuail, 1987). The charges of 'elitism', or of an 'Oxbridge' bias may partly account for the restricted level of debate that Lindsay German complains of - and awareness of this problem at the BBC, documented above, may account for the opportunities (albeit belated and limited ones) given to proponents of an anti-war view to make their case. It seems likely that divided popular opinion, audience pressure and the widely publicised mass protest, had its part to play in encouraging attention to the wider debate at the BBC in this respect.

Serious flaws in the government's claims about WMD were well known in advance of March 2003, and while some of these views were reported, they received relatively late attention from *Panorama* investigators. 'Experts' representing views wholly opposed to war and contrary to dominant discourse, such as former UN inspector Scott Ritter, former UN Humanitarian Coordinators for Iraq Hans von Sponeck and Dennis Halliday, leading US intellectual Noam Chomsky or other leading anti-war activists went largely unrepresented. While *Panorama's* coverage was not uniform, the majority of criticism and reflection followed major military action, rather than preceding it as expected with the War Programming conception of war coverage.

Research by Chouliaraki (2005) on news coverage of the Iraq war is in line with findings from this study, that journalists and media organizations do not consciously abandon 'impartiality' as a guiding principle at times of war or co-ordinate behind-the-scenes with the government to persuade the public of a point of view. Rather, that it is the more routine aspects of journalistic practice and editorial policy (see Allan, 1999), particularly reliance on official sources, the use of news frames and dominant thematic emphases to structure the selection, presentation and emphasis of reports, which help explain the under-representation of dissenting and anti-war voices, particularly in the lead up to war.

In conclusion, this study of *Panorama's* coverage of the Iraq war reveals a degree of professional autonomy at play, producing differing accounts of the justification, conduct and consequences of the war. These accounts served, on the one hand, as a conduit for unreliable 'intelligence information' to the public and, for a particular period, excluded expert and activist opinion opposed to the war. However, as war drew closer, oppositional views grew louder. The BBC's reliance on political elite discourse permitted the considerable disquiet with, and (partial) opposition to, US and UK foreign policy to be expressed by a variety of establishment and (to a much lesser extent) non-establishment actors. This disquiet continued, albeit muted, throughout the war and then grew as coalition control of Iraq broke down in the post-invasion phase. The study partly confirms a number of theories of war reporting and media-state relations, including Altheide and Grimes' (2005) 'War Programming' model; Bennett's (1999) 'indexing hypothesis' and empirical studies that show predominantly 'supportive' coverage by the broadcast media at times of war particularly in relation to how:

[...] dependence on government sources is understood to play a central role in shaping journalist's perceptions of events.'
(Goddard et al. 2007)

These findings, however, suggest that while the well-documented government intimidation of the BBC during this period may have impressed a need for 'caution' during investigations liable to embarrass the government's position, that other factors are more likely to have shaped the *Panorama* team's coverage, particularly the journalistic culture and practices operating more widely within the BBC's News and Current Affairs Department. It can be no surprise after all, that a major cultural institution such as the BBC is 'tied' to the structure of power that funds its existence. Showing the mechanisms through which this power operates within a single current affairs series is a multi-layered task that requires understanding of complex interconnections between state pressures and institutional constraints, through managerial and editorial decision-making processes and right down to the level of individual human agency. Making sense of these interconnection in relations to *Panorama's* output will be the focus of further research at Bournemouth's Centre for Broadcasting History.

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