Panorama's coverage of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'

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Introduction

The BBC requires its journalists to 'report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly' (BBC, 2012: 1) yet the Corporation's flagship current affairs series *Panorama*'s investigation of the 11 September atrocities and the ensuing 'War on Terror' was narrow, factually-flawed and served to amplify hawkish policy prescriptions that ultimately led to ruinous wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. Evidence for this view emerges through an examination of four major investigations into Al-Qaeda and the events of 9-11 broadcast between September 2001 and July 2002. Study of these key episodes shows how *Panorama*'s coverage lacked investigative depth and drew unfounded links between the 9-11 leader Mohamed Atta and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, whilst contributing to an information vacuum around the attacks that helped feed far-fetched conspiracy theories that sprang up in their aftermath.

Other *Panorama* episodes dealt with the broad subject of terrorism and 'the War on Terror' within this period, including three studio debates ('Britain on the Brink'; 'War on Terrorism' and 'Clash of Cultures') which have been written about elsewhere (see Cottle, 2002). The focus here, however, is on the quality of the investigative reports that dealt with the traumatic events of September 2001 and their aftermath, events which led to a profound shift in US

foreign and security policy, with far-reaching consequences for Britain and the rest of the world (see Norris, Kern and Just, 2003; Moeller, 2004).

Context for the Investigations: the Events of 11 September

On the morning of 11 September 2001, nineteen militants associated with the Islamic extremist group Al-Qaeda hijacked four American airliners armed with nothing more sophisticated than Stanley knives. These hijackings and the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon led to around three thousand deaths, billions of dollars in destruction and triggered unprecedented military, economic and political developments both in America and around the globe.

In less than two hours the United States had been transformed physically and psychologically by the biggest peacetime attack on the American mainland in the country's history. The image of the second passenger jet penetrating the south tower and the collapse of the two tallest buildings in New York was played on televisions around the world in heavy rotation (up to 30 times per hour). Yet destruction on this scale was difficult to fully comprehend, except perhaps in relation to many Hollywood disaster movies. Slavoj Zizek (2002) compared the 'theatrical spectacle' of the attacks to high budget disaster scenes familiar from Hollywood films arguing that:

> For the large majority of the public, the World Trade Centre explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was the framing of the shot itself not reminiscent of

> the spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others […]? (Zizek 2002: 11)

Zizek was one of many commentators to note that Hollywood had fantasised such destruction countless times. Other writers and media pundits noted grotesque 'intertextual' similarities with films such as *Independence Day, Escape from New York, Armageddon* and a host of disaster movies (see discussion below of *Panorama*'s 'September 11th: A Warning From Hollywood'). In the days that followed images of the second passenger jet penetrating the south tower, the spectacular collapse of the twin towers and the extensive damage to the Pentagon were played repeatedly on British television screens, as rolling news broadcasts on a number of channels pieced together events and suggested various explanations. Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network were strongly suspected and terrorist experts were called in to give background and provide possible explanations – explanations that became more credible as the huge investigation quickly uncovered the names of the nineteen hijackers. For the relatively well-resourced BBC current affairs series *Panorama,* an opportunity presented itself to investigate and provide context to the attacks in ways which news was not capable of doing. As Cottle notes of the current affairs form:

> Of all TV genres, current affairs programming has traditionally been charged with going behind the imagery and event-orientation of TV news. Because of its longer production gestation, it can provide a temporally longer view and deeper contextualisation of the events in question […]
>
> (Cottle, 2002: 179)

However, *Panorama*'s initial response to the attacks in the US quickly became the subject of some controversy. Various press accounts indicate unhappiness by veteran reporter Tom Mangold about his Editor Mike Robinson'salleged instructions *not* to cover the story immediately (Mangold was within an hour's drive of New York at the time). It has been claimed that Mangold was ordered to fly back to the UK while BBC journalists were flown out to the US on a specially chartered plane, only to be grounded for several days in Canada amidst the massive security clampdown (Cran, 2002; Lindley, 2003). A major difficulty with researching *Panorama*'s coverage of 9-11 has been the reluctance of many journalists and producers to go on the record or be interviewed at all about behind-the-scenes events. This author's off-the-record discussions with a person who was in the BBC's newsroom at the time of the attacks confirms press accounts of why there was no immediate *Panorama* coverage and suggests there was disagreement between the Head of Current Affairs, Peter Horrocks, and Robinson in terms of what they saw the role of *Panorama* to be:

> Horrocks wanted the *Panorama* team to do a fast turnaround for that evening's news programmes to record what was happening [while] Mike wanted to do a more thoughtful programme after the event, instead of on the evening of the event. So basically he wouldn't give over anybody to work on it, so other people in current affairs went off and did this 'Special'. What happened then, there was a war between Mangold and Corbin, because Mangold usually dealt with the CIA and DEA in the States, that was all his baby, [..] and Jane [Corbin] usually did, or had done, Middle East stuff on Bin Laden.
>
> (to author, 2007)

Corbin, according to this source, reportedly told Robinson, 'That's my gig. I don't care where Mangold is.' So, despite Tom Mangold being within a short drive of New York and having

good US intelligence contacts, Robinson used Corbin on the programme with a promise that Mangold would be given an opportunity to report on events at a later date.

The World's Most Wanted

Consequently, as a result of this alleged 'compromise' the first *Panorama* that covered the 9-11 attacks was 'The World's Most Wanted' transmitted five days later on 16 September, which was presented by Jane Corbin. Corbin's polished and informative report, which represented a major improvement on much of the highly repetitive news coverage, is structured by interleaving an account of Bin Laden's life and career as a 'terrorist mastermind', using footage from her previous investigations going back to 1998 with new images of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and interviews with survivors. The opening shot, played over Corbin's voiceover (below), is stock aerial film of the Twin Towers which cuts to a rapidly edited sequence of shots of the passenger jet crashing into the south tower filmed from different angles. This is followed by news footage of President Bush:

> JANE CORBIN: It stood proud on the New York skyline, a symbol of the American dream. On Tuesday it was shattered. Within hours suspicion fell on one man.
>
> PRESIDENT BUSH: There is no question he is what we would call a prime suspect.
>
> CORBIN: The prime suspect is Osama Bin Laden whose murderous campaign against America had already earned him a place on the FBI's most wanted list.

The camera pulls out from a grainy black and white still image of Osama's face on an FBI 'most wanted' notice (echoing the title of the programme). The crude black and white photocopy closely resembles a wanted poster from a western - a stereotypical American image perhaps deliberately selected to accompany the blunt message delivered in George W. Bush's Texan drawl:

> BUSH: And if he thinks he can hide and run from the United States or allies, he will be sorely mistaken.

Corbin's concluding line to the introduction plays over a close up of a colour photographic portrait of Bin Laden which zooms in to an extreme close up of his eyes:

> CORBIN: Tonight *Panorama* investigates the terrorist, Osama Bin Laden, the world's most wanted man.

Significantly, Corbin departs here from the BBC's editorial guidelines to avoid the term 'terrorist' (BBC 2012) a label which she employs five more times in the programme to refer to Osama Bin Laden and his associates. While this designation would seem to be uncontroversial given Bin Laden's later praise for the crimes against humanity of 11 September, it does, nevertheless, threaten to compromise the BBC's ability to report 'impartially'. As Moeller notes:

> After September 11, it was a short step for many media to first source the terms of the 'war on terror' and 'terrorist' to the president and other administration

> officials, then as the term slipped into common usage to begin applying the terms to the Bush foreign policy goals without attribution.
>
> (2004: 69)

The use of the term ‘terrorist’, (rather than, say, ‘criminal’) is not in itself remarkable given the scale of civilian casualties on 11 September. Nevertheless, its use sets a precedent and establishes a frame of reporting that is not easily relinquished and is also congruent with more hawkish prescriptions of how the international community should respond to the events. Similarly, dramatic visual devices punctuating the narrative emphasize Bin Laden’s sinister and all-powerful role. In one sequence the camera pans slowly across a pile of studio-lit concrete rubble beneath which a television broadcasts a slow motion sequence of Bin Laden addressing the camera. While the shot is an effectively disorientating and powerful visual statement its constructed nature raises awkward questions about the extent to which current affairs programmes should contrive such images. Do such interventions add anything to our knowledge of the attacks or could the time spent filming them have been better spent?

The report’s main focus of inquiry implicating Bin Laden in the 9-11 attacks and pointing to a looming US strike against Al-Qaida bases in Afghanistan was in line with much of the mainstream news reporting. By framing the story in terms of a war against the fanatics who had committed such a crime, other questions remained unanswered or even unasked. What were the origins of Al-Qaida and why were they at war with America? What were the business links between the Bin Laden and Bush family and how was Osama Bin Laden connected to the CIA? How had such a colossal failure of intelligence and breach of security occurred on 11 September? It transpired that the US government had received repeated warnings of impending attacks on Washington and New York from a number of countries.

American intelligence had also been made aware since 1995 that planes might be used in suicide attacks following threats to the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia and the Pentagon (*Washington Post*, 23/9/01), yet urgent recommendations to improve security of airports in the US and particularly flight cockpits had been repeatedly ignored (Ridgeway, 2010).

In fact, *Panorama*'s first investigation of the attacks 'The World's Most Wanted' does deal with some of these issues, albeit rather briefly. Using interview material and footage assembled for a 1998 report Corbin looks at Bin Laden's formative experiences in the US-backed war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and how the 1991 Gulf War had been a turning point in his attitude to America. Over shots of praying Muslims in Mecca and US tanks in the Saudi desert Corbin explains:

> CORBIN: Osama Bin Laden's view of America hardened into hatred when the Gulf War brought US troops into Saudi Arabia in 1991. Bin Laden was now living back in Saudi. His homeland was the site of Islam's holy places. Angry already at America's support of Israel, Bin Laden's fury boiled over at what he saw as occupation by the infidel.

After tracing Bin Laden's involvement in the previous bombing of the World Trade Centre Corbin's report also suggests, revealingly, that US intelligence agencies had been aware for years of the possibility of an Al-Qaida attack using passenger aircraft:

> CORBIN: A year after the World Trade Centre attack, the full scale of the wider terror campaign was revealed, and another member of the network was arrested in

the Philippines. Abdul Hakim Murad was a trained pilot and his confession to the local intelligence services reveals the gang had planned to blow up 11 US airliners in midair, and Murad had discussed with [1993 World Trade Centre bomber Ramsey] Yousef the possibility of crashing a plane into an American Government building.

(Voiceover reading from typed document:) "He will board any American commercial aircraft pretending to be an ordinary passenger. He will hijack said aircraft, control its cockpit and dive it at the CIA headquarters. It is simply a suicidal mission that he is willing to execute."

Rather than ask why the government had not forced airlines to reinforce their cockpit doors against such attacks as repeatedly recommended in security reviews, the report cuts back again to the spectacle of the south tower being hit before moving on to the gruesome testimony of an eyewitness:

NEW YORK CITY

09.03 Hijackers crash second plane

MIKE McMAHON (Paramedic)

[...] just before that plane hit the building there was a deafening silence. It was like a split second of quiet and then the explosion. We're basically under the building so stuff is raining down on us. At first we thought it was parts of the building but it was people, literally people falling all around us. Like I said, you can't imagine what it was like.

The visceral terror of the 9-11 attacks are returned to after each exposé of Bin Laden's past crimes, including a sequence on the 1998 bombings of the American Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Following the revelation of his involvement in earlier atrocities the episode returns to more film of the collapsing towers not previous seen in news reports. The spectacular nature of these shots in reinforced by the eyewitness testimony:

> NEW YORK CITY
>
> 10.29 North tower collapses
>
> (footage of collapse - huge, dense plume of smoke billows up and outward, and continues relentlessly rolling outward, overtaking and enveloping people as they flee the scene)
>
> MIKE McMAHON (Paramedic)
>
> It's just like you take the scariest movie you could ever think of. You look at these *Die Hard* movies... and silly movies, it's just unimaginable, unimaginable.

This theme of the nightmarish, cinematic quality of 9-11 is picked up some months later in *Panorama's* 'September 11th: A Warning From Hollywood' and is discussed below. What emerges from a study of 'The World's Most Wanted' is a sense of how structuring the investigation in this dramatic and, it should be said, highly effective manner (intercutting from previous investigations to scenes from the attack) cuts off important lines of inquiry at vital moments. Issues not explored elsewhere in the news *are* opened only to be closed again as the film returns to the dreadful *spectacle* of 9-11 and tales of individual heroism and tragedy.

It is significant that the possible 'culpability' of the US government in allowing the 9-11 attacks was the subject of much (detailed, if sometimes wild) speculation in several books and on hundreds of websites, but almost never on television. The question of how to prevent future attacks was also limited to one of 'winning a war' - a government policy that was unquestioned from the start. The possibility of using legal means to bring the terrorists behind the attack to trial, as had happened with the bombing of the FBI building in Oklahoma, is not discussed in any of the *Panorama* episodes examined here. This despite unanimous international agreement that the attacks were 'a crime against humanity' and universal readiness to use the UN and bodies such as the International Court of Human Justice to bring the perpetrators to justice and take effective co-ordinated action to prevent further outrages. The US's unwillingness to recognize the jurisdiction of the International Court of Human Justice and its disdain for multilateral co-operation on a whole range of issues may account, in part, for its reluctance to follow this route. Nevertheless, *Panorama*'s decision not to explore or consider this option in line with mainstream British and American media coverage of the US response to 9-11.an omission with grave consequences for the democratic debate about how best to respond to the attacks.

There was virtually no broadcast discussion of alternative agendas to those suggested by the US government and secret services (Kellner, 2003). Yet these very agencies had spent four billion dollars in 'Operation Cyclone' helping arm and train Bin Laden and other Muslim fundamentalists in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (see Holmes and Dixon, 2001). For some commentators, such as John Pilger (2002), the CIA - through intermediaries in the Pakistani Secret Service (ISI) and with the financial backing of Saudi Arabia had effectively created the Islamist war party that attacked America.

Reporting the Anthrax Attacks

While Jane Corbin's first report raises some concerns about how far a 'flagship' current affairs series could go in answering serious questions about the 9-11 attacks, Tom Mangold's report on the anthrax attacks of September and October 2001 raises far more serious and troubling questions about *Panorama*'s reliance on intelligence sources. A key aspect of the framing of what came to be known as the 'War on Terror' was the use of fear (see Mythen and Walklate, 2006; Oborne, 2006). This was evident from the *Panorama* report 'Bin Laden's Biological Threat' which made a link between the Iraq regime and Al-Qaeda operatives, a link later shown to be completely false and possibly a result of deliberate 'misinformation'. Immediately following the ten second *Panorama* signature tune and revolving globe graphic, Tom Mangold's voice-over sets the scene against low synthesiser notes and an eerie high-pitched electronic warble familiar from the horror film genre:

> 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.

This chilling introduction is accompanied by black-and-white library footage of viruses attacking a cell under a microscope and half-lit studio shots of a man in a leather Medieval plague doctor's mask. This cuts quickly to a close-up of the eyes of the mask lit so that they appear empty, which then cuts to an identically-framed close-up and then medium-shot of a man in contemporary biological warfare suit. The low, insistent synthesiser notes continue as the images dissolve to sheer white. From white there is another dissolve to the image of a

screen in a mocked-up laboratory on which television footage of Tony Blair giving a speech to Parliament is projected - with the subtitle '14th September 2001':

> TONY BLAIR: [Speaking in the House] We know that they would, if they could, go further and use chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons of mass destruction. We know also that there are groups or people, occasionally states, who will trade the technology and capability of such weapons.

During this speech the camera cuts from the screen framed by artfully-lit test tubes to a close up of Tony Blair's face before cutting to another establishing shot of the screen and lab. The camera tilts down towards an underlit glass laboratory preparation area on which more test tubes, beakers of blue and yellow liquids and other chemistry paraphernalia is arranged and against which rests the same colour photograph of Osama Bin Laden used in the introduction to 'The World's Most Wanted'. The voice-over during this sequence offers the possibility that such frightening images will be exposed as government 'scare-mongering':

> MANGOLD: Could there really be a biological attack by Al-Qaeda terrorists and are we ready for it if there is? Tonight *Panorama* sorts facts from fears and investigates the reality behind six weeks that have shaken the world.

In John Corner's typography of documentary discourse, the opening shots described above could be characterised as in an 'associative mode' as the 'pro-filmic' shot types and editing rely on a set of horror and science-thriller (cf. *The Satan Bug* 1965; *The Andromeda Strain* 1971; *Outbreak* 1995) generic conventions and clichés. As Corner notes, such image references 'may be primarily aesthetic rather than cognitive' aiming to produce an effect on

the audience and not necessarily ‘increased informational yield’ (1996: 29). After this attention-grabbing introduction the programme switches into a less ‘pro-filmic’ ‘illustrative mode’ employing a series of clips from recent news footage to accompany the emerging argument. It starts with a medium shot of George Bush answering journalists’ questions, before moving to rapidly-cut images of postal workers in face masks and investigators removing sacks of post from US government buildings in biological-weapons suits and spraying each other to remove possible anthrax contamination:

> 24 October 2001
>
> GEORGE BUSH: First of all I don't have anthrax.
>
> MANGOLD: The man in the White House may have escaped but three people have been murdered by proxy, another ten infected and thirty-two more exposed. Letters laced with anthrax have closed Congress and sent the US mail service into chaos. The perpetrators remain free. No link has been established to Bin Laden but there is growing evidence in the West of his involvement in the new horror of biological terrorism.

Before we come to the charges made against Iraq in the programme, what subsequently emerged as the background to the events portrayed in these clips is worth dwelling on here as it reveals important omissions never addressed in subsequent *Panorama* investigations into WMD. Not mentioned in Mangold’s report is that the attacks began only one week after 11 September with anthrax letters mailed to the NBC television network and New York Post, but which were not reported until more than two weeks after they were opened (see Rosenberg, 2002). It was, according to Rosenberg’s account, a further week after the death of the first

victim before reports on NBC and elsewhere acknowledged that letters had been received by media organisations containing anthrax spores and threats of more attacks. By this time more deadly letters had already been posted to Democrat Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (*New York Times*, 2009). From the middle of October to the end of November four or five letters bearing the same handwriting and containing lethal, 'weaponised' anthrax were sent, resulting in eighteen cases of infection and five deaths. Thirty-three thousand Americans were administered anthrax vaccines or other drugs (Kasuya *et al*. 2005), many of which had severe side effects and the postal service was forced to spend billions of dollars to protect their workers from possible attacks (*Baltimore Sun*, 2002).

However, almost as soon as it became clear that the anthrax had originated in an American US germ warfare laboratory (see *New York Times*, 2009), media interest in the case appeared to 'fizzle out' (see Monbiot, 2002). Television networks and newspapers that had been direct victims of the attacks seemed unperturbed two months later that those responsible for the deaths of five people, an assassination attempt on the leadership of the Democratic party and the temporary shut down of parts of the US government and postal services were still at large. No suspects were ever apprehended and put on trial, as Mangold notes, and yet neither *Panorama* nor any other British or US teams of investigative reporters looked at the bungled FBI investigation or the possibility that the same killers might strike again. It seems the media were unwilling to follow the trail of the killer into what Tom Engelhardt describes as 'the darkest heartlands of US bioweapons research, and so into the heart of Cold War military R&D from which so much has emerged to endanger our world' (Engelhardt, 2002: 1).

Later in ‘Bin Laden’s Biological Threat’ evidence is brought forward of meetings between the 9-11 plotter and Iraqi officials that has subsequently been denied by the CIA and thoroughly discredited, but in 2001 it is presented in the report as fact. Sitting at Prague airport Tom Mangold addresses the camera in ‘evidential mode’ (see Corner 1996) sitting in the location the 9-11 plotter and an Iraqi intelligence officer are supposed to have met:

> 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.

Mangold has admitted that the information about the meeting was supplied by a single (named) source from Czech intelligence but that reports of the supposedly photographed meeting could not be corroborated further at the time. In our interview Mangold describes the

information given by his source as ‘totally untrue’. Queried if he *knew* it was untrue, he replies, ‘Yes, I was totally lied to’. It was then put to Mangold that: ‘If it was a lie, that suggests it was disinformation’ to which he answers, ‘Yes, it was.’ When asked why Czech intelligence was feeding false information to him, he replies: ‘I have no idea what the broader plan there was, but it was complete… [pause] …it was all bollocks. Complete nonsense’ (interviewed 4 September 2009). Former CIA director Jim Woolsey’s carefully worded assessment of this information for the *Panorama* episode suggests American intelligence endorsement and possible involvement in ‘planting’ the story, but Mangold was unwilling to speculate in this area(‘It was some time ago and I can’t remember’) and so without further evidence the precise background to this investigation remains unclear. The episode is a reminder of allegations made against the British and American governments by Scott Ritter and others of a long running deliberate policy of disinformation entitled ‘Operation Mass Appeal’ (see BBC, 2003).

Perhaps more importantly in terms of the legal requirement on current affairs programme makers to provide ‘impartial’, ‘balanced’ and factually correct information while ‘Bin Laden’s Biological Threat’ 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. In fact, *Panorama* episodes broadcast in 2003 did acknowledge such links to be improbable and pointed to possible splits over this issue between British and American governments, or at least disagreement over the evidence.

A Warning from Hollywood

The third programme dealing with the 9-11 attacks was 'September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood' broadcast on the 24 March 2002 and presented by Steve Bradshaw. This programme followed up on the widely remarked sense, articulated by Zizek (see above) that the 9-11 attacks had been prefigured by a series of Hollywood action films.

> BRADSHAW: The feeling that September 11th was like watching a movie was shared across the world, nowhere more strongly than in the hills above LA Harbour in Hollywood itself.
>
> STEVE DE SOUZA (Screenwriter - Die Hard I & II)
> Well it did look like a movie. It looked like a movie poster. It looked like one of my movie posters.

The investigation examines how Hollywood had been closer to predicting the 9-11 attacks than 'any intelligence reports'.

> BRADSHAW: For [former CIA case officer] Baer, the movies of the 90s had captured the threat from terrorism more accurately than his bosses in Washington.
> BAER: The way I look at Hollywood is it has more imagination than the government. The government is made up of bureaucrats. Hollywood takes the facts as they see them in life and turns them into these scenarios that are very close to reality in a certain sense. The only difference between Hollywood and reality is Hollywood has a happy ending, and there's a hero.

As Corbin's report six months earlier made clear – intelligence reports *did* note plans by Al-Qaida operatives to hijack jetliners on suicide missions and fly them into government

buildings. ‘September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood’ suggests that the problem lay with intelligence chiefs who did not heed warnings from their more junior advisors. Remarkably, one former member of the National Security Council argues that she became involved in the making of a Hollywood film as a way of her alerting the President to potential terrorist threats:

> JESSICA STERN (National Security Council, 1994-95)
> There was a group of us who felt that this was an urgent threat, that people weren't paying enough attention to. Indeed we were determined to get the President to pay more attention to this issue.
>
> BRADSHAW: Stern was approached by producers making a film called *The Peacemaker* about terrorists stealing an atomic bomb from Russia's ill-guarded stock pile, its so-called 'loose nukes.' They wanted to turn Miss Stern into the lead character. Stern agreed, believing a movie might have more impact on the White House than another memo.

While details of how Jessica Stern was played by Nicole Kidman in *The Peacemaker* are interesting it could be argued that the more serious charge of why warnings from intelligence operatives following the 9-11 plotters were repeatedly ignored is not examined here or elsewhere in *Panorama* investigations. Neither was the wider issue of how US foreign policy, notably its support for Israel, sanctions against Iraq and perceived anti-Islamic bias had radicalised a generation of Arabs to the extent that terrorist attacks were almost inevitable (see McQueen, 2000; Hourani, 2002). Were those working on the three *Panorama* teams

covering 9-11 wary of raising these fundamental question due to fears of offending and losing the cooperation of senior intelligence, military and political figures? To the programme's credit many of the details revealed in *September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood* are intriguing, such as the extent to which Hollywood films were based on the input and collaboration of the intelligence community or made with military support - conditional on script approval. There is also the extraordinary confirmation that Pentagon employed Hollywood script writers to brainstorm what the terrorists of Al-Qaeda might do next:

> BRADSHAW: […] At last the Pentagon seemed to be admitting it had to think more like Hollywood, and so the so-called 9-11 or September 11th Group was set up.

The programme is visually powerful with aerial shots of American cities, tightly framed tracking shots of skyscrapers and menacing zooms on aircraft flying across urban landscapes. These cumulatively produce a paranoid atmosphere underscored by moody, threatening music which intersperses the various interviews. 'September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood' is a well made and, at times, thoughtful piece on how fictional representations of terrorist attacks were uncannily prescient of the 11 September atrocities. However, given the relatively limited number of *Panorama* investigations into the circumstances around the greatest security failure in America's history, it represents another missed opportunity.

The Hunt for Bin Laden

Ten months after the 9-11 attacks *Panorama* follows a group of American infantrymen as they locate and destroy Al-Qaida caves in Afghanistan in 'The Hunt for Bin Laden' . While not directly about the 9-11 attacks the film does assess progress in the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan. In her introduction Corbin explains how 'Charlie Company have come thousands of miles to get even'. She interviews soldiers, asking them about their letters from wives and girlfriends so we get to know them as individuals. Corbin then sums up the objectives of the mission before going on to judge its effectiveness:

> CORBIN: The men of C. Company are fighting in someone else's land to destroy a terror network that threatens the American dream. I came to Bagram to witness a superpower turn its military might against a group of fanatics who'd hijacked a failed state – Afghanistan. The base already bears the scars of the earlier ill-fated Soviet intervention. I wanted to see who was winning this new kind of war to make the world a safer place after the September events that undermined all our certainties.

Corbin does not appear to be quoting any politician when she states that the war is 'to make the world a safer place' and there is little historical perspective beyond a brief reference to the 'earlier ill-fated Soviet intervention'. A current affairs programme that takes a 'longer view' could have discussed, or at least mentioned, the three previous occupations of Afghanistan by British forces and how they ended ignominiously (see Bearden, 2001; Rashid, 2002). Nevertheless, the programme does show that all is not going well in the fight against Al Qaeda. It is revealed, for example, that Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda fighters slipped away

from Tora Bora with local Mujahedin help whilst US forces stood close by. It is also illustrates how effective the Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters could be in battle with US and British forces. Corbin certainly does not spare the blushes of a British marine brigadier who had arrived in the region with a confident fanfare:

> CORBIN: The hapless brigadier found himself in the crossfire between Downing Street and the press, accused of having hyped expectations of what the marines would achieve.
>
> But how many Al Qaeda have you captured?
>
> Brigadier ROGER LANE (Commander, British Forces)
> We haven't captured any al Qaeda but I would…
>
> CORBIN: And how many have you killed? [...]
>
> LANE: We haven't killed any.

What is noticeable looking back over *Panorama* investigations over a decade or more is an increasing use of non-diegetic sound effects and music as well as more 'cinematic' visual direction. Holland (2006) has explored the historic tension between the visual and the spoken word in current affairs television and the fear than journalistic values can be sacrificed if visual values are allowed to predominate. She argues that 'television journalism gains its particular strengths from an interplay between the flow of images of varying power and intensity and the construction of verbal sense that plays against that imagery' (2006: 93).

However, she also demonstrates that doubts and worries about the visual, particularly its emotive qualities can be shown to be justified. In *The Hunt for Bin* Laden there are several sequences that underscore these concerns. In one sequence we are taken through an exotic landscape of mountains and remote dusty tracks in which camels and goats are led by young herders. To the strains of a mournful, wailing music we are then positioned inside a cave in which torch lights appear to be shone from the entrance lighting up motes of dust. Foley sounds of dripping water echoing in the cave and a taught percussive drum effect as might be found in a thriller accompany the extended shot in which the torches are revealed to be small mirrors held by Afghan boys reflecting powerful rays of sunlight into the cave. One of these rays illuminates a dark area on the cave floor in which the face of Osama Bin Laden is superimposed, stretched and played in slow motion. The sequence is intercut with a grainy television image of President Bush and an interview with Senator Bob Graham in his office with the blinds drawn behind him:

> GRAHAM: He's wealthy, he's charismatic and smart, and so by eliminating him you have dealt a crippling blow to al Qaeda.
>
> CORBIN: So eliminating him must be the aim.
>
> GRAHAM: He is the personification of al Qaeda and many people will not feel that there has been closure to this war unless he is brought to justice dead or alive.

There is a strong suspicion in this sequence that such heavily worked images threaten *Panorama*'s claims to authentic reportage. The complicated studio reconstruction in 'Bin Laden's Biological Threat' of a medieval plague doctor's mask which metamorphizes into a

modern biological weapons mask intercut with a televised speech by Tony Blair projected on a screen in a laboratory, plays a similar, apparently innocent, illustrative role. However, the concern here is that the *emotive* power of the images contains powerful ideological meanings that reinforce rather than challenge many of the assumptions upon which the 'War on Terror' was launched.

Conclusion

The popularity of many websites purporting to explain 'the truth' behind 9-11 suggests public interest in a proper investigation of the attacks was very high and remained so for many years. Yet *Panorama* failed to produce a series of detailed and far-reaching investigations that might have answered many of the fundamental questions raised by the events of September 2001. The reluctance of *Panorama* and other news and current affairs programmes to enquire beyond official narratives may have contributed to the circulation of persistent misconceptions, such as Iraqi links to Al-Qaeda, as well as the wilder and more ludicrous theories about 9-11 . *Panorama* did not challenge the US intelligence agencies' record or properly assess the US government's controversial policy prescriptions. Instead the BBC's flagship current affairs series fell back on recycling old reports ('The World's Most Wanted'), exploring stale truisms about the analogies with Hollywood films ('September 11th: A Warning from Hollywood') and broadcasting intelligence disinformation ('Bin Laden's Biological Threat') that increased the likelihood of a war against Iraq. It also employed emotive visual imagery and audio soundscapes that were highly constructed and liable to reinforce and support the push for military solutions.

While aspects of these four programmes are valuable, taken as a whole, *Panorama*'s response to 9-11 did little to take those in power to account for their policy and security failings. The fact that *Panorama*'s Editor ordered an experienced reporter, Tom Mangold, who was on the spot, *not* to investigate the attacks, is symptomatic of a failure of nerve in *Panorama*'s coverage of 9-11. The BBC's approach to current affairs, in this instance, can be characterised as timid and its reliance on official, 'institutionally endowed' sources (see McQueen 2008) hobbled the programme. In conclusion, unless the series is prepared to offend authority in its quest for answers to troubling and deep seated questions as it has done, on occasion, in previous decades (see McQueen 2010) then it is possible that the programme will be regarded as adding nothing significant to existing news coverage. For *Panorama* to overcome this threat of perceived irrelevance future investigations must ask the kind of awkward and discomforting questions that are mostly avoided in the programmes examined here. If it does not the programme may pass without mourning from the schedules.

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