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# Politics and the Media: A Crisis of Trust?\*

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2003 seemed to confirm the suspicions of a public already dubious about government communication. Despite the intense public relations offensive before the Iraq war in March, the public were sceptical of Iraq's threat, and the revelations of the Hutton Inquiry showed they had every right to be. The Inquiry, one of the key events of the year, raised serious doubts about the accuracy of many of the government's claims on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The media's credibility did not fare much better. Although the news media provided a window on the world of politics, the content which the public received was subject to widespread criticism. The press, especially certain tabloid newspapers, was seen as largely out of touch with its readers in the lead up to the war. The Hutton Inquiry raised a series of questions about the accuracy of BBC news output. 24-hour news coverage of the Iraq war, although live, showed the extent to which there was tension between speed and accuracy in the ratings-driven news environment.

This article examines the tactics employed by Downing Street to persuade the public of the need for war. Using evidence from opinion polls, it assesses the public response to those efforts. It looks at the coverage of the 'war on Saddam' by the British media, the military and government news-management operation, and the public's viewing habits. It looks at the postwar feud between Downing Street and the BBC over broadcast claims that Downing Street had 'sexed-up' an intelligence dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to win public support for armed intervention. It looks at the subsequent inquiry by Lord Hutton into the suicide of civil servant David Kelly and its impact on the Prime Minister and the Downing Street media operation. It asks whether the events of this year have served to further undermine the already fragile trust in government communication.

## *The propaganda battle*

January saw a continuation of the Prime Minister's and his government's public relations offensive to try to persuade a largely sceptical public of the need to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction by force, rather than give the UN inspectors more time to find them. A key element in this campaign was intelligence information used by Downing Street to reinforce its argument that Saddam's weapons were a 'clear and present danger'. In February, Downing Street posted a second

dossier of information about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction on the Internet—the first having been released in September 2002. The Prime Minister also took his argument to the country, engaging in a round of television and radio interviews. In cooperation with ITN, he made the case for armed intervention to a group of voters sceptical of the need for force. To get his argument across to a wider audience, news interviews were combined with the targeting of non-news and current affairs outlets. For instance, at the beginning of March, Tony Blair appeared on an hour-long show on MTV to discuss Iraq with a group of young people from Europe and the Middle East.

In their attempt to persuade the public, the Prime Minister and the government were not only confronted by opponents in their own party, but also by a well organised and media aware Stop the War Coalition. The latter organised a series of high profile demonstrations, one in February attracting an estimated million protestors. The anti-war campaign was boosted when so-called intelligence material in the second dossier was found to have been plagiarised from a 12 year-old PhD thesis.

Although a section of the press was hostile to the need for military force, the majority of papers were largely supportive of the Prime Minister's stance. Newspaper proprietors Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black were the most vocal in advocating the need to remove Saddam. Not surprisingly, their papers zealously championed the Blair–Bush position. Indeed, the majority of national newspapers supported intervention despite the fact that many of their readers and the public at large remained sceptical. Six daily papers supported the need for invasion: *The Times*, *Sun*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Star*—a combined circulation of 9.4 million. The *Sun* was particularly vehement in its criticisms of the opponents of the war. It launched a vitriolic attack on President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder and their opposition to an invasion. In a stunt, the *Sun* printed a special edition in French, distributing two thousand copies in France with the headline 'Chirac is a worm'. Three papers opposed any war, the *Mirror*, *Guardian* and *Independent*—a combined circulation of 2.7 million. The circulation balance in favour of the conflict was largely the same amongst the ten Sunday papers—10.3 to 3 million.

Over the period of January to early March, despite the spin from Downing Street and pro-war coverage in the majority of newspapers, public opinion remained largely opposed to British military intervention and was not persuaded by the arguments of those in favour of force. However, a MORI opinion poll for the *Sun* in March highlighted that public opposition to military intervention was not strong. While 63% opposed a war, this fell to 17% if the conflict had UN backing and proof was provided that Iraq was trying to hide weapons of mass destruction ([www.epolitics.co.uk](http://www.epolitics.co.uk)). Without either condition satisfied, on the eve of the invasion the majority of the public opposed intervention, an ICM poll for the *Guardian* showed that 44% of those sampled

opposed military action to remove Saddam Hussein, with 38% supporting it.

If Tony Blair's spin offensive had any impact, it was counter-productive in terms of his approval rating, which fell during this period. A MORI poll for the *Sun* found that the number of people who approved of the way he was handling the Iraq crisis fell from 36% to 30% ([www.epolitics.co.uk](http://www.epolitics.co.uk)), while an ICM poll for the *Guardian* found that his personal approval rating had hit a low of minus 20 in March.

### *Watching the war*

The public were provided with hours of video footage, acres of newsprint and thousands of internet pages during the conflict. At the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March, news audiences soared. The main terrestrial news bulletins attracted the highest viewing figures.<sup>1</sup> The audiences for the main evening news on BBC One and ITV averaged around 6 and 5 million respectively, hitting heights of around 7 to 8 m when key events occurred. Audiences for more in-depth bulletins *Newsnight* and *Channel Four News* increased too, as did the audience for breakfast news. There was also a strong appetite for special programmes on the conflict, shows such as *Tonight* with Trevor McDonald achieving a higher than usual audience of 4.6 million—despite being in head-to-head competition with *East Enders*.

While the majority of the public gained their information from the main terrestrial channels, one marked difference from the earlier Gulf War was that 40% of British households had access to three or more 24-hour news channels. The numbers watching the main 24-hour news channels during the conflict swelled, particularly when news was breaking. *Sky News* was the most watched of the news channels. It was seen by an audience averaging well over half-a-million, peaking at 1.23 m during the 'shock and awe' bombardment at the beginning of the conflict—its second largest audience ever. *BBC News 24* over the same period attracted audiences of a quarter of a million on average, rising to a peak of 384,000 during the first bombing of Baghdad, and the ITN news channel gained an audience high of 146,000. Although its exposure was still somewhat limited in the UK, *Al-Jazeera*, the Arabic-based 24-hour news channel, was available for the first time to satellite subscribers. In the UK, 87% of Arabic households had access to the station through the BSkyB satellite network, and the channel claimed to have gained a further 4 million new subscribers in Europe during the conflict.

There was a new interactive dimension to the public's viewing experience. If Vietnam was hailed as the first television war and the Gulf War as the first live television war, then the Iraq War was surely the first interactive multi-media conflict. Digital satellite television channels and the Internet allowed the British public not only to witness events 24-hours a day but also shape their own viewing experience. The viewers of digital television channels could use the interactive buttons on their

remote control to switch between reports from various locations. The 46% of households with access to the internet could have visited hundreds of news websites and chat rooms to discuss the war. The main news organisation websites saw an increase in visitors. Traffic levels at the *Guardian's* website increased by nearly 30% in the first weeks of the war, while levels increased by 40% at *BBC News*. British audiences could also visit *english.al-jazeera.net*, the Arabic news channel's English website which claimed to provide a 'spin free perspective' on the war for the non-Arabic-speaking world. There was also an increase in the number of people accessing 'alternative' sites for news, sites such as *instapundit.com*, *blogsofwar*, *iraqbodycount.net* all reported an increase in visits. The monthly UK-based internet newspaper *Muslim News* reported that it was receiving an extra 2,000 to 3,000 hits a day. The public could also gain information and express its views on events through mobile phones. All the major news networks offered a text messaging service, providing continuous updates on events on the battlefield.

Even with 24-hour interactive news, national newspapers still remained an important source of information and comment for the public, but they did not benefit from the dramatic increases in circulation of previous conflicts. The total circulation of daily papers rose slightly in the first days of the war. The broadsheet papers in particular saw their sales rise in this initial period—*The Times* by 5%, *Independent* by 9% and *Guardian* by 6%. However, only the *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* recorded increased circulation over the whole period. After the start of the conflict tabloid readers grew bored with war coverage, and those tabloids which 'splashed' the war least seemed to benefit most from increased sales. The *Star's* circulation rose and as did the *Sun's* but the *Daily Mail*, with its in-depth coverage, saw its sales fall by 40,000 compared to February, while the *Mirror's* fell by 45,000, dropping below two million for the first time in seventy years.

Given the extent of coverage, it is not surprising that 28% of respondents in a MORI survey for *The Times*, said they spent more time consuming news output than before the war started. The same poll found while there was not much 'shock and awe' at the coverage, the public did take a greater interest in news output, with 85% of respondents saying they were 'interested' or 'very interested' in the increased news coverage. Overall, terrestrial television news remained the most popular source of information on the war. When respondents were asked by MORI which of the television news outlets they had watched most, 38% said news on BBC1, 13% news on ITV, 4% Channel Four, 1% BBC 2 and Channel 5. In comparison, 11% said they had watched Sky News, 10% BBC News 24, 1% CNN. While the public was largely gripped by the coverage, what sort of coverage were they exposed to?

*Media coverage of the conflict: more speed than accuracy*

An estimated 2,500 to 3,000 media staff from around the world were involved in reporting Operation Iraqi Freedom, more than in any previous conflict.<sup>2</sup> Exact numbers are hard to verify, but there were around 800 'embedded' with coalition forces—i.e. accompanying frontline units (660 with the Americans and 150 with the British), a further 350 journalists in Kuwait, 300 in Baghdad, and 900 in Northern Iraq.<sup>3</sup> The British media spent millions of pounds covering the conflict, ITN's outlay was an estimated £5 m and BBC News' nearly £10m.

In the earlier Gulf War, 24-hour news was in its infancy, in March every twist and turn of the conflict was covered live by numerous news channels. Viewers of 24-hour news were hit by a blizzard of largely unprocessed real-time information. News anchors in the Kuwait desert juxtaposed reports from journalists 'embedded' with troops on the frontline, on ships in the Gulf or in many other locations such as Central Command Qatar, Baghdad or Northern Iraq. The ultimate in unprocessed information was 'Reuters Raw Video': available to subscribers online, it provided real-time unedited video footage of events as they unfolded.

While there were more outlets providing instant coverage, it seemed, however, to be at the price of accuracy. In all wars it is difficult to get an instant and complete picture of developments on the battlefield, as the information received is often fragmented and/or deliberately distorted. However, modern news organisations face competitive pressures to be first on the air, which is especially true with 24-hour news stations. Going into the conflict, Sky News claimed it was 10–15 minutes ahead of the BBC News 24 when it came to reporting 'big' news events such as September 11. During the war, the desire to be first with the news often led to 'cut-and-paste' coverage of the conflict—the military's claims relayed instantly without verification by journalists. One example involved the battle for the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr, which was reported captured a total of nine times before it actually fell to coalition forces after five days. The BBC's Director of News suggested 'the difficulty with a 24-hour news channel is you're trying to work out live on air what's true and what isn't. His deputy admitted 'mistakes were made on a daily basis' but suggested the BBC 'had tried to attribute and qualify claims for the audience' (*Guardian*, 28.3.03). However, the extent to which the BBC subsequently amended the military's false claims was limited. Research at Stirling University has shown there were very few instances where the BBC actually said 'and not as the BBC wrongly stated earlier' or 'and not as the military told us yesterday'. Stories were amended, but earlier incorrect claims left unacknowledged. While reports were prefaced with qualifications, these were at best intermittent and largely absent in reports from journalists 'embedded' with coalition forces.

The broadcasters were also cautious in their treatment of opposition to the conflict. A leaked confidential memo urged senior BBC managers 'to be careful about broadcasting dissent'. The BBC Director of News suggested this was due to the 'degree of political consensus within Westminster, with the Conservatives supporting government policy and the Liberal Democrats, supporting UK. This caution spilt over into self-censorship, with the BBC and ITN refraining from showing explicit pictures of civilian or military casualties that were screened by *Al-Jazeera*. The controller of ITV news suggested that he 'would never put these images on. The news broadcasters were also resistant to carrying pictures from *Al-Jazeera* of the captive coalition military personnel. The main channels often delayed screening such images or masked soldiers' faces, claiming sensitivity to their families.

While the news channels may have been reluctant to report British casualties, the period saw often-graphic reports about the innocent victims of the conflict, a familiar feature of war reporting. Television provided plenty of illustrations of the child victims of coalition bombing, such as the 12-year-old boy Ali Ismail Abbas, who had lost his family and his arms. Ali's plight and the campaign to get him and other children medical care in the West dominated many of the news headlines during April. Even the *Sun* ran its own campaign to raise money for the child victims of the conflict, with the strap line 'give a quid for an Iraqi kid'.

In the age of 24-hour news, the press was at a relative disadvantage, although all papers increased the number of editions printed daily in the first week of conflict in order to capture the latest events in a fast-moving war. The *Daily Mail*, for instance, increased its editions from two to nine a day. The broadsheets, without the continual deadlines of 24-hour news, provided often insightful coverage of events, while the tabloids coverage, with the notable exception of the *Mirror*, was predictably jingoistic. Those papers opposed to the war maintained their antiwar line throughout its duration. The *Independent's* columnist Robert Fiske was particularly critical about of coalition's claims about civilian casualties. Unlike its rival tabloids, the *Mirror* sought to provide more serious coverage of the conflict. This attempt at repositioning could be seen in its employment of the sacked ABC journalist Peter Arnett and other 'heavyweight' columnists such as John Pilger, Christopher Hitchens and Jonathan Freedland.

While the public was able to witness events live as they unfolded in different locations, the significance of what they saw and the claims made by the military about those events could frequently not be assessed. The instantaneous nature of news meant that verification of claims was often delayed until days afterwards, by which time the news had moved on to a new story.

### *The media management operation*

The media management operation was planned as carefully as the invasion itself. It was coordinated from a million-dollar media centre at

Central Command in Doha, Qatar, staffed by a team of military and civilian information officers. Their goal was to provide the world's news media with the latest information on the conflict. Throughout the war, the media were addressed on the coalition's progress by a series of military personnel, including Generals Franks and Abizaid, as well as Air Marshall Brian Burridge, the British commander in the Gulf. The daily briefings took place on a £144,000 stage-set designed by Hollywood art director George Allison, with five plasma display screens behind a central podium, the idea being that this would provide a clear and authoritative platform from which to address journalists. Media access to senior military personnel outside this arena was carefully regulated, limited to occasional interviews, and many journalist in Doha complained that there was little for them to report.

The coalition also tried to control journalists reporting from the frontline. One of the major causes for concern prior to the conflict was the perceived unregulated flow of information to the public. In 1991 the military had tightly regulated the news gathering process squeezing out independent journalists or 'unilaterals'. In 2003 the policy was continued with teams of correspondents assigned to coalition combat units, where their activity could be carefully controlled. These 'embeds' lived with the troops for the duration of the conflict, were dressed in combat fatigues and had to obey a 12-page rule book on reporting. The information they could relay was also monitored by officers in the field to ensure that no tactical or casualty details were released prematurely.

However, things did not go according to plan. While in 1991 journalists were reliant on military controlled Forward Transmission Units to beam their reports back, in 2003 the technology was, according to the controller of ITV News, 'better, lighter, easier to handle and cheap—[making it] much more effective'. So instead of hundreds of carefully-managed journalists reporting coalition triumphs and the quick capture of Iraq initially believed, there were hundreds journalists with hi-tech equipment, beaming every skirmish to 24-hour news organisations hungry for the latest developments at the frontline. As one media manager at Central Command noted: 'They're reporting every fire fight as if it's a major incident, every prick as if it's a major wound.' Such output had immediate consequences for the media-management operation. Instead of controlling the flow of images from the front, as in Operation Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan, the military media-managers at Central Command had to respond to reports on numerous skirmishes and to comment on their importance almost immediately, often before their significance was fully realised.

At the same time, there was great pressure on the military to provide impatient news outlets at Central Command, with regularly updated assessments of how the operation was unfolding and produced quickly. As with the news media, the need for speed affected one of the most important aspects of the news-management operation, its accuracy.

To maintain credibility, the media operation needed to ensure that journalists at Central Command were provided with accurate information, but continuous demand meant this had to be provided quickly. The need for speed and accuracy created a tension at the heart of the news-management operation.

The military public relations apparatus experienced similar problems to those of the news media, receiving often fragmented information from the field, shrouded by the 'fog of war'. It often took time to gather, filter and make sense of a large number of claims from the battlefield and feed them into a bigger picture. Under pressure, military spin-doctors often made announcements which were later withdrawn. For instance, on 26 March, TV news reports claimed that the British had engaged 120 Iraqi tanks and armoured vehicles heading south toward the British lines. However, at a Ministry of Defence press briefing three days later it was admitted that only three armoured vehicles had been engaged; the error was put down to faulty army 'moving target indicators'. On March 30, the head of the British public relations operation, Group Captain Al Lockwood, claimed that the Royal Marines had captured an Iraqi general in an assault on Basra. This claim was reported in the *Sun* and the *Independent*, but was withdrawn by the military and blamed on the 'fog of war'.

The making of announcements only to withdraw them generated confusion and suspicion amongst journalists at Central Command and compromised the credibility of the news-management operation. Coalition spin-doctors were accused of adopting a strategy of disinformation, making unsubstantiated claims about the forces engaged and the outcome of battles to confuse the enemy.

One area in particular where this suspicion fed into established concerns about honesty was civilian casualties—an inevitability of such conflicts. The coalition flatly denied that their missiles had struck a Baghdad market-place on two consecutive nights in late March, killing of a large number of civilians. However, pictures from the market place and remnants of a coalition missile found by the *Independent's* Robert Fiske, painted a different picture. After the second missile hit the market-place, the coalition spin-doctors briefed the media that it might have been one of the Iraqi's own missiles, as the head of Baghdad's air defences had been sacked because his anti-aircraft missiles missed their targets and had fallen on the city. The claim was broken as an exclusive in an ITN bulletin and widely reported. Such spin did little to allay the journalists' suspicions that the military were often eager to cover up, or at least reluctant to admit, accidental deaths.

The coalition representatives were unable to influence directly the material transmitted by news crews in the areas controlled by Saddam, but they complained to and criticised those outlets which broadcast material they thought undermined its campaign. The footage transmitted of captured and killed coalition forces generated much criticism

from military and government sources. *Al-Jazeera* in particular was singled out for criticism for its coverage of coalition prisoners and dead soldiers. Coverage of two supposedly executed British soldiers was denounced as a breach of the Geneva Convention, even though television stations were not bound by the convention and not legally constrained from showing such pictures.

The British media came under criticism for carrying *Al-Jazeera* footage and for news judgements which government sources claimed handed propaganda opportunities to Saddam. In early April news media coverage was lambasted by the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, for treating reports from the coalition frontline as though they were the 'moral equivalent' of reports from Baghdad. The Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, mused in one speech that the 'Dunkirk spirit' of 1940 would have been 'irreparably damaged' if the British public had been subjected to the current 24-hour news coverage. The coverage of the looting that followed the captured of Baghdad was condemned as misleading. Individual journalists were also singled out for criticism. The Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, openly questioned the accuracy of the reporting of the *Independent's* Robert Fiske, suggesting that he had little corroborating evidence that the coalition forces were responsible for the two market-place bombings in March.

The news-management operation in the Gulf was complemented by the news operation at home. The government's main aim throughout the conflict was to provide an overall narrative for events—that this was a 'humanitarian war of liberation', not a conquest, and that it was going to plan. In addition to using his monthly press conference, the Prime Minister appeared on talk-shows and a host of news programmes to remind the public that the purpose of the conflict was to remove Saddam and liberate the Iraqi people, and that, of course, there would be 'tough and difficult moments'.

However, it was not only the military's news operation that faced problems; the government also found that its message was sometimes confused. Tony Blair's statement that two British soldiers had been 'executed' was quickly withdrawn after the family of one of the soldiers challenged the claim. The Defence Secretary was forced to retract claims that a hundred captured Iraqi chemical suits were proof that Saddam was going to launch a chemical attack.

### *Public support for the war*

The start of hostilities saw a dramatic change in public opinion, with the majority suddenly switching to support hostilities. MORI called it one of the most dramatic turnarounds it had measured. In its poll, the proportion of the public approving British participation in military action increased from 26%, before the conflict began at the beginning of March to 56% when the conflict was under way—a rise of 30% ([www.mori.co.uk](http://www.mori.co.uk)). Similar swing in opinion was shown in an ICM poll

for the *Guardian*: there was a jump in support for military action of 16%—rising from 38% to 54% at the start of the conflict.

MORI's breakdown of the swing in opinion showed a variation by social class. Opposition to the conflict was firmer amongst the higher social classes. The swing in support of the conflict in class AB was only 7%, less than the 13.5% swing in class C1, 15% in C2 and 18.5% in D and E.<sup>4</sup> An ICM poll at the end of March also revealed that opposition to the war remained highest amongst those that read the left-leaning broadsheet press (see Table). It also showed that support for the war was highest amongst the readers of the popular press, mainly social classes C1, C2, D and E. Perhaps, the majority of readers of the left-leaning broadsheet press were more aware of the arguments and the consequences of such a conflict and were therefore likely to remain opposed to the war. Tabloid readers were perhaps less exposed to the arguments before conflict began and were therefore more prone to change their minds once British troops were in action.

Table 1 also shows that only the *Mirror* was editorially out of step with its readers. While its readers shifted position to support the war, the paper maintained its anti-war stance throughout. Its falling sales during this period may have been a direct result of its editorial stance, despite the editor's suggestion that the fall was due to its honesty in deciding not to include 'giveaways' in the circulation figures as other papers do. Whether this is correct is difficult to say, but what can be discerned is that the *Mirror's* attempt to reposition itself as a left-centre up-market paper and abandon tabloid trivia alienated some of its traditional readers.

The public may not have been enlightened by the saturation coverage, but it certainly did not turn the public against the conflict or against Blair. Public support for military action continued to rise during the conflict, reaching 63% when hostilities officially ended in the middle of April. Tony Blair benefited from what was called 'Baghdad bounce' in the opinion polls. According to ICM for the *Guardian*, his personal approval rating increased from minus 20 in February to minus 11 when war started in March and to plus 66 in April when it ended—with

1. Do You Approve or Disapprove of the Military Attack on Iraq to Remove Saddam Hussein? (% of readers)

	Approve	Disapprove	Don't Know
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	49	34	17
<i>Times</i>	55	29	16
<i>Daily Express</i>	57	26	17
<i>Daily Mail</i>	61	26	13
<i>Sun</i>	68	17	16
<i>Mirror</i>	49	38	13
<i>Guardian</i>	25	66	10
<i>Independent</i>	38	55	16

Source: ICM Research/Guardian Poll, *Guardian*, 31.3.03.

80% satisfied with the job he was doing and only 14% dissatisfied. A similar picture was provided by a YouGov poll for the *Mail on Sunday*, which showed that in the lead up to the conflict the majority of respondents thought Blair was doing badly compared to the other party leaders, 57% to 42%. By April it found that this was reversed, with 57% believing Blair was doing well and 42% badly. However, Blair's surge in popularity was short-lived.

### *The aftermath: Downing Street's war with the BBC*

Once the 'fog of war' cleared and Iraq faded from the headlines, a series of revelations about the public relations offensive before the invasion led to a major row between the Downing Street and the BBC.<sup>5</sup> On 29 May a report by the *Today* programme's defence correspondent, Andrew Gilligan, carried an allegation that Downing Street had embellished an intelligence dossier about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, released in September 2002, to make the need for invasion for compelling. The allegation, made by an anonymous source, suggested that Downing Street had, against the wishes of the intelligence services, at the last minute inserted the claim that Saddam could launch weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes. The programme's allegation was attacked by government ministers; the then Leader of the House, John Reid, claimed that it was 'untrue' and that it was provided by 'a rogue element in the intelligence services'. Gilligan reiterated the source's claim in a report for the *Mail on Sunday*, this time naming Alastair Campbell as the actor responsible for 'sexing things-up'.

Suspicions about Downing Street's embellishment of security documents were given more fuel, with the concurrent release of the annual report of the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee. This held that the government had released the second February 2003 dossier to the public without full clearance from the intelligence services. At the end of June, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee began an investigation into the production of both dossiers. Alastair Campbell was summoned and questioned firstly, about 'sexing-up' intelligence material, and secondly about his role in the construction of what was called the 'dodgy' second dossier that plagiarised a 12-year-old PhD thesis. He apologised for the latter but, by expressing his concerns about journalistic standards, ensured that his criticisms of BBC reporting dominated the news media's coverage of the meeting. Campbell denied the claims that he had sexed-up the first dossier by inserting the 45-minute claim. Under questioning, he accused the BBC making 'a pretty unbelievable allegation'. 'On the basis of one anonymous source, they are basically saying that the Prime Minister had taken the country into military conflict . . . on the basis of a lie, that's a very serious allegation.' He suggested that 'it's time the BBC apologise to us in relation to that 45 minutes' and noted that he would 'keep banging on about the issue until the BBC acknowledges it's a lie and apologises'.

Campbell's outburst brought into the open an ongoing feud between the BBC and Downing Street over Gilligan's report. After his appearance before the Committee, and in frustration, he wrote an open letter to the Head of BBC News, setting out a series of questions for the BBC to answer, particularly whether the BBC still stood by the allegation in the report. In an open reply, the BBC said it stood by its source's allegation and refused to apologise, accusing Campbell of trying to 'intimidate the BBC' and of conducting a personal vendetta against a journalist whose reports had caused discomfort'. This response provoked an unprecedented move by Campbell: he turned up at ITN's studios and in an interview with Jon Snow denounced it as 'weasel words and sophistry'. However, the findings of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee shed little light on matters and did not relieve the tension between the Downing Street and the BBC. Although it found that Campbell did not insert the 45-minute claim into the dossier, it did suggest that the claim it was given 'undue prominence'.

Meanwhile, Gilligan's source, a civil servant in the Ministry of Defence, had come forward and, with his identity leaked to the press, agreed to appear before a reconvened Foreign Affairs Committee at the beginning of July. David Kelly, a former weapons inspector, was not, it seemed, the high-placed intelligence source Gilligan and the BBC had suggested, and Downing Street hoped this would undermine the BBC's position. However, Kelly's evidence was less than conclusive; while suggesting he might not have been Gilligan's only source, he denied accusing Campbell of 'sexing-up' the document by inserting the 45-minute claim. The Secretary for Defence wrote to the Chairman of the BBC asking if the civil servant was its source but it neither admitted nor denied this. It was only after Kelly's suicide in July that the BBC admitted he was the source for Gilligan's report.

In the wake of Kelly's suicide, the Prime Minister agreed to the setting-up of a judicial Inquiry into the events surrounding his death. Overseen by Lord Hutton, a Law Lord, it started in August. It heard 25 days of evidence from over 30 sources, including the Prime Minister, Alastair Campbell, the Secretary of State for Defence, Kelly's widow, the Chairman and Director General of the BBC, civil servants and journalists. Although television cameras were not allowed in the court, the witness testimony and documentary evidence were made public on the Inquiry website ([www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk](http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk)). On the day of Alastair Campbell's appearance, the site received 16,778 hits and 300,000 page views. It attracted a great deal of media coverage which revealed details of the feud between Downing Street and the BBC over Gilligan's report and how entrenched the positions of both sides had become—the former determined to extract an apology and the latter determined not to 'bow to intolerable pressure'. The press were quick to point the finger of blame. The *Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Daily Mail* argued Downing Street was guilty of Dr Kelly's death, while the

Murdoch press suggested that the BBC was culpable. Despite attempts to apportion blame, the only certainty was that Kelly had been a victim of the Downing Street/BBC feud. The consequences of the Inquiry were felt before the final report was delivered.

### *The fallout from the Hutton Inquiry*

The first casualty of the Inquiry was Alastair Campbell. Before it had finished taking evidence he announced that he was resigning, although he claimed to have been contemplating leaving for some time. The second casualty was the news-management system he had created. His August announcement was used to make a symbolic break with the 'Millbank model' developed while in opposition. Seeing effective communication of government policy as central to electoral success, it led to a radical shake-up of government communication, greater centralisation of control in Downing Street and widespread obsession with dominating the news agenda. However, constant revelations about spin and attempts to control the news by government spin-doctors, culminating in the Hutton Inquiry, discredited this type of news operation.

The interim findings of the Phillis Committee, formed in February to review government communications, provided the blueprint for Downing Street media operations post-Campbell. The major change has been that a senior civil servant (at Permanent Secretary level) is in overall charge of strategy and coordinating government media operations, not a political appointee. Responsibility for the day-to-day operations has been split between the director of communications—a political appointee—and a civil servant. The political appointee, David Hill, a former head of Labour Party media operations, is responsible only for party political matters, his role is to provide the political perspective on behalf of the Prime Minister and assist cabinet ministers with the political context for departmental communications. The civil servant is the Prime Minister's official spokesperson in charge of communicating on non-party-political matters. Importantly, David Hill will not enjoy the powers that Campbell had to direct civil servants. This can be seen not as the end of spin but as a return in spirit to the way media operations were run before Blair's election in 1997, with civil servants back in control.

The third casualty seems to have been the BBC's news reportage. A controversial question on the morality of the Iraq war asked of the Archbishop of Canterbury on the *Today* programme in October provoked a complaint from the Archbishop and led the programme editor to cut it from the broadcast. This incident, following *Newsnight's* decision not to screen a report on payments to the then Conservative leader's wife in respect of work done in his capacity as an MP, led to widespread complaints by BBC journalists that the corporation was becoming increasingly cautious. The caution could be seen in the move to establish a department specifically to deal with complaints under the control of the newly created post of Deputy Director General. It could also be

seen in the attempt to avoid potential future controversy similar to that generated by Gilligan's article for the *Mail on Sunday*. In December the BBC announced limits on the extent to which its correspondents could write for national newspapers. All these changes point, some suggest, to a BBC not only cautious but more timid in its approach to politics.

The fourth casualty has been Blair himself. The publicity surrounding the Hutton Inquiry affected his popularity. His 'Baghdad bounce' was short-lived. A focus group survey in the *Financial Times* reported that voter's felt duped by Tony Blair on the Iraq conflict. A poll by YouGov in June found the public fairly evenly divided on whether he had been truthful about weapons of mass destruction, with 46% believing he had been and 43% that he had deliberately distorted information ([www.yougov.co.uk](http://www.yougov.co.uk)). In September, after the Hutton Inquiry, a poll by ICM for the *Guardian* found that 53% of those sampled thought the war was unjustified, a rise of 16% on April. The Prime Minister also remained unpopular with the electorate. According to MORI, his net approval rating in July was minus 28%, falling further to minus 35% in August and was still minus 25% in November. Polls also continued to show that the public did not trust the Prime Minister. An ICM poll mid-way through the Hutton Inquiry for the *Sunday Telegraph* found that 58% of voters trusted the Prime Minister less than before the Inquiry started.

### *Conclusion*

Events in 2003 reinforced an already a growing public distrust of government communication. Parliamentary committees and the Hutton Inquiry revealed the extent to which government communication was spun and the lengths government went to manipulate public opinion ahead of the Iraq war. Media coverage of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and the Hutton Inquiry gave the public a critical insight into the extent to which language and evidence were stretched in both dossiers to illustrate dramatically that Iraq was a 'real' security threat. For the press already cynical of government communication, this was further evidence the government's mendacity, and the newspapers that opposed the war wasted no time in reminding their readers of this.

It is not surprising that the post-Hutton world is one where people are more suspicious of government communication than ever; how can they distinguish between what is real and what has been manipulated by Downing Street spin-doctors? An increasing number may believe that all government communication is in essence deceitful, shaped by a team of spin-doctors and should carry a health warning.

With trust in politicians and public institutions already at an all time low, cynical attempts to manipulate the media and the hostile coverage which greets every revelation of spin foster a corrosive cynicism. If such cynicism is reinforced by further press reports, it may destroy what little trust there is left in government communication. That is currently fragile;

one can only wait to see if the reforms recommended by the Phillis Committee can re-establish the credibility of government communication in the eyes of both journalists and public.

\*The article draws on newspaper reports for information and particular sources are cited only when necessary.

- 1 For more details see J. Sancho and J. Glover, *Conflict Around the Clock: Audience Reactions to Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War*, ITC, 2003. [http://www.itc.org.uk/uploads/Conflict\\_around\\_the\\_clock.pdf](http://www.itc.org.uk/uploads/Conflict_around_the_clock.pdf), November 2003.
- 2 There has been a tremendous growth in the number of journalists reporting conflicts. Only 27 reporters were allowed to land on the Normandy beaches in 1944; 70 journalists were on the front at any one time during the Korean War; 400 reporters were accredited at the height of the Vietnam war; around 1,500 were involved in coverage of the Gulf War. See J.J. Fialka, *Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1991, p. 4; P. Taylor, *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media Since 1945*, Routledge, 1997, p. 125.
- 3 Estimates for the number of journalists 'embedded' with coalition forces ranges from 700 (600 with the Americans and 128 with the British) to 900 (767 with US forces and 136 with the British) (*Independent*, 10.4.03).
- 4 For more information on opinion poll findings and the war see R. Mortimore, 'Blair Cannot Count on the Baghdad Bounce', [www.mori.co.uk/digest/2003/c030502.shtml](http://www.mori.co.uk/digest/2003/c030502.shtml), May 2003.
- 5 For more on government/news media relations see J. Stanyer, 'Politics and the Media: A Breakdown in Relations for New Labour', *Parliamentary Affairs*, April 2003.