



Neil Report

Tim Bailey, Editor BBC Radio Newsroom and Chairman of the EBU Radio News Programme Group



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London, Tuesday 12 October,
Jack Straw stood up in the
House of Commons.

The British Foreign Secretary told members of parliament that the British Secret Service – known as MI-6 – had now officially withdrawn the claim that Saddam Hussein ever had any chemical or biological weapons that could be set-up and fired within 45 minutes.

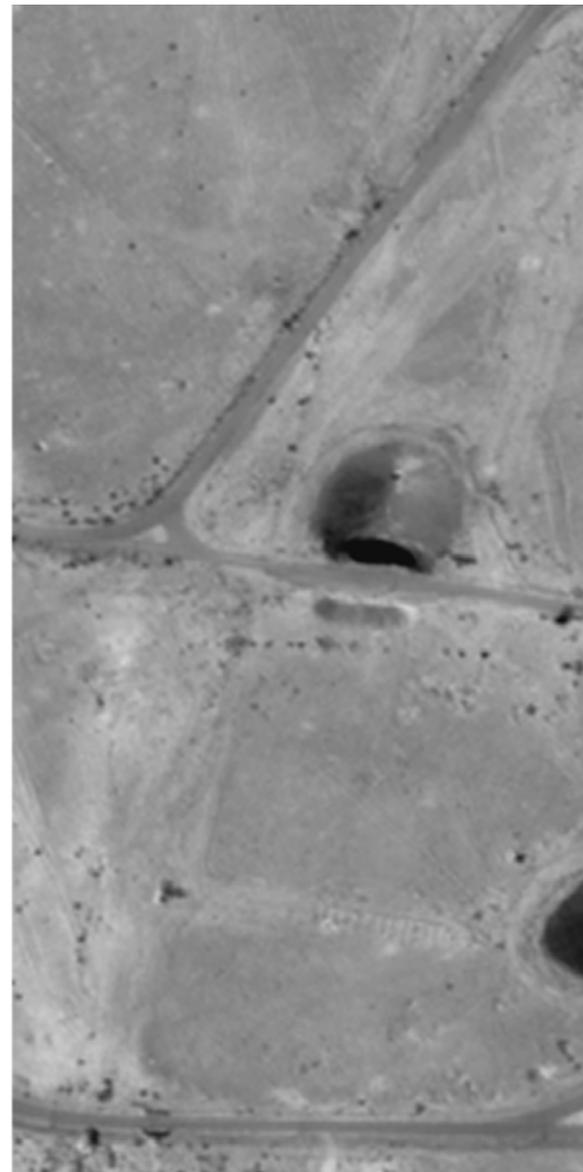
This claim was a vital piece in the British Government's arsenal of facts and figures that they used to try to convince the public that it was right to go to war in Iraq. Well, now it was gone. It is fair to say the statement did not cause that that much of a sensation. Frankly, it had been clear for many months that these weapons did not exist. But that evening it was our second story on the main radio news bulletin and the newspapers carried full reports the following morning.

What caught my attention, however, was something else. A listener e-mailed a comment into a current affairs programme not long after Mr

Straw's statement. The e-mailer said that now the 45-minute claim had been withdrawn, could the BBC reporter, Andrew Gilligan, have his job back and could the Director General of the BBC, Gregg Dyke, be re-instated, and could the chairman of the BBC governors, Gavin Davies, be asked to withdraw his resignation. And, in fact, could everything go back to where it was before that whole unhappy saga – known to British broadcasting as the Gilligan affair – unfolded with such serious consequences for all of us in Britain, and in particular, in the BBC. Of course that is not going to happen. One man – a government scientist named Dr David Kelly – is dead, and there is a new regime at the BBC in place and it is moving ahead with its own plans. There is no going back.

Consequences

One of the main results of the whole business was to set up a review to look at how we carried out our journalism



Report



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and to see what needed to be improved and what needed to be changed. The man given the task of carrying out this review was a retired BBC news executive by the name of Ron Neil. He interviewed people inside and outside the organization and after some months produced a report. Now it is clear to everyone in BBC news that the Neil Report is going to be the constitution, the commandments that underpin BBC journalism for as far as anyone can imagine.

The first thing to say is there is nothing very radical in the report. In fact, most of it will strike most people as a restatement of the obvious, a restatement of the very basics of broadcast journalism. But it is clear that for some of our staff, especially the young and inexperienced, there is a clear imperative to remind them of these basics.

At the heart of the report is what is called the Five Journalistic Values:

- Truth and Accuracy
- Serving the Public Interest
- Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion
- Independence
- Accountability

It is now the job of senior and not so senior managers to translate Neil's recommendations and proposals into everyday advice and instructions for our journalists. And this means some very down-to-earth proposals – for a start there is note-taking. Neil says very clearly that journalists should take an accurate note of what a source and contact has told them. The report makes the very blunt point that inaccurate notes lead to lost law cases, if not even worse consequences.

Take another area – dealing with allegations against someone that are broadcast on the BBC. These fall into two main categories. One is where the BBC itself makes an allegation against someone, probably as a result

of its own investigative journalism. Then there are other situations, much more common, where someone appears on the BBC and makes allegations about someone else. Neil says we should deal with these by applying basic journalistic common sense. We must question the credibility of the source of the allegation and make sure that we give the subject of the allegations the right to reply.

The report also highlights another key point. That is the reaction of the audience to an allegation broadcast by the BBC. Whether we like it or not, by broadcasting the allegation we give it power and credibility. And because the audience trusts us, more often than not, they think it is the BBC making the allegation. We must deal with this reality. We must test the story with great vigour.

And there are the question and answer broadcasts, known as “two-ways”. This section of the report no doubt springs directly from the infamous 06:07 broadcast on the morning show on BBC radio by Andrew Gilligan about weapons of mass destruction. Neil is quite clear – when the BBC is breaking stories containing serious or potentially defamatory allegations, live two-ways are normally inappropriate. And where there are serious or potentially defamatory remarks in a two-way, it must be scripted beforehand.

However, perhaps the biggest cultural change in BBC news to emerge from the Neil report deals with complaints. There are a total of 18 bullet points dealing with complaints alone in the report. They come down to one clear measure. We must improve how we deal with complaints. We must be quicker in our response, more sympathetic, and more honest.

So what are we going to do about it all? Well, the BBC does not do anything by halves. And the main focus for most of the staff is on



Weapons seized by US forces, Najaf, Iraq



training. This training is taking place on a low level, among producers and reporters in their own programme areas. This is already underway and will continue for some time.

What next?

At the heart of the Neil recommendations is something much bigger, much more ambitious. This is the establishment of a college of journalism. This would bring together the training needs of all parts of the BBC news – some seven thousand people. Not surprisingly this has caught the eye and the imagination at home, although no-one is quite sure what it means. It may be that the course is situated in an existing university; it may be conducted as part of an enlarged existing training course within the BBC; it may be situated in a brand new campus.

Senior journalists within the BBC have always thought that the corporation's basic principles of fairness, impartiality and political balance were well known and understood by the staff. What Neil discovered was something very disturbing. Quite a few of our youngest – and brightest – people knew the words. But they were ready to admit to not knowing what the principles actually meant and how they affected their programmes in everyday broadcasting.

The post-Gilligan process within the BBC has been very painful in many ways – there already has been much rewriting of the history of what happened and why it happened; who was to blame; who was right all along. But quite a lot of positive attitudes have also been revealed. I honestly think the Neil Report and its proposals will turn out to be one of the positive aspects.



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US Marines patrol at Fallujah, Iraq