NEWS UNDER PRESSURE

Third Draft

Intro & Opening

Chairman, Thank you for your introduction and thank you for your invitation to speak here today.

News Under Pressure

You've asked me to talk about News Under Pressure. The list is ominously long.

Indeed a news executive surveying all this today might well feel a bit like John Jacob Astor at the bar of the doomed liner, The Titanic who is reported to have said "I know I ordered ice but this is ridiculous!". (PAUSE)

So what are the icebergs of today that News has to steer around?

There are the pressures from the politicians.

There are the financial pressures.

There is the fall-out from the digital revolution and from market fragmentation and there is the pressure from the growth in the sheer volume of information now available.

Also under pressure are many of the traditional core values of news such as impartiality and even accuracy. There are those who say that in a world of infinite choice such things no longer matter.

Political Pressure

(PAUSE)

Let me start with political pressure.

As you know, it's something we in the BBC have had a fair amount of experience of recently – and I'll say more about that in a moment – but we are by no means alone among European broadcasters.

In Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Slovenia there have been recent rows about political interference. Accusations of "state paternalism" and "partitocrazia" have become commonplace.

First off, we should be clear that there is nothing wrong with politicians trying to exert pressure on broadcasters. In the modern media world that is what we should expect them to do. Where there is a problem, however, is when broadcasters give way to such pressures.

But to successfully resist political pressure public broadcasters have to earn and establish a political legitimacy which transcends and trumps that of their political paymasters. I'll come back to this in a moment.

Political Pressure and the BBC

First let me turn now to the recent events at the BBC and our coverage of the intelligence about the elusive Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq which resulted in the resignation of our Chairman, our Director-General and a reporter.

Wars have always been one of the greatest tests for news organisations, and the Iraq war was particularly so for a publicly funded national broadcaster like the BBC.

It was Huw Wheldon, the BBC's former Director of Television, who said that “a Britain divided puts the BBC on the rack”. And so it turned out to be.

With the country profoundly split over the war, we always knew there would be flak from every side and that our impartiality would be called into question.

The BBC was accused on the one hand of favouring the Bush-Blair position and on the other of being soft on Saddam. We were attacked by anti-war groups. We received a blizzard of complaints from the government.

Against this background the actual row came down to the use of a few words in an early morning radio report.

Hutton

At the time it seemed very complicated. On reflection, it was quite simple.

The Today programme – our main morning radio show - set out to broadcast a report about genuine and, as we now know, well-founded reservations in parts of the intelligence community about a British government dossier which was published to support the case for going to war.

Dr David Kelly, Britain's leading expert on Weapons of Mass Destruction, told two BBC reporters that the original intelligence on Iraq's weapons had been unreliable but political pressure had meant it had been exaggerated in the published dossier to strengthen the case for going to war.

In a live interview, BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan went further and used a form of words which suggested bad faith on the part of the government – that the Government knew the intelligence was wrong before it published it.

Tony Blair's Chief spokesman Alastair Campbell launched a sweeping and angry attack on the BBC at a Parliamentary Committee.

From that point on there could be no happy ending.

The government was defending its integrity and the BBC was defending its independence. For each side, those two principles are non-negotiable, and it could only end badly. In the heat of what was by now a very public row, Dr Kelly tragically committed suicide.

The government set up a full Judicial Inquiry.

It was discovered the reporter Andrew Gilligan had insufficient notes to support all that he had broadcast.

The verdict of the official Inquiry found the BBC guilty of several faults. It found the government guilty of none. Top-level resignations at the BBC swiftly followed.

But that was not how the British public chose to interpret events. Opinion polls taken in the aftermath of the report quickly showed that trust in the BBC rose as a result of the affair and trust in the government dropped sharply.

Now the BBC has many critics – many of them very vocal at times - but what seems to have happened here is that once the public saw the BBC as being under serious threat from the government they quickly realised they didn't like that. A large part of the reason for that reservoir of support is the relationship that the BBC has managed to build up with its audiences.

Over the years we have taken great care to stress to our listeners and viewers that the BBC is their organization, paid for with their money. We have done this in a variety of ways – some successful, some less so – but the overall emphasis all the way through has been on trying to make ourselves more accountable, more transparent, more self-critical and to appear less arrogant.

So while it was a bruising experience at the time – and while I certainly wouldn't recommend to anyone going about it in such a way as to lose your Chairman and Director General, - I think the whole experience has been a very useful reminder to us that the direct relationship between a public broadcaster and its public is crucial.

Managing the relationship with our audiences is now an essential part of the service a public broadcaster must provide.

Audiences need an emotional connection to the programmes and services they use if they are to offer their trust. That emotional connection is all the keener if they also pay for the broadcaster.

In news,openness is now as important as the journalism itself in the relationship with the audience.

Taking the lid off the news machine and showing the public how we work and why is essential to building trust.

We have launched media literacy programmes – including roadshows - which show people how the news is made.

Feedback programmes – in which audiences get to have their say on our output and challenge us about it - have become an essential part of the programme mix.

The BBC has also started a new website, called News Watch, which explains our editorial processes and policies, allows discussion of them, and provides a streamlined avenue for complaints, with an area for swift clarifications and corrections.

It is fundamental to good journalism that you must always, always be willing to listen to complaints and always be willing to correct things if you have got them wrong. Journalists are sometimes very unwilling to admit their mistakes. They are wrong. Admitting errors and correcting them does not lessen your credibility with audiences, it increases it.

Deciding what your editorial values are and publishing them is one thing…...

Organising your programming and journalism around them and managing your relationship with the public in line with them is more difficult.

BBC Journalism

Clearly, the stakes can be very high when journalists attempt to hold governments to account.

In the wake of what happened at the BBC, some may be deterred from trying. It's essential they are not. Asking difficult questions and pursuing them remains a core responsibility of the media.

That's why at the BBC we are determined to raise the quality of journalism even higher. We want to get it dead right every time. This year we are launching a BBC College of Journalism which will train our several thousand journalists in editorial principles and how to apply them to their daily news judgements.

(PAUSE)

The Digital Revolution

The advent of digital technology has revolutionised broadcasting. We have yet to see the full consequences of this revolution.

Radio and television have now been joined by a third force – the internet. Beyond that we are already beginning to discover the potential of news on mobile devices, news via downloading, podcasting, WiFi, WiMax and the rest.

Indeed, the ability to put an electronic memory into anything means that news on your fridge must be only weeks away, and news on your favourite jacket is coming next year!

News is everywhere 24 by 7. Most countries now have at least one continuous news channel, India has twelve.

And that of course has introduced a new competitiveness between the networks. No longer is it good enough to be fast and reliable. Nowadays you have to be first. "First with breaking news" has become the marketing catchphrase.

But first at what price? How often does "breaking news" actually mean little more than "breaking rumours"?

At the BBC we have taken a clear decision. We want to retain the trust of our audiences. Yes we want to be fast but never at the expense of accuracy. If it comes to a choice we would rather be "second and right" rather than "first and wrong".

And with this growth of news networks, another increasing phenomenon is the advent of the opinionated news station and the television channel "with attitude". Hence the growth of talk radio in the United States, the popularity of Fox News and the growth of Al Jazeera across the Middle East. Everyone can get just the news that suits them.

But the risk with this digitised utopia is that it rapidly turns into a personalised straight jacket. News becomes a closed community of listeners and viewers where no one has to encounter any facts, views or opinions which contradict their own. Viewer choice rapidly turns into an electronic echo chamber where audiences hear only their own views and prejudices recited back to them. (It's no accident that in the run up to the last American Presidential election, CNN had the highest viewing figures for the Democratic Convention, Fox the biggest for the Republicans.)

That is why impartial News broadcasting – largely provided by independent public broadcasters - is going to become more not less important in the future. Impartiality – allowing all opinions to be presented, from whatever viewpoint - must remain the cornerstone of our news and information.

As much as we challenge those in power we must continue to challenge our own viewers and listeners. We must present them with facts and opinions that will surprise them – facts and opinions that at times they may even feel deeply uncomfortable about. That is a crucial part of the civic role of public broadcasting in a democratic society.

But there is more to it than that.

The global growth of news channels and of sources of news has not led to a commensurate growth in reporting or in analysis or in context.

Many of the modern news channels rely a lot on second-hand sources, on agency pictures and on a lot of studio talk. Some of that talk is well-informed, a lot of it not.

All of this puts reliable, first-hand, on the spot eye-witness reporting at an absolute premium

That's why the BBC invests more heavily in newsgathering than any other broadcast news organisation. The importance to us of first-hand reporting means we now have across the world 92 bureaux, with 250 correspondents.

This is backed up by the BBC Monitoring operation at Caversham which has access to 3,000 separate sources of international news and information.

Here in Britain, we have a wide line-up of specialist correspondents for domestic stories backed by the BBC's newsgathering presence in fifteen television newsrooms and 46 radio newsrooms in every major city and county across the county.

We believe that it is our job to be physically present in as many locations as possible and not to simply use other people's pictures and information.

We want our correspondents and reporters to be able see what they report.

When the earthquake struck Indonesia, the BBC correspondent in Jakarta, Rachel Harvey, was providing live coverage on the effects of the tsunami well before some of our competitors had even reported that the quake had happened.

And the BBC will not just cover the devastation of the tsunami and then forget it. Our correspondents on the ground have and will stick with the story, reporting the after-affects and the progress of reconstruction.

A Disconnected World

But we have yet more to do.

In a world awash with information we have a responsibility to not only report the facts accurately, not only to allow all viewpoints their say but we also need to help our audiences make sense of what they are seeing and hearing.

All too often, the news headlines tell of a violent and uncertain world, whether it is another suicide bombing in the Middle East or bomb attacks in Madrid, or in Istanbul, Bali or Morocco.

Such events are a grim reminder of the violence, mistrust and hatred that are flourishing in many parts of our world.

A world which is increasingly connected technically feels increasingly disconnected in terms of values and aspirations.

Many Muslims feel they are losing out in the new world order, just as many in the West are fearful of Islamic militancy.

The roots of this hatred run deep. They are bound up with politics, religion and history.

Too much news reporting today portrays the news as a series of sensational, random, often unconnected events. That does the audience a massive disservice and can sometimes paint the world as a place only full of fear, terror and foreboding.

When the media give a distorted picture, either in the quest for higher audiences, or because they have a political axe to grind, they cultivate a fertile breeding ground for mistrust and suspicion.

All of us need to make space in our broadcasts for those vital elements of context and analysis which allow our listeners and viewers to understand <u>why</u> things are happening and to enable them to see the connections.

(PAUSE)

<u>Audience Expectations and Interactivity</u>

So, audience expectations are moving fast; as fast as the technology and in some cases leading the technology. And in turn the audiences' relationship with the news provider is changing. No longer are they content to remain passive receivers of information.

They expect to play a part, to voice their opinions, to react to events and ideas,

The Iraq war was perhaps the first event to bring home to us how fast these changes are transforming the whole relationship with audiences. In the first three weeks of the war the BBC received over 240,000 e-mails and tens of thousands of text messages.

The phenomenon tells us a lot about what motivates today's audiences – and the role that the BBC believes it can play as the leading platform for a global dialogue.

Talking Point, our global interactive programme, is the first to combine an international phone-in with an online debate. It is broadcast to an audience of 180 million on BBC World television, World Service radio and BBC News Online

Through such ventures, we believe the BBC can facilitate a genuine debate to promote understanding and involve everyone from world leaders to ordinary people.

Recent discussions have ranged from Iraq's new constitution to human rights around the world, and among the guests have been President Karzai of Afghanistan, President Musharraf of Pakistan, President Putin of Russia and Tony Blair.

It is a global conversation that gives individuals a chance to rigorously test opinions and arguments and to hold leaders to account.

It is a dialogue which can promote genuine understanding and break down those barriers of mistrust, ignorance and hatred.

(PAUSE)

Conclusion

I'd like to end on a personal note.

Like the editor of every international news organisation, a lot has been going through my mind in recent months.

I've touched on some of them this morning.

The importance of establishing a link between different nations and cultures – of connecting the world in dialogue and understanding as well as technologically.

The importance of understanding the changing nature and demands of our audiences – in terms of interativity and in terms of offering them a variety of world perspectives. And of giving enough background and context to make sense of those perspectives.

The importance of defending our editorial freedom and ensuring that we present a full range of views.

The importance of continually questioning, not just those we interview, but ourselves too – about our approach to news programmes, and especially how we maintain impartiality.

Above all, however, the last few months have reminded me of three things.

First, we must never compromise on our values – accuracy, integrity, independence, impartiality, trust. They must be non-negotiable.

Secondly, how much we rely on the professionalism, commitment and courage of our reporters and programme makers in the field.

When we talk about connecting with a world audience, they are the people who make the first and most important connection.

They are the eyes and ears for our audiences, and it is their skill and their professionalism often in very dangerous situations - that underpin everything else. Too many journalists pay with their lives. Last year 78 journalists were killed. Earlier this year a BBC journalist, Kate Payton, was shot dead outside her hotel in Somalia.

We, and our audiences, owe all our front-line journalists a huge debt of gratitude.

(PAUSE)

My third conclusion is about our responsibility and role as public service broadcasters in a world that is at once globalised and yet, at times, filled with mistrust, misinformation, oppression, hate and division.

It is down to us to use our skills to provide trusted, reliable news.

It is our responsibility to be committed to portraying those events in a broader context and analysing them in an independent and impartial way.

We can be the new catalyst for dialogue, debate and mutual understanding.

Yes, the pressures are great but by doing these things, I believe that news broadcasters can in the future help re-connect a disconnected world, can contribute to greater mutual understanding and can help to make the world a better place.

Thank you for your attention this morning.