

## **Case study 5**

### **The BBC and the Conservative British Government during the Falklands conflict and a similar incident in Iraq**

The BBC was criticised during the Falklands conflict in the early 1980s for referring to 'the British' rather than to 'our' forces. Apparently, stating an obvious and fairly neutral 'fact' was not enough for some. The implication of 'our' troops is tacit support and consensus that they are somehow automatically 'right'. This emotional attitude to war reporting—the expected loyalty—was a hangover from the days of 'Imperial' England, the patriotic coverage of World War II, and the nationalist sentiment whipped up around the Suez conflict of 1956 (Harris 1983). During the Falklands conflict, the BBC felt that 'our troops' would become 'our ships' and then 'our policy', implying that the BBC was in agreement with Government decisions in the conflict, thus giving them more credibility with the public. In its defence, the BBC claimed that the Falklands conflict didn't constitute an all-out war, therefore reinforcing its claims to be offering balanced coverage. The Falklands conflict arose between Britain and Argentina over the disputed Falkland Islands in the south Atlantic.

The British Government heavily censored news reports from the Falklands and made it very difficult for television to get pictures of the conflict. It then attacked the BBC over its coverage. Conservative Member of Parliament John Page described the BBC quoting statements by Argentinian leaders about the fighting and attempts to broker diplomatic solutions as 'almost treasonable' (UPI 1982a). The 'treason' charge was levelled at BBC television anchor Peter Snow for using the phrases 'if we believe the British' and 'the only damage Britain admitted' during one program (Associated Press 1982). Another Conservative Member of Parliament, Robert Adley, formally complained to the BBC for showing funerals of Argentinian soldiers, describing the story as 'insulting propaganda' (UPI 1982b). The BBC's chairman at the time, George Howard, said BBC news reports were credible around the world because the publicly funded but independently run corporation had a reputation for 'telling the truth, however unpalatable'. 'I

suppose it is inevitable that when bad news is reported the messenger will get the blame,' he added (UPI 1982b). Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had told the House of Commons a couple of days earlier that: 'The case for our British forces is not being put over fully and effectively' by the British Press (UPI 1982b). For good measure the 'Iron Lady' added: 'There are times when it seems that we and the Argentinians are being treated almost as equals and almost on a neutral basis' (Ross 1982). The American media was smarting because neither Argentina nor Britain would allow 'foreign journalists' (for that read the big American TV networks) into the combat zone (Rothenberg 1982). The low point for the BBC came when a British military leader, Colonel Herbert H. Jones, who later died in the conflict, threatened to sue the BBC for 'manslaughter' for allegedly reporting details of an imminent attack on an Argentinian position at Goose Green. A *Sunday Times* report claimed Col. Jones's anger stemmed from a BBC report of a statement by Defence Minister John Nott in the House of Commons that the attack was imminent. Because of the report, Argentinian reinforcements were sent to bolster forces at Goose Green. But a BBC radio reporter with the British task force denied the claim that Col. Jones had made any such threat (UPI 1982c).

A similar incident arose during the conflict in Iraq in 2004 when the British Chief of Defence Staff, General Michael Walker said that news reports about the redeployment of the famous Black Watch regiment made it 'easier' for insurgents to stage attacks, a claim dismissed by the British National Union of Journalists as 'absurd' ("Journalists deny reports put UK troops at risk," 2004). The regiment had come under regular attack from roadside explosive devices, mortars, grenades and small arms. In the first month of their mission at Camp Dogwood near Baghdad four soldiers had been killed by bombs ("Journalists deny reports put UK troops at risk," 2004).

### **Issues and questions raised by case study 5**

1 What do you think of the BBC's contention that the Falklands conflict wasn't technically a war, only a 'conflict' and therefore it should be more balanced in its coverage?

- 2 Is there really any difference in terms of ethical decisions that need to be made?
- 3 Is it, in your opinion, ethically wrong to report what the 'other side' is saying? Could it be morally wrong, and yet not ethically wrong?
- 4 What about the terminology 'if we believe the British' and 'the only damage Britain admitted'? It's certainly emotive, but is it also tinged with disbelief?
- 5 Is this a case of the politicians trying to 'kill the messenger'?
- 6 Wouldn't the media take some comfort from Margaret Thatcher's comment that it was treating both sides as equals? Isn't that balanced reporting?
- 7 How would you feel if the military accused you of reporting that maybe helped 'the enemy' kill your own country's troops?
- 8 In this day of satellite links and Internet web sites, how could you prevent such a thing happening?
- 9 It would be cold comfort, would it not, that the Colonel's alleged accusation was later discredited by one of your colleagues?
- 10 Do you agree with Britain's NUJ that it's absurd to suggest news reports would help insurgents target coalition troops?

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