

Lloyd, J. (2004) *What the media are doing to our politics*, London: Constable & Robinson, (p.2–4, 136–140)

Given that the broadcast of 29 May 2003 has been so important to this and all other narratives on the British media since it happened, it's as well to remind ourselves what it consisted of. Here is a transcript, as broadcast on the 'Today' programme, at 06.07.

John Humphrys (Today' programme presenter): The government is facing more questions this morning over its claims about weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Our defence correspondent is Andrew Gilligan. This in particular, Andy, is Tony Blair saying, they'd [Iraqi missiles] be ready to go within 45 minutes?

Andrew Gilligan ('Today' programme defence correspondent): That's right, that was the central claim in his dossier which he published in September, the main case if you like against Iraq, and the main statement of the government's belief of what it thought Iraq was up to and what we've been told by one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up that dossier was that, actually, the government probably knew that that 45-minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in. What this person says, it was actually a rather bland production. It didn't, the draft prepared for Mr Blair by the intelligence agencies, actually didn't say very much more than was public knowledge already and Downing Street, our source says, ordered a week before publication, ordered it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be, to be discovered.

JH: "When you say 'more facts to be discovered' does that suggest they may not have been facts?"

AG: Well, our source says that the dossier, as it was finally published, made the intelligence services unhappy because, to quote the source, he said there was basically, that there was, there was, there was unhappiness because it didn't reflect the considered view they were putting forward, that's a quote from our source, and essentially the 45-minute point was, was probably the most important thing that was added. And the reason it hadn't been put in the original draft was that it was, it was only, it only came from one source and most of the other claims were from two, and the intelligence agencies say they don't really believe it was necessarily true because they thought the person making the claim had actually made a mistake, it got, it had got mixed up.

JH: Does any of this matter now, all this, all these months later? The war's been fought and won.

AG: Well, the 45 minutes isn't just a detail, it did go to the heart of the government's case that Saddam was an imminent threat and it was repeated four times in the dossier, including by the Prime Minister himself, in the foreword: so I think it probably does matter. Clearly, you know, if, if it was, if it was wrong, things do, things are, got wrong in good faith, but if they knew it was wrong before they actually made the claim, that's perhaps a bit more serious.

JH: Andrew, many thanks; more about that later.

Never, in his long career, had John Humphrys done a better sign-off than that.

The broadcast, government's protests against it and the controversy it generated, claimed the life of its main source – Dr David Kelly, a government weapons expert. It was the main object of inquiries and reports by two parliamentary select committees, those on intelligence and on foreign affairs. And it was the prompt for the Hutton Inquiry and subsequent report – which put into the public arena more information and analysis of the secret services and their relationship with government than had ever been revealed so soon after the event at any time before. Indeed - and this isn't the subject of this essay - the effect on the intelligence world may in the long term be larger, for itself and for society, than on that of the media. [...]

The culture, pressures, mindset and leadership of the BBC came together, on 29 May 2003, at 06.07, to produce the broadcast two-way news interview between John Humphrys, the 'Today' presenter, and Andrew Gilligan over its claims about weapons of mass destruction ... Andrew Gilligan, who had a bent for pulling at the threads of stories until something came away and into the light, was again pulling on a promising thread. We know, because of the objections of the government which then led to the Hutton Inquiry, that the late David Kelly had told him an interesting story: he told much the same story to two other BBC journalists, Gavin Hewitt and Susan Watts. Both reflected some of the doubts which Kelly said existed in the intelligence services about the claim that missiles could be activated within 45 minutes - and about other issues on WMD – in broadcasts they made. These doubts had been aired before – notably in the *Observer*.

Indeed, the 45-minute claim was a thin one. It was shown to be almost certainly wrong and, months after the event, the prime minister said he had not known to which missiles the claim referred. Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, said neither he nor Tony Blair had attached much importance to the claim. Yet it was mentioned four times in the September dossier and had been given very large prominence - without apparent correction from government – in much of the tabloid coverage of the dossier. It was thus possible that what Gilligan said – that the prime minister knowingly lied – could have been true.

But that is what the story amounted to: some evidence; a suggestion; a possibility. On that edifice, a direct charge of prime ministerial lying was made. And it *was* a direct charge. A prime minister, especially one as hands-on as Blair is generally and certainly was during the Iraq war, always carries the can ultimately. The broadcast made sure that was known to be the case; Humphrys personalized it: 'is Tony Blair saying they'd [WMD] be ready to go within 45 minutes?'

The 45-minute claim was, according to Gilligan, 'central' to the dossier. It was mentioned several times, but it wasn't central. It was a piece of evidence which was shockingly precise, hence its inclusion. But it wasn't central. Nor was the source who he said he was. He was not a senior official in charge of drawing up the dossier: David Kelly had contributed, as he later said, only a few lines.

Did Gilligan say that Blair – or the government - knew the 45-minute claim to be wrong? He said it twice, though the form of the broadcast was so shambolic – even given the informal standards of two-way broadcasts – that it allowed the BBC to later claim he had not. First, he said that 'the government probably knew that that 45-minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in'. And again, at the end of the broadcast, when Humphrys had given an opening for Gilligan to play down what he had earlier said ('Does any of this matter now?'), he repeats it, apparently conditionally but actually unmistakably: 'things do, things are, got wrong in good faith, but if they knew it was wrong before they actually made the claim, that's perhaps a bit more serious.'

Gilligan's story was a lead: or, in the current British media environment, a tabloid story which, by its placing and treatment, implicitly asks to be taken with a pinch of salt - that is, it might be right, or it might be wrong, or it might be wholly made up. It was a promising lead: it was already placed in a context of stories reflecting doubts coming out of sources in the intelligence community (in one of the acid interchanges of letters between Richard Sambrook, head of news, and Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's director of communications, Sambrook uses the fact of the other news stories as proof that the Gilligan story had more than one source). So it was worth following; worth determining how the Joint Intelligence Committee was working; worth pointing to the tension in the intelligence services; worth illuminating the fact that John Scarlett, the chairman of the [JIC] and as such the senior adviser on intelligence, was working so closely with the prime ministerial aides, senior civil servants and ministers that they were – as the e-mail traffic divulged to Hutton shows – working at times as one team.

But the thread was not pulled; it was snapped, and presented to the public. And the most extraordinary thing about the story from the BBC's point of view, was Humphrys' question: '*Does any of this matter now?*'

Gilligan was broadcasting into, and out of, a culture which had been created through the interrelationships of many different forces ... They produced, not his report – he did that – but an environment in which a reporter, ill-prepared, from his own flat, could charge the prime minister with a major, deliberate falsehood – and his interlocutor could at the end of it say: 'Does any of this

matter?' It came from a programme whose previous editor had hired Gilligan because he was 'edgy'; that is, he got anti-government stones. Gilligan's editor at the time of the broadcast, who took over from Rod Liddle, was Kevin Marsh, a more solid, careful, BBC man' His first instinct had been to defend the story-which he had shepherded on to air- unequivocally. In a memo to Stephen Mitchell, the head of BBC radio news, he wrote on 9 June: 'I started to look at this point by point and frankly it'd be easy to get as confused as [Alastair] Campbell is. The man is flapping in the wind . . . Downing Street has never explicitly denied the central charge . . . BBC journalists have been told . . . that the original story was correct.' In the same memo, Marsh writes ... it was a consistent BBC delusion – that Gilligan had never accused the government of lying, but that 'we simply [said] that uncorroborated evidence was given prominence and that members of the security services were uncomfortable with that'.

A later memo from Marsh on Gilligan reads comically, especially when placed beside the earlier ones. On 27 June, as the heat began to come on the BBC and as various officials in the news division began to pull together a response, Marsh wrote, again to Mitchell: 'clearly I have to talk to AG early next week . . . the guts of what I would say are: this story was a good piece of investigative journalism marred by flawed reporting – our biggest millstone has been his loose use of language and lack of judgement in some of his phraseology'.

The memo is comic because of its internal contradiction. How can a piece of journalism of any kind be good if the reporting is flawed? What was Gilligan's journalism if not reporting? Marsh is doing the equivalent of a sports commentator claiming that 'it was a fine game marred by flawed football'. The statement, because of its clearly unconscious absurdity, comes from the same environment as the report itself, one which does not know what it is saying, indeed which got to the stage of claiming that words mean what the broadcasters say they mean. For weeks – months – the BBC denied it said what it said. Many in the BBC, and out of it, still do. Martin Kettle wrote in the *Guardian*:

the episode illuminates a wider crisis in British journalism than the turmoil at the BBC; second, that too many journalists are in denial about this wider crisis; third, that journalists need to be at the forefront of trying to rectify it; and fourth, that this will almost certainly not happen . . . the more you read [the comment on the Hutton Report] the more you get the sense that the modern journalist is prone to behaving like a child, throwing its rattle out of the pram because it has not got what it wanted.

Gilligan's report should be set in stone at the entrance to the BBC, or at one end of Fleet Street, the former home of much of the British press. It is more useful to us in the media than any number of the quotations from Milton, Mill or Mencken which we roll out on occasions. It reminds us of what we have become. If the best of journalism – the BBC – could both put out a report like that and defend it, and remain (in many parts of the Corporation) convinced that it had been unfairly criticized by Hutton and traduced by government, then we have produced a media culture which in many ways contradicts the ideals to which we pay homage.