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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Lies, slurs and dodgy experts: welcome to the nightly news

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Perhaps the closest Bill O'Reilly has actually been to combat. US Army

Author

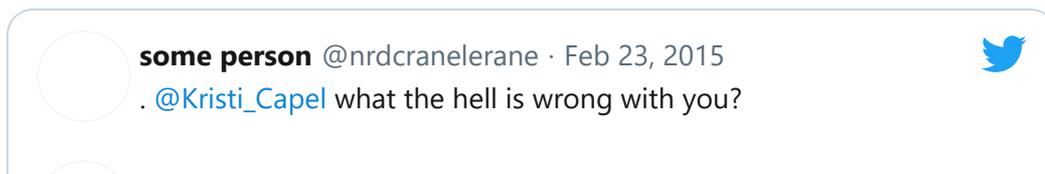


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It's not a good time to be a newscaster in the US. The latest controversy to hit broadcasters concerns Kristi Capel, a morning news presenter on Cleveland Ohio's Fox 8 network. The morning after Lady Gaga had wowed the Oscars ceremony with her Sound of Music medley, Capel commented, live on air, whilst giggling and gesticulating, "It's hard to really hear her [Ga Ga's] voice with all that jigaboo music that she does, or whatever you want to call it. Jigaboo."

Amid the predictable twitter storm, Capel apologised, tweeting to one complainant:



She added later, “I deeply regret my insensitive comment. I didn’t know the meaning and would never intentionally use hurtful language. I sincerely apologise.”

Her apology was not universally accepted. Professor of Political Science, Jason Johnson, argued that it was a “total stretch” to believe that she did not know that jigaboo was a negative reference to black people. He wrote:

She didn’t make an ‘insensitive’ statement, she made a racist statement, and to believe her story you’d have to believe that a woman with a degree in journalism uses words on television that she doesn’t know the definition of.

Capel has been suspended from her duties. For three days. She is now back on the air.

Anchors away!

So more problems for Fox whose far more well-known national news caster Bill O’Reilly has found his own credibility under scrutiny. In a sense he should be used to this. His uncompromising and belligerent interviewing style coupled with his right-wing views and unshakeable belief in the virtue of his own opinions has led to forensic examinations of his broadcasts.

Peter Hart’s 2003 book, *Oh Really? Unspinning Fox News Channel’s Bill O’Reilly* critically evaluated O’Reilly’s output and began with an endorsement from Robert McChesney which stated: “O’Reilly’s disinterest in the truth, in principle, and interrogating his own assumptions, and in intellectual consistency, is little short of breath-taking.”

All of which makes the current accusations made by his former colleagues and non-profit investigative news magazine, *Mother Jones* not in the least surprising. On February 19, journalists David Corn and Daniel Schulman wrote:

For years, O’Reilly has recounted dramatic stories about his own war reporting that don’t withstand scrutiny — even claiming he acted heroically in a war zone that he apparently never set foot in.

Corn and Schulman allege that O’Reilly has on many occasions referred to his role as a war correspondent during the Falklands war in 1982 and of his experience of combat. They suggest that he embellished his role there and dramatised his experiences in war-stricken El Salvador in 1981.

When this story broke last week, O’Reilly predictably went on the attack. Seeking to contest the *Mother Jones* story, he spoke to a journalist at the *New York Times* who was reportedly threatened with repercussions if any of the subsequent coverage was “inappropriate”. “I am coming after you with everything I have,” O’Reilly said. “You can take it as a threat.”

The whole incident is clearly a case of O'Reilly being hoist by his own petard because the Mother Jones piece was written in response to his high-minded on air denunciation of another news anchor who had exaggerated his war record, NBC's Brian Williams.

For years, Williams had recounted the tale of his being caught under fire whilst in an army helicopter in Iraq 2003. When his version of the incident was questioned by a soldier who was actually under attack, Williams admitted: "I made a mistake in recalling the events of 12 years ago ... I said I was traveling in an aircraft that was hit by RPG fire. I was instead in a following aircraft."

O'Reilly's response to this admission was both pious and ultimately hubristic. On February 11 on Fox News, against a backdrop that read "BRIAN WILLIAMS, THE PRESS AND YOU ... Reporting the news comes with a big responsibility" he intoned:



Disgraced anchor Brian Williams. EPA

Reporting comes with a big responsibility, the Founding Fathers made that point very clearly. They said to us, 'We'll give you freedom. We'll protect you from government intrusion. But, in return, you, the press, must be honest.'

It's not as if the newsrooms of US television stations need any more bad publicity. It's only a month or so ago that Fox's Steve Emerson, the self-titled "internationally recognised expert on terrorism" said during a television report that in the UK, "There are actual cities like Birmingham that are totally Muslim where non-Muslims just simply don't go in."

"There are parts of London there are actually Muslim and religious police that actually beat and actually wound seriously anyone who doesn't dress according to traditional Muslim attire."

These comments were met with the derision they deserve with David Cameron wading in to call Emerson a "complete idiot."

Is the UK any better?

But before we get ahead of ourselves ridiculing the American TV news model, let's remember the Leveson report, phone hacking trials and the fact that several that British journalists have recently had to deal with questions about their integrity. As Hadley Freeman wrote in the *Guardian* last week, Johann Hari, once the bright young thing of British journalism and winner of the Orwell prize who was exposed in 2011 as a plagiarist and slanderer, is now well on his way back to rehabilitation.

Even more lately, on the Muslim Council of Britain's "Visit my Mosque day" held February 1, Channel 4 News anchor Cathy Newman tweeted that she had been turned away from the South London Islamic Centre.



It turned out that Newman had simply turned up at the wrong mosque, one not taking part in the event. More than this, CCTV footage showed quite clearly shows her having a very short exchange with a man who points her toward the exit. She leaves through a courtyard and that is that. As the Huffington Post, who first highlighted the video, put it, "the entire encounter lasts just seconds." In no way could it be said that Newman was "ushered" out.

Age of accountability

In the cases of Emerson, Williams and O'Reilly particularly, it is difficult to feel any sympathy – their fabrications and claims are many and the accusations of embellishment continue to come. But what all these instances tell is that in the internet age there is nothing that is said or claimed that can be completely consigned to the memory hole.

Journalists, or any individuals come to that, can be held to account for whatever they say or do. As Ed Wasserman said in 2006, "journalists are no longer simply producing news, they're creating permanent archives on deadline."

It is undoubtedly a good thing if poor journalism and mendacity is highlighted and called to account, but we live in an age where every public utterance can be scrutinised by an army of critics with access to a search engine and Twitter. Let's hope that this scenario leads to better journalism and not a culture of conformity.

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