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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

What's in a name? Cameron singles out BBC over Islamic State coverage

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Any of you fine chaps fancy a job in broadcasting? EPA/Andy Rain

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Speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme about the appalling murders in Tunisia, David Cameron told presenter John Humphreys that he wished the BBC would desist from referring to the terrorist organisation responsible for these killings as "Islamic State". He said:

I wish the BBC would stop calling it 'Islamic State' because it is not an Islamic State. What it is, is an appalling barbarous regime ... it is a perversion of the religion of Islam and many Muslims listening to this programme will recoil every time they hear the words.

That Humphreys pointed out that it was “tricky” to decide what to call IS when they indeed call themselves by that name is worth noting, because the debate around what to name this “existential threat” has been going on for months.

As Lizzie Dearden wrote in The Independent, Islamic State is precisely how the extremists wish to be known: in June 2014 the Shura Council of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) announced the return of the caliphate and proclaimed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as “caliph of Islam”.



The council decided to adopt Islamic State, wrote Al Monitor, because it was a “clear indication that this organisation was no longer confined to one or two countries”.

The French government refuses to use “Islamic State”. In September last year, calling on the media to follow his lead, French foreign minister Laurent Fabius said:

This is a terrorist group and not a state. I do not recommend using the term Islamic State because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists. The Arabs call it 'Daesh' and I will be calling them the 'Daesh cutthroats'.

So what Cameron was urging the BBC to do was in accordance with current thinking and, I think we can deduce, informed by collective British Muslim opinion.

Last autumn the prime minister received a letter from signatories including Mohammed Abbasi, representing the Association of British Muslims, and Amjad Malik QC, president of the Association of Muslim Lawyers. They wrote:

We do not believe the terror group responsible should be given the credence and standing they seek by styling themselves Islamic State. It is neither Islamic, nor is it a state.

IS semantics aside, it’s interesting to consider why Cameron chose only to admonish the BBC. He could have just as easily said: “I wish the media would stop calling it Islamic State” because, after all, one is just as likely to read of IS in the Telegraph or the Mail – or even here on The Conversation – as to hear it spoken of on the BBC.

Enemy within?

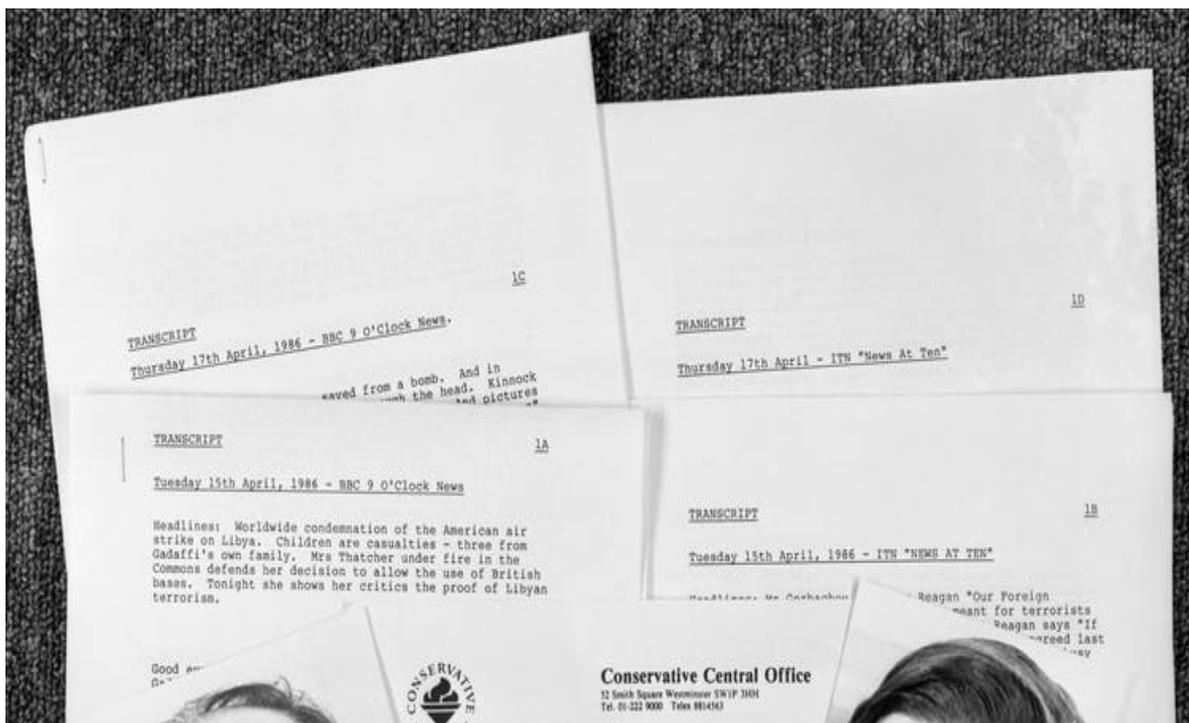
Plus ça change. The fact is that in times of national crises, particularly war, the BBC has become used to being criticised for the content and manner of their coverage. This stretches back at least as far as World War II when Churchill expressed his intense discontent at how the BBC reported the early days of conflict. Lord Reith, founding father of the BBC, wrote in 1949 of Churchill speaking of them as the “enemy within the gates, continually causing trouble, doing more harm than good ... something drastic must be done about them.”

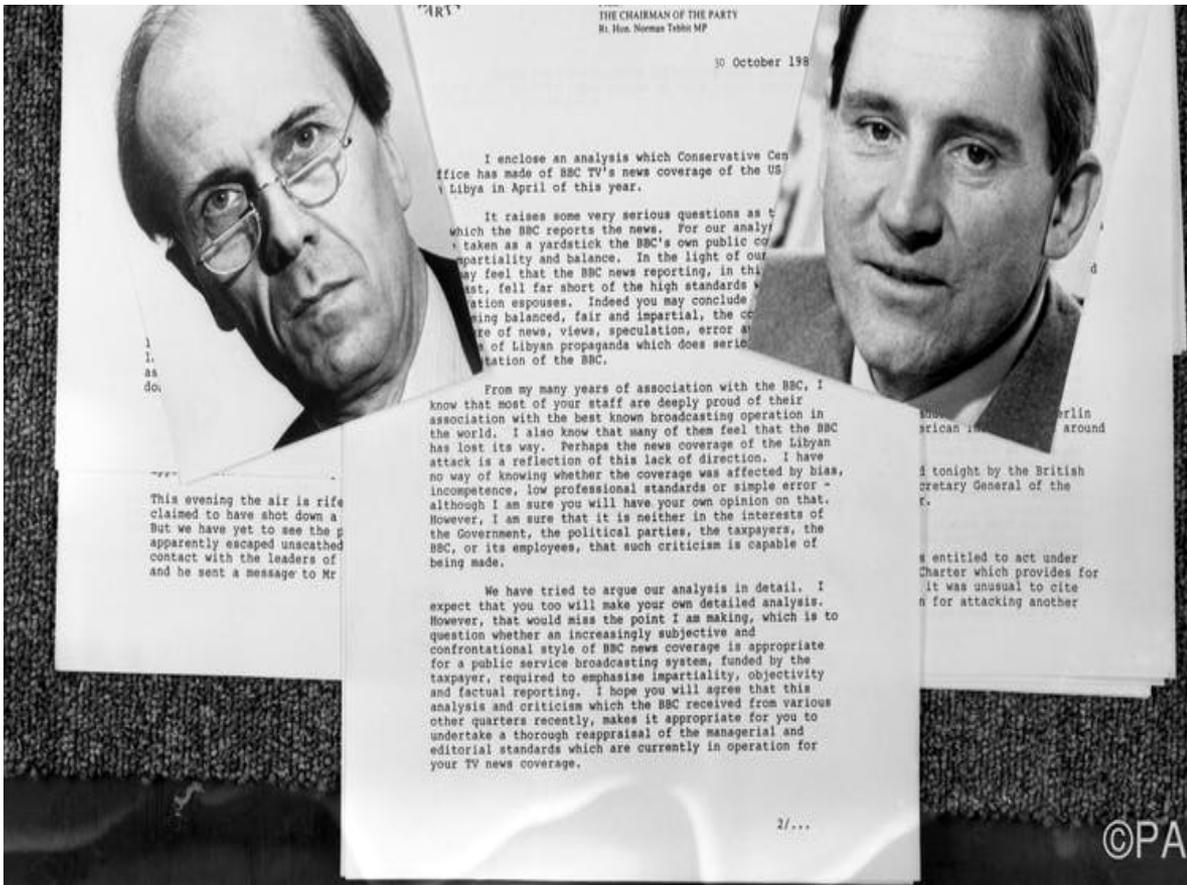
By the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956 prime minister Anthony Eden was fully expecting the BBC to become a functioning arm of the establishment. On the 40th anniversary of the crisis, former member of government during the Eden years and Telegraph editor, Lord Deedes, wrote:

There was a feeling during Suez among the ministers that the BBC was in the last resort a branch of government. They were not easily disabused of this notion.

During the Falklands war of 1982 it was the government’s wish that the media should suspend objective reporting and news gathering and embrace the British cause without question. When the BBC attempted to report objectively it was met with the full force of the Thatcher government. She herself “strongly” believed that the BBC was assisting the enemy – while Norman Tebbit wrote in his 1988 autobiography:

The unctuous ‘impartiality’ of the BBC’s editorialising was a source of grief and anger ... For me, the British Broadcasting Corporation might have called itself the Stateless Persons Broadcasting Corporation for it certainly did not reflect the mood of the people who finance it. The wounds inflicted by the BBC have not healed.





When it comes to criticising the BBC, Norman Tebbit had form as his letter from 1986 about coverage of the US raid on Libya shows. PA / PA Archive/Press Association Images

Little changed during the Blair years. In 2004, the former director general, Greg Dyke, wrote that the former PM had “unleashed the dogs” after the Hutton report – and in his memoirs Dyke prints letters from Blair which he claims show how the government tried to “bully” the BBC into changing its coverage in the run-up to the Iraq war. A BBC journalist told the *Scottish Daily Herald*:

You have to understand, we just could not cope with the barrage of complaints ... Long letters detailing alleged mistakes and misrepresentations and demanding that we answer every specific point we raised. We felt under undue pressure as an organisation. We felt it was a case of daily harassment.

Mutual suspicion pact

More broadly, the relationship between the BBC and successive governments since its creation in 1926 has been characterised by antagonism. Various governments, regardless of party, have attempted to limit the BBC’s perceived power and influence.

In times of warfare or threats to national security the aim has been to either make the BBC subordinate to government or, more realistically, to weaken its ability to operate relatively independently and autonomously. The conflicts between the two serve to illustrate the gap between what government expects the broadcasters to report and what the broadcasters see as their professional duty to report.

The point is that the BBC is a singular, publicly-funded broadcaster with a rich history and an international reputation which – deserved or not – means that it has a much scrutinised news output. Successive governments have sought to manage that output so that it presents the best view of themselves while maintaining the status quo.

It is in this context that we must view Cameron’s decision to call out the BBC, and only the BBC, for its reporting of Islamist terrorism.



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