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Dethroning the BBC

25 years after the Princess Diana interview aired, a series of grave malpractices by the BBC were revealed. The broadcaster needs urgent reform

In November 1995, some 23 million people in the UK, nearly 40 per cent of the entire population, watched the BBC journalist Martin Bashir interview Princess Diana about the state of her marriage with Prince Charles and her general attitude towards the monarchy. It was a hugely significant moment for the Royal Family but also, 25 years later, a journalistic coup that has severely rebounded on the Corporation.

For many years, journalists – including those from the *Daily Mail* group, the pro-monarchy tabloid newspaper outlet that might have expected to land such an interview – hunted for the truth behind the means of how Bashir secured the interview with the Princess. Following mounting pressure, in November 2020, Tim Davie, the new director general of the BBC, commissioned an inquiry chaired by a former Supreme Court judge, John Dyson, that found that Bashir had obtained the interview through deceptive means and that the BBC had then covered up subsequent concerns and, indeed, rehired Bashir in 2016 as a religious correspondent.

The conclusions of the report are explosive, condemning not simply the journalistic transgressions that had taken place but, more significantly, the Corporation's reaction to them. 'Without justification' noted Dyson, 'the BBC fell short of the high standards of integrity and transparency which are its hallmark' because it had both buried press logs that showed inconvenient facts about how Bashir had secured the interview and then failed to address the controversy on any of its news programmes.

Schadenfreude

The findings of the report have been greeted with glee by the BBC's critics in both the press and parliament. The *Mail*'s headline called on the police to 'probe the BBC' while the *Daily Telegraph*speculated that the Corporation now faces a 'shake-up' in the light of the 'Bashir row'.

The *Sun* and *The Times*, both owned by Rupert Murdoch, a well-known critic of the public service broadcaster, reported the sharp criticism of the BBC by Prince William, Diana's oldest son: 'She was failed not just by a rogue reporter, but by leaders at the BBC who looked the other way rather than asking the tough questions'. Given that the BBC is subject to a Royal Charter, such a public outbreak of harsh criticism of the national broadcaster was unprecedented.

With the BBC outspent by its commercial rivals, such as Sky, Netflix and Amazon, its funding base diminished by around 30 per cent since 2010, and its critics rubbing their hands with glee, the Corporation faces a very uncertain future.

It is, however, the reaction of a Conservative government whose backbenchers have long targeted the corporation as part of a broader culture war against 'liberals' and 'metropolitan elites', that will give the BBC the most cause for concern. The Dyson Report has allowed this war to move to the front bench with prime minister Boris Johnson stating that he was 'obviously very concerned' about the report and home secretary Priti Patel arguing that this was a 'very very significant moment...where lessons have to be learned'. The culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, followed up with an article in *The Times* where he insisted that 'cultural change must be a focus for the director general and new chair'.

This is a particularly vulnerable moment for the BBC. Boris Johnson's government has only recently agreed not to pursue decriminalisation of the licence fee, a move that might have cost the Corporation some £300 million a year, though this threat has not entirely disappeared. Meanwhile, next year sees a mid-term review of its Royal Charter that includes a new five-year licence fee settlement, and ministers have made it very clear that they will use the fallout from the Bashir interview as 'an opportunity to review governance and accountability structures'. With the BBC outspent by its commercial rivals, such as Sky, Netflix and Amazon, its funding base diminished by around 30 per cent since 2010, and its critics rubbing their hands with glee, the Corporation faces a very uncertain future.

A respectable institution

Supporters of the BBC have claimed that, while Bashir's behaviour was certainly unethical, the incident has been exaggerated by its enemies to accelerate an agenda to weaken the Corporation. Trust in the BBC remains much higher than for that of any other news source and the need for a non-market and non-aligned provider of news and information is all

the important in an age of disinformation and polarisation.

There is certainly much truth in the fact that the Bashir episode highlights the hypocrisy of the newspapers who are screaming murder about one 'rogue reporter' while conveniently forgetting their own role in phone hacking and their use of intrusive, unethical and sometimes illegal methods. Newspaper groups like Reach (publishers of the *Daily Mirror*) and News UK (publishers of the *Sun* and *The Times* and, until its demise, the *News of the World*) have paid out millions of pounds in damages to victims of precisely the kind of behaviour that Bashir engaged in. Indeed, one of the great ironies of the Princess Diana interview is that the BBC has been found to have emulated the worst practices of tabloid journalism, despite its stated commitment to uphold the highest reporting standards.

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The criticism by opportunistic rivals and long-standing opponents does not justify the cover-up that the Dyson Report so dramatically highlights. The whole episode reveals a lack of accountability in decision-making and governance that made it possible for the sins of omission that facilitated the original interview and then the refusal to make subsequent investigations public. In a frenzy of self-flagellation, the Corporation has now made a fulsome apology and, in an attempt to head off more drastic government intervention, has launched a review of editorial practices and governance.

The future of the BBC

The fears that Boris Johnson's government is determined to launch a full-scale 'war on the BBC' are somewhat exaggerated. Many years of financial restraint and government pressure have already severely weakened the BBC's appetite for and capacity to undertake hard-hitting journalism that might embarrass the Conservatives. The BBC is currently overseen by a chair who is a Conservative donor and a director general with extensive experience in the private sector. According to one former correspondent, 'there is plenty of evidence that the BBC, in both its international and domestic manifestations' deserves the epithet 'state broadcaster'. Indeed, one government broadcasting minister announced to parliament shortly after the publication of the Dyson Report that there was 'no need to rush into any changes' and that the BBC 'has been and should be, a beacon setting standards to which others can aspire'.

The best thing the BBC can do to hold off the wolves at its door and to restore its reputation is to start to hold the government accountable through fearless and independent journalism. For that to happen, the BBC will need to be unshackled from its intimate connections with the state through a series of measures – including an appointment process that is independent of government, decentralisation of decision-making and a more progressive and transparent funding system – that will democratise both its governance and editorial processes. This is not at all what the government has in mind but if the BBC is adequately to serve and represent the public who pay for its services, a programme of radical reform in the public interest is necessary.



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