

## **BBC News in the United States: a 'super-alternative' news medium emerges**

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This article focuses on BBC News in the United States, where recent developments suggest that a new, powerful 'multifaceted' BBC is emerging - one that integrates the many elements of this venerable yet still-dynamic modern institution. Thanks to its unique combination of historically derived institutional credibility, solid non-commercial funding base, and a newly acquired 'cool' cachet, the BBC brand in the United States can now be presented in multiple ways, using its many 'faces' to attract new audiences while retaining the loyalty of existing audiences, both in news and entertainment. This influence is not confined to the BBC — it can also be seen in other UK-originated news outlets. But it is the BBC that provides the anchor role that underpins the influence of these other institutions.

The accumulated impact of the BBC in Britain and around the world - including America - over the past 80 years has been immense. The institution, and the social responsibility/public-service broadcasting model it embodies, has become intimately associated with the very idea of Britain. The BBC controls one of the biggest news organizations in the world, with 3700 news employees and 41 overseas bureaus - more than CNN, far more than even the biggest US newspapers and the networks (Robertson, 2004). Yet it also maintains its role as a prominent producer and sponsor of all types of entertainment programming.

This article argues that the news function of the BBC, a traditional state-supported public-service broadcaster in Britain, operates differently in the US context. As the BBC has weakened its public diplomacy function within North America, and shifted its focus there from shortwave broadcasting to the internet and domestic cable television, its role has begun to resemble that of a domestic

US alternative news source - albeit an alternative source with enormous resources and high credibility. This development has been spurred by world developments since 11 September 2001 and the onset of the Iraq War.

### **US audiences for British media, post-9/11 to the war in Iraq**

It is clear from recent events that the BBC and other UK news sources have dramatically increased their exposure to American audiences - a development certainly hastened by widespread access to new media technologies such as the web and broadband internet access. However, it was the 2003 invasion of Iraq - and the run-up to that war - that greatly increased America's exposure to BBC News (as well as other UK media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Times* newspapers, and *The Economist* magazine). In particular, US cultural elites, including elements of the population opposed to war, who were looking for alternatives to mainstream US news, turned to non-domestic sources such as the BBC, which they perceived as offering a more nuanced, less biased news product. And this small yet significant opening to contra-flows from outside the United States is happening at a time when a once-seemingly unthinkable global phenomenon is quietly taking place: the decline of the United States' economic and cultural global dominance, as the luster of US soft power loses its shine around the world (Tunstall, 2008; Wallerstein, 2003).

Some pertinent factors need to be considered in distinguishing mainstream US media coverage of the war in Iraq from that of the UK in the years since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks:

- The continuing resonance of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' in the American public imagination.
- The success of the Bush administration in successfully framing the post-9/11 response to Al Qaeda and Iraq as part of a 'War on Terror', rather than (as it is largely seen in Europe), as a struggle framed in a legal-criminal investigation paradigm (Porch, 2004; Scheuer, 2004; Woodward, 2002).
- The ability of the Bush administration, in the run-up to the war in Iraq, to successfully frame that war as one of necessity, tied directly to the broader war on terrorism and a vital search for WMDs (Packer, 2005; Pitt and Ritter, 2002). Long before this frame started to be seriously questioned in the US mainstream media, it had been comprehensively rejected by large majorities of the public in most other countries - including Britain (Pew Research Center, 2004).
- The tendency for American news media and the American public to show greater deference to their president as commander-in-chief in time of

war — though that dynamic had clearly reached its limits by 2005 ('Brits vs. Yanks', 2004; Massing, 2005).

- The rightward drift taken by US media in the early years of the 21st century, with talk radio, Fox News, the *Washington Times*, Clear Channel radio stations, syndicated columns, and other outlets forming an effective media 'echo chamber' for right-wing opinions and positions that whipped up pro-administration, anti-pacifist sentiments; these positions were effectively introduced into an increasingly compromised mainstream media system, which became less able to facilitate a genuine, broad-based national debate (Alterman, 2003; McChesney, 2004).
- The sharp loss of confidence by the US public in the credibility of their domestic news media ('State of the News Media', 2007; Pew Research Center, 2005).
- The greater level of skepticism among the British public about the need for war in Iraq - not to mention UK participation in that war — even as British public opinion was generally better disposed to the US than that of most other nation-states (Naughtie, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2004).
- The greater level of skepticism about US motives in the ranks of the British polity - particularly in the ranks of the governing Labour Party, but also in other major political parties, including even the normally staunchly pro-US Conservative Party (Cook, 2004; Naughtie, 2004; Stothard, 2003).
- The tendency of the British news media to index themselves to the wider array of opinions over the Iraq War and the 'War on Terror' voiced within the British political system, thus providing access for Americans to a range of debate not typically seen in US politics.<sup>1</sup>

While these developments have been changing the broad political landscape in the United States, the diffusion of new technologies and changing social-cultural conditions are precipitating fundamental shifts in news consumption trends. As a major study on the state of America's news media puts it: 'We are witnessing conflicting trends of fragmentation and convergence simultaneously, and they sometimes lead in opposite directions' ('State of the News Media', 2007: para. 3). That study notes the possible emergence of 'prosumers' who are replacing the traditional notion of news consumers. According to this concept, citizens as pro-sumers 'simultaneously function as consumers, editors and producers of a new kind of news in which journalistic accounts are but one element' ('State of the News Media', 2007: para. 7). A small yet increasing segment of the US market - consisting of more highly educated, well-to-do Americans (sometimes called the 'cultural' or 'creative class') — is, it seems, prepared to seek news and information from external sources, even

when their country is at war (Wall and Bicket, 2008). These so-called cultural creatives are less inward-looking than other Americans, and more accepting of opinions and information from a range of sources (Ray and Anderson, 2001). Their appearance can be said to reflect the rise of 'micro-spheres', or sub-publics, emerging within the broader public sphere (Volkmer, 2002, 2005).

From the preceding it is clear that by the second or third year of the 21st century the prerequisites were in place - the 'pull' factors, if you like - for the broadening of the US public sphere to allow greater input from non-US media as a result of the events following 11 September 2001, and the US media's response to those events. The introduction of these media from a trusted source - primarily the BBC but also other UK-based media - has arguably led to the expansion of the US public sphere into a putative transnational US-UK public sphere.

In the run-up to the Iraq War and during the war itself, non-US news sites saw sharp increases in web traffic from America. This trend became apparent soon after the World Trade Center attack. Alina Tugend, writing only weeks after the attack, noted:

Increasingly, those hungry for a broader and less American-centric perspective of the situation have turned to foreign media outlets, in particular the BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and British newspapers, such as the *Guardian* - which experienced a huge jump in Web site visitors after September 11. (2001: 24)

While news sites from other English-speaking countries - including those from Canada and Australia - were popular, the majority of this traffic went to UK news sites. While the BBC was the prime beneficiary of this development, other, non-BBC-related UK websites also saw substantial increases in US traffic. This was particularly true of The *Guardian* and, to a lesser extent, The *Independent*, The *Economist* and other 'quality' UK news media.

By early 2003, on the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq, American traffic to such sites was rising sharply. The GuardianUnlimited site - a blanket website for The *Guardian* and The *Observer* newspapers - saw a heavy spike in US traffic during this period, coming second only to the BBC in terms of US access to UK news sites (Kahney, 2003). The surge of US interest in The *Guardian* continued after the initial ground invasion: in August 2004 The *Guardian* reported that approaching half of its 9.6 million users originated in the US (Teather, 2004).<sup>2</sup> Overall, the majority of internet traffic from overseas has gone to UK news sites, which have retained their popularity in the years following the Iraq War (Boyd-Barrett, 2007; Thurman, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

The top news media performer in the United States, however, has consistently been the BBC. With its large (publicly funded) budget and cross-promotion from its BBC World Service News, plus its widespread name recognition, the BBC has clearly been at the forefront of the rapid spread of British-sourced news in the US. Since 2001, the BBC's web traffic has increased rapidly, to the point where, by mid-2005, the BBC's website was

copying with some 3 million users per *day*, with its main global web server hubs split between London and New York (Hinde, 2005). Today, the BBC attracts greater numbers of American users than such important domestic US news outlets as Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* (Thurman, 2007).

Increasing numbers of Americans - primarily but not exclusively those who have greater access to the internet - have thus been seeking news from alternatives to the traditional mainstream media. British news sources make up a major component - certainly the major non-US component - of these alternative sources. However, such sources also need to be considered within a broader universe of access to many different sources of news on the web. They include innumerable weblogs and sources such as *commondreams.org* and *AlterNet.org*, which act as clearing houses pulling news from multiple sources, including, to a significant extent, from UK news sources. In fact, at least some of the rise in US web traffic to UK news sites can be attributed in part to the fact that stories appearing on the UK news sites are often linked to from US alternative media sites. This provides a doorway for eager and news-hungry US web surfers to further explore UK news sites.

The rise in access to non-US news was not limited to the web during this period. In early 2002, a contributor to *Columbia Journalism Review*, a US trade publication for American journalists, was noting that 'Americans' interest in the news is up, of course, since September 11, but not only in the American version of it. British news organizations have seen increased US interest' (Parks et al., 2002: 56). By early 2002, 27 National Public Radio (NPR) stations had added BBC broadcasts, for a total of 283 stations in the United States. This was in addition to the hundreds of Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) stations that were carrying BBC World news broadcasts. Audiences for BBC World news bulletins, aired on public television stations in the US, rose 28 percent during the first weeks of the Iraq invasion (Robertson, 2004). This rise has continued unabated through much of the decade (Thurman, 2007).

It is also worth noting that the rise in interest in the BBC has gone hand in hand with a sharp upturn in the audience for another type of news programming that could be considered 'alternative' within the US paradigm: PBS and especially NPR. Both British and US public broadcasting organizations have been working more closely together, particularly in terms of delivery of hard news (Parks et al., 2002).

### **Contrasting styles of coverage**

So what is it that makes the culture of British journalism so different - and so refreshing - to large numbers of Americans? What is it that American news consumers yearn for and find in British coverage? This section considers

elements of journalistic practice and culture common to a number of British news organizations.

One clue to the inherent differences between the two countries' contemporary approaches to news is to be found in a fascinating pair of interviews published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2004, comparing British and American styles of journalism through the lens of two editors of comparable newspapers in the UK and US: Leonard Doyle, the foreign editor at *The Independent* of London and the *Washington Post's* Michael Getler. While Getler defends both his paper and US print journalism in general, Doyle is harshly critical of the US elite press's performance over Iraq, noting the debilitating effect of so-called 'objectivity' on the American mainstream press.

From Doyle's point of view, the mainstream US media failed to challenge a neoconservative elite that drove the US into an 'illegal' war ('Brits vs. Yanks', 2004:47). While praising the high standards of professionalism among American news workers, he nevertheless blames 'the structure of US print journalism, where big media organizations like the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*' have become complacent in a media environment in which they still face little direct competition (though that is changing). The result, Doyle argues, is 'an overcautious press that has fantastic resources at its disposal, but frankly disappoints when it comes to exposing the administration to rigorous scrutiny' ('Brits vs. Yanks', 2004:47). What's more, in drawing parallels with Iraq War coverage and what he calls 'their limp-wristed coverage of dirty wars of the CIA in El Salvador and Nicaragua', Doyle suggests that these failings are deep-seated and systemic, and that, in spite of their undoubted professionalism and integrity, the US media's greater trust of and deference to their government remains a deep flaw ('Brits vs. Yanks', 2004).

Turning from print to televisual media more evidence emerges of differences in the approach of British and American TV news outlets - where most Americans still get their news, either from the networks or their local stations. Both the BBC and, to a lesser extent, its commercial counterpart, ITN, have over decades built up enviable reputations for credibility and impartiality in their reporting. In the 1980s, the corporation famously refused to hold to the spirit of a Conservative government ban on broadcasting the speeches of IRA terrorists or their political representatives. Television news pieces would include an actor's voiceover of an IRA source, synchronized with the picture of the source speaking. At the start of the 'War on Terror', Jane Kirtley (2001) favorably compared British TV news practice with the US networks' submission to a Bush administration 'suggestion' that they should not run tapes by Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden or broadcast his voice. When the British government made a similar request of the BBC and competing TV news operations ITN and Sky, they all rejected that request. And, as Kirtley comments, these UK organizations 'don't even have a First Amendment to protect them' (2001: 66). More recently, when democracy protests took place in Burma in the fall of 2007, audiences for CNN were told that monks were demonstrating in Yangon,

Myanmar (the names chosen by military dictators), whereas BBC audiences were informed about the events in Rangoon, Burma (the names used by opposition groups who were democratically elected for a brief time in 1990).

There is also a financial component to consider. BBC News is not under the same commercial, profit-seeking pressures that afflict US news outlets (though this too is starting to change) and British television news generally is less dependent on expensive 'celebrity' anchors. Richard Sambrook, director of global news for the BBC, addressed this point in an interview:

In Britain the networks still basically spend their budgets on newsgathering, while in the States they increasingly spend it on the talent. The wager is that personality matters more than program substance. 'Katie Couric is a fantastic news presenter', Sambrook said, 'but is she really worth \$60 million? One wonders what could be done with [news] content if she was making \$40 million, or \$20 million.' (Kunkel, 2002: 4)

More broadly, there is a critique present in the BBC and other UK news organizations that centres on the inherent and sometimes stultifying conservatism of most US mainstream news organizations. While it is rare to find senior BBC executives going on the record overtly criticizing US news media, other less senior staff are occasionally freer with their opinions. Jon Friedman's (2004) interview with the BBC's Rachel Atwell, who heads the BBC's TV news operation, elicited a rare degree of candor. Notes Friedman: 'As blunt as a spoon, [Atwell] indicated that the American media veer between acting downright ludicrous and mind-numbingly illogical, though she was far too polite to come right out and use those words. Still, she wasn't shy about calling the American media "extraordinarily self-obsessed"' (2004: para. 2). In reiterating what Atwell regards as the 'big difference in how the European media and their American counterparts cover the news of the world', Friedman notes that she 'can't get over the American media's fixation with writing and speaking about the candidates and the questions of religion and patriotism ...' Noting that there are 'flags everywhere' in the US media's coverage of events, Atwell said the preoccupation is 'absolutely incomprehensible' (2004, para. 21).

Unlike the publicly funded BBC, British newspapers are privately owned institutions with a dual commitment to making money and preserving the practices and traditions of what might be called 'Anglo-Saxon' or Anglo-American journalism, which includes a strong support for freedom of expression. In this, they can be considered as counterparts and equals of many other mainstream quality titles in the English-speaking world - those that presume to represent the public sphere of their state- or nation-based polity.

However, there are still key differences that separate both the British quality print and broadcast media from their US counterparts. For one thing, British journalists are by inclination less deferential to their country's leaders and office holders than journalists in the United States. This extends to senior cabinet ministers and even to the British prime minister, who is grilled much more severely than the President of the United States. And again, this can be

indexed to the more antagonistic and partisan nature of British politics - perhaps most clearly epitomized by the weekly clash of parliamentary politics known as 'Question Time'.

British TV interviewers have long been characterized by a take-no-prisoners style that would likely bring them rebukes in the US. This is a tradition epitomized by the BBC's (late) Sir Robin Day, who in 1982 famously caused the then-British Minister of Defence, John Nott, to walk out of an interview after Day called him a 'here today, gone tomorrow politician'. More recently, Jeremy Paxman, a host on BBC2's flagship *Newsnight* program and in many ways Day's spiritual successor, won a journalism award for taking Michael Howard (then Home Secretary and later leader of the Conservative Party) to task, pressing him on an issue by asking him the same question no fewer than 14 times (Graff, 2005; Robertson, 2004). Paxman is the man who has famously been quoted as saying he's always thinking during an interview, 'Why is this lying bastard lying to me?' (Graff, 2005; 'Interview: Quest for an Answer', 1990). The Paxman style of political interrogation has become de facto the standard to which many British TV interviewers - including David Dimbleby, John Humphrys and James Naughtie - hold or aspire. Interestingly, BBC America is, from February 2008, airing a weekly version of *Newsnight* in the United States, with Paxman prominently featured (Clarke, 2007).

Furthermore, in any clash between UK media and its government, the government often appears in a less favorable light in the eyes of the British public. This was highlighted by the events surrounding the release of the 2004 Hutton Report. This report had investigated the details surrounding the apparent suicide of a former Iraq weapons inspector, David Kelly, after reporting by the BBC's Andrew Gilligan led indirectly to the government's apparent identification of Kelly as the probable source of information damaging to the government. Lord Hutton's report more-or-less exonerated the British government and placed almost all the blame on the BBC - directly for contributing to Kelly's suicide and indirectly for its procedures in challenging the veracity of government pre-invasion claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (the infamous 'dodgy dossier'). Even though the report forced the resignation of then Director-General Greg Dyke and the chairman of the Board of Governors, its findings were not fully accepted by the British public; contemporary polls revealed that most Britons believed their government was being dishonest and that the BBC was in fact telling the truth (Curtice, 2004a, 2004b). Subsequent revelations indicate that the BBC's position likely was closer to the truth than the government's had been (Morris, 2008; Prince, 2008). As a result, the government has since trodden more warily in criticizing the Corporation over its news activities.

The war in Iraq highlighted very real differences in how each country's news media perceived their effectiveness in covering a conflict in which both countries were directly involved. In general terms, the British news media came out of the conflict in better shape than their US counterparts. Thus, for

example, while the BBC was criticized in some popular and academic quarters for being too supportive of the government in the initial invasion stage (Lewis, 2006; Pilger, 2003), there was little of the hand-wringing in the British news generally, or the BBC specifically, that was comparable to the US media's general post-invasion navel-gazing (Kurtz, 2004a). There was no UK press equivalent of the widely reported critical report by the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz (2004b) of his paper's handling of the war, or the *mea culpa* produced by the *New York Times*, whose editor's note acknowledged that its coverage of the WMD issue 'was not as rigorous as it should have been' (*The Times and Iraq*, 2004: 10). More broadly, the US news media in the first years of the 21st century have come under a steady torrent of public criticism over ethical lapses and laxness in their handling of numerous major news issues, from the stock market bubble to poverty in America and other stories of major significance that seemingly get ignored or under-covered. But of all the stories that the US news media have been accused of mishandling during this period, none has had the importance or resonance of the Iraq War, its genesis, and its subsequent evolution into insurgency (Massing, 2005).

From a specifically US perspective, one more key indicator of British journalism's privileged reception in the United States is its quiet integration into America's alternative media system. In recent years UK journalists and UK media outlets increasingly have been used as credible sources by US alternative and progressive media. British-originated news stories are regularly republished in alternative online news sites, while British journalists such as Robert Fisk and Andrew Gumbel have become frequent contributors to prominent alternative media outlets such as *The Nation*, *Znet* and Amy Goodman's 'Democracy Now' radio and television shows (Wall and Bicket, 2008). This informal coalition of UK mainstream media reporting and US alternative media promotion and dissemination should not be underestimated. Under certain circumstances, it can propel an under-reported news story into the national mainstream and sustain its salience - at least for a period — even in the face of mainstream media resistance. This was clearly shown in the US coverage of the 'Downing Street Memo' story in 2005 (Bicket and Wall, 2007).

### **The BBC as a unique non-US news institution in America**

The first part of this article reviewed the various 'pull' factors that have made non-US-originated news so appealing to a wider array of audiences in the United States; in doing so, it holds that British news organizations in general, and the BBC in particular, have been in a uniquely strong position to take advantage of this appeal. The second part of this article turns to the institution of the BBC itself, to show how its size and nature places it in by far the strongest position among British news organizations to take advantage of this growing demand in the US for non-US news. Key to understanding its success

in the United States in recent years is the BBC's manipulation of its institutional strengths — its 'push' factors. These strengths can be characterized as four institutional-cultural 'faces' the BBC presents to the world, plus a fifth 'face' that is currently more specific to the BBC's emerging role in the United States and its operations in that country - though this new face suggests an approach that could well be replicated in other parts of the world.

The range of institutional-cultural activities represented by these faces (outlined in more detail below) is impressive: they range from the BBC as a public-service broadcaster and global media powerhouse, to the BBC as a 'super-alternative' news medium in a US context. As these institutional-cultural faces have developed over time, they have each tended to reinforce and magnify the resonance of the others. As the BBC now expands its news (and entertainment) presence in the United States, each of these faces allows the corporation to broaden its reach across multiple fronts. Taken together, they give the BBC a uniquely influential role (for a foreign media operation) in shaping US public opinion. Again, this influence is not monopolized by the BBC - it is evident in other UK-originated news media such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. Yet it is the BBC that anchors the influence of these other institutions. The Corporation's resonance and adaptability explains its continuing strength and adaptability. Almost alone among traditional nation-state public-service broadcasters, the BBC is making a profitable transition from public-service broadcaster to hybrid public-commercial entity. This evolution can be seen in perhaps its most advanced form in the United States, where the BBC has made its presence felt in three ways: through its website; through rebroadcast of its programming on cable networks and on public radio and television; and through BBC America, a commercial joint venture with the Discovery Network (part-owned by Liberty Media Corporation). BBC America has become increasingly successful in recent years, and is now available in almost 40 million households (Robertson, 2004). BBC America features not only entertainment programming, but also a regular BBC News round-ups as well as *World News Today*, a commercially funded morning news show for American viewers. It is also one - but only one - of the many venues now available for American audiences to receive BBC News.

The BBC has also run several marketing campaigns such as their fall 2005 initiative, 'News for a Nonstop World', which promoted its website and radio programming using RSS feeds and instant messaging, with the former appearing as banner advertisements on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (Morrissey, 2005). In 2007, the Corporation launched a campaign to urge American audiences to start requesting that US cable companies make BBC News more available. Billboards in Los Angeles encouraged passers-by to 'See the world you've been missing' (Gold, 2007). BBC sources insist they have identified a gap in the US market, as CNN provides domestic audiences with less international news and more talk shows than in the past, while the morning network 'news' shows provide little to no news at all - at a time when

opinion polls showed an increased desire for international news (BBC Factor, 2005; Christensen, 2004; Gold, 2007).

### **The multifaceted BBC's global role: its institutional-cultural faces considered**

Over the course of its first half-century or so, the BBC evolved the first three of the institutional-cultural faces it presents to the world. From the 1920s, the BBC's developing role as a domestic public-service broadcaster provided a public-service broadcasting model that was later replicated throughout the world. Then, beginning in the 1930s, the BBC emerged as a key medium of imperial public diplomacy through the inauguration of international short-wave radio broadcasts, beginning with the Empire Service (Thussu, 2007). For most of the 20th century, these were the two main faces of the BBC.

The third face that emerged is more abstract and ideological, yet no less powerful for that: the BBC as a type of cultural 'time capsule' for British values that appeal to other countries such as the US. Long before the BBC started trying to self-consciously brand itself and specifically market its 'Britishness' overseas (really a 1990s phenomenon), the BBC had built up for itself the role of a prime interpreter of British values to the world. The corporation did this both institutionally, as the aforementioned model for a very British approach to public-service broadcasting, and in content terms, as the producer of news and entertainment content that subtly or not-so-subtly articulated these so-called British values and British identities (the class system, fair play, stoicism, reverence for history, etc.), both to domestic audiences and to the wider world. Incidentally, these institutional and cultural values were also mimicked by Independent Television (ITV), the BBC's commercial competitor in Britain; but around the world, they are almost universally *identified* with the BBC (Briggs, 1985).

All three of these older institutional-cultural faces operated together in creating a particular role and myth for the BBC and what it stood for, especially in the post-Second World War period. The two newer faces to emerge in recent years play off their older siblings, but take account of changing technological, social, cultural and ideological factors, both in the UK itself and in global media. The first of these newer faces has become almost as universal as the other three: this is the BBC as a commercial, for-profit entity, promoting global news coverage and entertainment in competition with other transnational media entities. However, crucially, in presenting this new face to the world, the BBC retains its reputation for quality and credibility.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the clearest expression of this new direction for the corporation is BBC World Service Television, which in 1995 split into the following two entities: BBC World, a 24-hour commercial international news and current affairs TV channel that is challenging the dominance of global TV news leader, CNN

International (Hachten and Scotton, 2002); and BBC Prime, the BBC's general entertainment TV channel in Europe, Africa and the Middle East ('BBC Worldwide Annual Review', 2005). What's more, the BBC's international television services are funded commercially, in sharp contrast to the BBC's World Service radio, which remains funded by a direct Foreign Office grant (Thussu, 2007).

### **A new face for the BBC in America: a 'super-alternative' news medium**

This leads to consideration of the BBC (and by extension other, less prominent UK-based news media) as an *alternative* medium within the context of an expanding national public sphere in the United States - or even as part of an emerging transnational geocultural public sphere or 'microsphere', incorporating key elements from its operations in the United States and Britain. This might seem an unusual proposition to make, given the BBC's massive size and global importance. But, as the following makes clear, the BBC's role in the United States - regardless of its impact elsewhere - has long stayed clear of the 'mainstream' tag.

The term 'alternative media' is used in this context to define 'media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever forms those concentrations may take in different locations' (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 7). However defined, the label 'alternative media' has traditionally been used to encompass media outlets that lie outside the so-called 'mainstream' media - or more specifically, the corporate-owned mainstream media. This has allowed the term to be applied to a wide range of media outlets, from *The Nation* magazine to the *Village Voice* to community radio and television. More recently it has been expanded to incorporate countless blogs and alternative news websites. The United States has seen a significant rise of the reach and impact of alternative media of all types in recent years.

Of course the United States has a long tradition of such media. Since the early 20th century, the alternative press, variously defined, has been a constant feature of the US media landscape, albeit subject to rising and falling popularity. These media emerged initially from a primarily (though not exclusively) radical-left tradition of muckraking and dissident writing (Kessler, 1984). From the 1960s, the alternative press re-emerged as a significant force, linked to (mostly) weekly print newspapers such as the *Village Voice*, *LA Weekly* and *Seattle Weekly*, as well as radical magazines such as *Z Magazine*. More recently, however, the onset of the 'War on Terror' and the war in Iraq has coincided with not only an expansion of the alternative press in the print medium (Shaffer, 2003), but also the maturation of the internet as an online home for alternative media on both sides of the political spectrum.

All the same, the 'alternative' tag remains fuzzy, and there is little agreement about what constitutes alternative media - beyond self-identification by media outlets claiming this status. As the alternative *Z Magazine* points out:

If the *Village Voice* calls itself alternative, for example, but is virtually identical in its structure, finances, and decision making with non-alternative institutions, and, moreover, has no intention of making any changes in these aspects, it is still alternative, because the Voice's CEO says it is. (Alpert, 2004: para 2)

The BBC of course does not typically describe itself as an alternative medium, in the United States or elsewhere. However, in terms of its role and impact in the country as a whole, it is arguably analogous to, say, the *Village Voice's* role in New York political and cultural life. Returning to the Couldry and Curran (2003) definition, the BBC does represent a production center 'that challenges, at least implicitly', concentrations of traditional media power in the United States.

Most obviously, the BBC's non-standard (for the US) financing arrangements set it apart from the dominant pattern of US commercial news. Partly as a result, the BBC's media practices do clearly still fall 'outside the mainstreams of corporate communication' in the US. BBC leaders like to contrast their position with that of mainstream commercial media - whether in the UK or the United States - which invariably are subject to significant and at times debilitating influences from the marketplace. For example, in an April 2005 interview on Hypergene MediaBlog, Richard Sambrook, director of BBC Global News, argues that, in its move toward a participatory media model, the Corporation's public funding enables it to 'concentrate on quality and reach', whereas commercial competitors are forced to take account of profitability. That probably means we can afford to take risks, by focusing purely on the public value of a news service, that a commercial broadcaster can't' (Willis and Bowman, 2005: para. 67). Crucially, the BBC's resulting placement in the alternative 'camp' is also recognized and accepted by key audience segments, such as 'interpretive communities' of self-identified activists in the United States surveyed on the alternative media's role in opposition to mainstream media (Rauch, 2007). The BBC has retained this oppositional cachet in spite of the recurring debate back in the UK over whether, and to what extent, the Corporation truly challenged the UK government in the period surrounding the 2003 Iraq invasion (Lewis, 2006, Pilger, 2003; Tumber and Palmer, 2004).

Returning to the alternative media literature, we find that studies of alternative media identify such media as representing voices that offer advocacy, oppositional, or even dissident views (Kessler, 1984; Streitmatter, 2001). They do so because they so often perceive mainstream media as biased and operating in the interests of the powerful as opposed to minority or other less empowered voices - in particular because of their financial structures that cause them to be advertising driven and thus dependent on business interests and because their owners are part of these same elite classes (Armstrong, 1984; Streitmatter, 2001).

As for whether the BBC itself practices an alternative or left-wing bias: that is certainly a perception held by some on the right of the US political spectrum. However, given the general conservatism of the United States in comparison to Britain, the further shift to the right experienced in the United States in recent

years - at a time when political conservatism in the UK has been in marked retreat - and the concomitant rightward shift of the US media, it seems inevitable that the BBC would appear more liberal or left-leaning by comparison. But such an assumption emerges not from the BBC's professionalism and news ethics, but instead from the manifestation of a broader ideological shift - to the right - among significant sections of the US polity. In this context it is worth recalling the comments of Nick Higham, a special correspondent for BBC News 24. Higham's comments focus on the Iraq War, but one could apply the reasoning more broadly to at least one component of the changing national culture in the United States:

I think Americans, particularly conservative Americans, have a problem with the BBC approach because impartiality, which is the BBC's fundamental watchword, is itself a liberal notion.... And our commitment to impartiality comes out of what is fundamentally a small 'l' liberal culture, liberal media culture, in which objectivity, impartiality are thought to be good in themselves and achievable.... The impression I get is that a lot of Americans just don't get that.... And to them it's much more important that the news media are supportive of the national effort, particularly when you go to war. (Robertson, 2004: 50)

Although the BBC does not engage actively in advocacy journalism it certainly does promote a wide variety of political views, and often dissident views, especially when compared with the narrower range of political and ideological debate typically heard in the US mainstream media.

### Conclusions

This article has re-examined the role of the BBC in the United States - particularly in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq. Within the broad context provided by these geopolitical developments, the role of the BBC has begun to resemble that of a domestic US alternative news source, filling in the vacuum left by an American agenda-setting press that appeared to cease 'doing its job properly' in the crucial run-up period to the Iraq War, and for at least two years afterwards. We can thus effectively apply - at least in the case of the United States - the alternative media label to news outlets, such as the BBC, that are not traditionally considered to be 'alternative' in their home country. The same label can be applied to a number of prominent UK-based news media using the same process. However, the BBC's size, influence and multifaceted nature allows it to be considered, effectively, as a 'super-alternative' news and infotainment source in the United States - contributing to a high level of credibility that sets it apart from US mainstream news media. Yet the BBC also brings to bear its massive newsgathering operation and reputation for honesty and credibility built up from generations of global broadcasting. The BBC 'brand' carries name recognition and an aura of respectability and quality that carries over from its news to its entertainment programming, available on multiple US cable channels in addition to BBC

America. And in fact, BBC America has expanded its BBC World news coverage, both on weekday mornings with a three-hour block, and weekday evenings with an expanded one-hour news special broadcast from Washington, DC. And, in a first for the BBC, BBC World now cablecasts its content on a Long Island cable system reaching 2 million subscribers. And BBC World's Richard Sambrook is negotiating with other US cable companies (Hansen, 2007). No other non-US media organization currently has the credibility, legitimacy and the deep pockets necessary to take on this multi-faceted role. All in all, it's a powerful combination for influencing US public opinion.

In general, the quality British news media - based in a country where the attitude toward US motives and actions in the 'War on Terror' has been more critical (in spite of former Prime Minister Tony Blair's ardent support for the US-led coalition) - have maintained a more combative attitude toward the United States and the Bush administration. Even so, these outlets' categorization as foreign media and their still-marginal status in the US media market currently insulate them both from mainstream public pressure in the US and from overt political pressure from the US government (though this is starting to change). This freedom allows them to be much more critical of, and even antagonistic to, administration foreign policy than is the case with their elite US-based counterparts. Yet the reputation for integrity and quality they generally enjoy as English-language news outlets representing a key American ally enables them to be considered appropriate and acceptable sources of information among large segments of the US audiences.

From among the set of non-US media organizations operating in the US, the BBC is exceptionally well positioned to adapt to the new combination of 'pull' and 'push' factors now provided by a dynamic mix of new technologies and social, cultural and political developments. The BBC's evolving, multi-faceted identity puts it in a near-unique position — for a foreign news organization - to respond to the demand of millions of disaffected US 'pro-sumers' seeking new sources of credible, legitimate information. It is these American pro-sumers, rapidly increasing in number yet still tied to Western news norms, who are the likely advance guard of a fundamental shift under way in news consumption patterns. Meanwhile, the increased presence of BBC News on NPR and PBS services provides a powerful complementary 'push' factor, seeking out new audiences of people who may not necessarily have been seeking alternative news, but who might in any case appreciate such a source if it is presented to them. At the same time, the BBC brand carries name recognition and an aura of respectability and quality that carries over from its news to its entertainment programming, now available on multiple US cable channels in addition to BBC America. In the process, the BBC, it could be argued, has been expanding its public-service function from one national public sphere to another - in effect contributing to the creation of a transnational public sphere or microsphere, linking the United States to the UK. However, in so doing, the BBC is also contributing to a fundamental change in the nature of that public sphere.

If the BBC has become de facto a form of alternative media in America, it is because that 'alternativeness' has been created by the specific nature of BBC News operations in the United States, combined with the reception of the content by US audiences who perceive themselves as unable to get the full story from their own media - particularly liberals and those against the war, whose voices fail to appear or resonate within the US media sphere.

This does not necessarily mean that the BBC will retain its alternative tag in the United States - it is, after all, a global media giant, with strong commercial ambitions in the world's richest media market. It is equally likely that this 'alternativeness' is a temporary condition, made possible by a confluence of larger changes in international relations, global journalism, and communication practices and patterns. Yet experience of the BBC's global operations to date indicates that it can retain its multifaceted nature, preserving a strong brand identity even as it develops its new faces and moves ahead aggressively with new services and into new arenas. BBC News may well preserve some of its 'alt cool' even as it becomes steadily mainstreamed into the US news sphere.

Finally, the rise of the BBC in the United States also suggests a new twist in the reshaping of media and cultural boundaries in that country. Now that the era of purely national centrifugal news (defined in America by the formerly dominant network news) is gone or going, the BBC is positioning itself to be a significant player in the fragmented, centripetal news microsphere that will likely replace it.

## Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Intercultural and Development Division at the May 2007 conference of the International Communication Association in San Francisco, California.

1. Bennett's (1990) indexing theory can be applied usefully to news media coverage in both the UK and the US. This approach examines the extent to which media professionals 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in their news coverage 'to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic' (Bennett, 1990: 106). The theory, together with subsequent refinements (Althaus et al., 1996; Livingston and Eachus, 1996; Zaller and Chiu, 1996), takes a significant step forward in helping us understand how the press actually functions in covering political news. Its emphasis on the role of source-journalist relations - and particularly on the power of government sources - is revealing.

2. Leander Kahney, in an article for Wired.com, quotes Jon Dennis, Guardian Unlimited's deputy news editor, who points out that American readers are 'visiting his site for the range of opinions it publishes, and to engage in vigorous debate. Media outlets in the United States, he said, are not presenting the issues critically' (Kahney, 2003: para. 10).

3. Interestingly, more conservative business-oriented UK publications such as *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* of London have also seen sharp increases in their US circulation in recent years (Hansen, 2007; Jacobs, 2004; Parks et al., 2002). By late 2004, *The Economist's* weekly sales in the United States had reached 450,000 - three times the UK sales figure and 45 percent of the magazine's worldwide circulation (*The Economist*, 2004).

4. This is not to suggest that commercial values and quality news are incompatible - of course, they are not. But their forced merger in the context of the BBC was difficult, to say the least. The radical institutional changes brought about by the BBC's reorientation in the 1990s (under Director-General John Birt's Producer's Choice program) were painful - and Georgina Bern's anthropological study of the BBC during the late 1990s, *Uncertain Vision* (2004), provides plenty of evidence for that. But the BBC nevertheless seems to have weathered that era with its global reputation fairly intact.

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