

As Gaza is savaged again, understanding the BBC's role requires more than sentiment

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In Peter Watkins' remarkable BBC film, *The War Game*, which foresaw the aftermath of an attack on London with a one-megaton nuclear bomb, the narrator says: "On almost the entire subject of thermo-nuclear weapons, there is now practically total silence in the press, official publications and on TV. Is there hope to be found in this silence?"

The truth of this statement was equal to its irony. On 24 November, 1965, the BBC banned *The War Game* as "too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting". This was false. The real reason was spelled out by the chairman of the BBC Board of Governors, Lord Normanbrook, in a secret letter to the Secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend.

"[*The War Game*] is not designed as propaganda," he wrote, "it is intended as a purely factual statement and is based on careful research into official material... But the showing of the film on television might have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent." Following a screening attended by senior Whitehall officials, the film was banned because it told an intolerable truth. Sixteen years later, the then BBC director-general, Sir Ian Trethowan, renewed the ban, saying that he feared for the film's effect on people of "limited mental intelligence". Watkins' brilliant work was eventually shown in 1985 to a late-night minority audience. It was introduced by Ludovic Kennedy who repeated the official lie.

What happened to *The War Game* is the function of the state broadcaster as a cornerstone of Britain's ruling elite. With its outstanding production values, often fine popular drama, natural history and sporting coverage, the BBC enjoys wide appeal and, according to its managers and beneficiaries, "trust". This "trust" may well apply to Springwatch and Sir David Attenborough, but there is no demonstrable basis for it in much of the news and so-called current affairs that claim to make sense of the world, especially the machinations of rampant power. There are honourable individual exceptions, but watch how these are tamed the longer they remain in the institution: a "defenestration", as one senior BBC journalist describes it.

This is notably true in the Middle East where the Israeli state has successfully intimidated the BBC into presenting the theft of Palestinian land and the caging, torturing and killing of its people as an intractable "conflict" between equals. Standing in the rubble from an Israeli attack, one BBC journalist went further and referred to "Gaza's strong culture of martyrdom". So great is this distortion that young viewers of BBC news have told Glasgow University researchers they are left with the impression that Palestinians are the illegal colonisers of their own country. The current BBC "coverage" of Gaza's genocidal misery

reinforces this.

The BBC's "Reithian values" of impartiality and independence are almost scriptural in their mythology. Soon after the corporation was founded in the 1920s by Lord John Reith, Britain was consumed by the General Strike. "Reith emerged as a kind of hero," wrote the historian Patrick Renshaw, "who had acted responsibly and yet preserved the precious independence of the BBC. But though this myth persisted it has little basis in reality... the price of that independence was in fact doing what the government wanted done. [Prime Minister Stanley] Baldwin... saw that if they preserved the BBC's independence, it would be much easier for them to get their way on important questions and use it to broadcast Government propaganda."

Unknown to the public, Reith had been the prime minister's speech writer. Ambitious to become Viceroy of India, he ensured the BBC became an evangelist of imperial power, with "impartiality" duly suspended whenever that power was threatened. This "principle" has applied to the BBC's coverage of every colonial war of the modern era: from the covered-up genocide in Indonesia and suppression of eyewitness film of the American bombing of North Vietnam to support for the illegal Blair/Bush invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the now familiar echo of Israeli propaganda whenever that lawless state abuses its captive, Palestine. This reached a nadir in 2009 when, terrified of Israeli reaction, the BBC refused to broadcast a combined charities appeal for the people of Gaza, half of whom are children, most of them malnourished and traumatised by Israeli attacks. The United Nations Rapporteur, Richard Falk, has likened Israel's blockade of Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto under siege by the Nazis. Yet, to the BBC, Gaza - like the 2010 humanitarian relief flotilla murderously attacked by Israeli commandos - largely presents a public relations problem for Israel and its US sponsor.

Mark Regev, Israel's chief propagandist, seemingly has a place reserved for him near the top of BBC news bulletins. In 2010, when I pointed this out to Fran Unsworth, now elevated to director of news, she strongly objected to the description of Regev as a propagandist, adding, "It's not our job to go out and appoint the Palestinian spokesperson".

With similar logic, Unsworth's predecessor, Helen Boaden, described the BBC's reporting of the criminal carnage in Iraq as based on the "fact that Bush has tried to export democracy and human rights to Iraq". To prove her point, Boaden supplied six A4 pages of verifiable lies from Bush and Tony Blair. That ventriloquism is not journalism seemed not to occur to either woman.

What has changed at the BBC is the arrival of the cult of the corporate manager. George Entwistle, the briefly-appointed director general who said he knew nothing about Newsnight's false accusations of child abuse against a Tory grandee, is to receive £450,000 of public money for agreeing to resign before he was sacked: the corporate way. This and the preceding Jimmy Savile scandal might have been scripted for the Daily Mail and the Murdoch press whose self-serving hatred of the BBC has long provided the corporation with its "embattled" façade as the guardian of "public service broadcasting". Understanding the BBC as a pre-eminent state propagandist and censor by omission — more often than not in tune with its right-wing enemies - is on no public agenda and it ought to be.

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