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MANAGEMENT**

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**EDITORIAL PROCESSES FOR COVERAGE OF THE ISRAELI-
PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

Introduction

Any description of the BBC's editorial processes for coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be viewed within the framework of our overall editorial strategy. The strategy – set out in a separate paper – shapes the approach and leads to the decisions that are taken.

The formulation of that strategy is achieved through a number of key editorial boards and meetings, at the top of which is the Journalism Board. The Journalism Board brings together the three news divisions - News, World Service & Global and Nations & Regions - under the direction of the Deputy Director-General. It is the chief policy-making forum for all journalistic matters within the BBC.

The News Editorial Board, led by the Director of News, meets fortnightly to discuss key editorial themes and evaluate output. It feeds into the Journalism Board and ensures that editorial decisions taken there are disseminated throughout departments. On specific issues, like responding to the Balen report on the Middle East or the Governors' Impartiality Review on Coverage of the EU, it also develops policy which is then fed through to the Journalism Board for approval. For example, the News Editorial Board developed an editorial and practical response to suggestions in the Balen report. These were approved by the Journalism Board before implementation.

News Editorial Board is also an occasion for assessment of impartiality issues, giving the opportunity to identify gaps in coverage and to evaluate serious complaints and how they have been handled. (See separate note about complaints handling.)

Across the BBC's journalism as a whole the "Big Stories" meeting, led by the Deputy Director-General, provides a monthly forum for executives and specialist editors across News, Global News and Nations & Regions to confer on the major themes and stories of the year. The Middle East has been discussed at length twice in the past six months, and included the participation of the Middle East Editor, Jeremy Bowen, and the head of the Jerusalem Bureau, Simon Wilson.

How News works:

Broadly speaking, day-to-day responsibility for the output of radio and television programmes and news channels and for the content of the BBC News website indexes rests with individual editors. They have a substantial support structure in terms of

editorial, technical, legal and other advice, and the ability to refer up, but the vast majority of decisions are made by programme or section editors, and they are accountable for what is published.

That said, they make their decisions in the context of a range of influences which includes strategic editorial guidance from senior management. In addition, there are some differences in approach between departments (i.e. Television News, Radio News, News Interactive and Radio and Television Current Affairs.)

Newsgathering

Most of the daily news coverage of the Middle East (that is, reportage as opposed to interviews) is provided by the Newsgathering department. Newsgathering runs all the overseas bureaux and associated resources, and acts as an agency servicing the full range of the output. Newsgathering offers material from the field via desks in London; and likewise these relay requests from output areas to the bureaux.

The principal BBC bureau in the region is in Jerusalem. The Middle East Bureaux Editor is based there, with three correspondents and supporting resources.

There are other Newsgathering offices in Amman, Cairo, Gaza, Ramallah, Tehran and Baghdad. There will soon be one in Beirut. There is a correspondent based in each of these bureaux, with the exception of Ramallah. There are stringers and freelancers in other cities in the region, including the Gulf.

The busiest bureaux in the region are Jerusalem and Baghdad. Between them, they provide the bulk of the coverage. The smaller bureaux provide much of the rest. None of these bureaux operates 24 hours, so some material 'out of hours' is also processed in London, sometimes by reporters with direct experience of covering the region, sometimes by general reporters.

The Middle East Bureaux employ seasoned correspondents and producers, with good knowledge and experience of reporting the region. All have been appointed after competitive appointments processes. They are supported by locally hired staff - in Israel we have both an Israeli and a Palestinian producer, for example. They are acutely aware of the significance of the language they use in their reports, the opposing positions of the different groups and the highly-charged emotional atmosphere in which they work. This is essential given the fact that much of what they do is live; they are under pressure to make good instant judgements, to offer measured analysis and to achieve the right tone and balance.

The Jerusalem bureau also serves as an advice centre for staff in London about all aspects of Middle East coverage - helping with background, advising on potential story lines, suggesting interviewees, urging caution where necessary and so on.

Funding

All daily news programmes are entitled to receive from Newsgathering a basic news service on the main stories of the day. (See note about News Interactive arrangements below.) Newsgathering does not have sufficient resources to give every programme and channel everything it requests.

For breaking news, outlets are serviced according to a list of priorities. For foreign news, priority is given to the continuous news services including World Service and then any of the main programmes which is on air (e.g. Today, The Six O’Clock News etc. on domestic outlets).

For planned events, Newsgathering deploys with a view to servicing all TV and radio outlets, consistent with the importance of the story, the costs, and the logistical factors.

Programmes are free to pursue other elements of coverage beyond the core service offered by Newsgathering - most commonly via their own reporters and via interviews. The more important programmes, such as the Ten O’Clock News and Today, have their own budgets to commission and pay for supplementary material beyond the core service. This might range from a single element of the production process – hiring an extra camera crew to filming a separate interview or picture sequence up to an entire item, fully financed by the programme. This material may be provided by Newsgathering or from other sources.

The programmes with the biggest budgets include the Ten O’Clock News, The Six O’Clock News, Today, Breakfast and Newsnight. BBC News 24 has a budget to enhance its coverage of breaking news - for example, to pay for extra satellite feeds.

Editorial meetings

The main mechanism for the exercise of editorial control and for calibrating the balance of coverage is through scheduled daily and weekly meetings.

Members of the senior News management team meet every weekday at 0850. At this meeting, the Director and Deputy Director of News, heads of department and their deputies – including the key planners - review coverage since the previous meeting and look ahead to the development of the news agenda. This is an opportunity to share any concerns about quality, tone and impartiality and to discuss where key stories are going. It’s also a chance to get a snapshot of audience feedback from the On-line statistics. Audience complaints from the log are highlighted as appropriate by the Head of News Complaints who also attends the meeting.

The views and decisions taken at the 0850 meeting inform the departmental meetings of editors at 9.15, run by the heads of Television News, Radio News and News Interactive which critique coverage and plan the day ahead in much greater detail. Newsgathering is represented at the television and radio meetings – see below for different arrangements in News Interactive.

A second departmental meeting takes place in the afternoon (1600 for TV and 1630 for Radio and News Interactive) at which the on-going treatment of stories is assessed. This provides another opportunity for departmental heads (or their deputies) to check on due prioritization and impartiality.

In addition to these meetings, all daily BBC News programmes, strands and BBC News website sections have their own meetings at which team members put forward ideas and suggestions for coverage.

There are regular weekly planning meetings in each department where there is discussion of that week's expected agenda, but where there is also discussion of one or two broader strategic editorial concerns, often determined by the decisions from the Big Stories forum. The purpose of this meeting is to make sure that coverage is not dominated exclusively by the rush of daily events. In TV News for example, a recent briefing from the Middle East editor at Big Stories has led to a discussion about how the issues of security v. economics may play in the forthcoming elections, the likely level of support for different elements within the Palestinian leadership and security issues around east Jerusalem.

Every month the Editors' Forum focuses in depth on a significant area of coverage, reviewing the past and looking ahead to how to develop themes in the future. Chaired by the Director of News, the forums started in March 2005 and are attended by up to fifteen different editors each month.

Editorial Policy also organizes a pan-BBC monthly meeting for discussion of editorial policy developments and issues, attended by key editorial staff from across the BBC. In the last two years (20 meetings), issues relevant to reporting the Middle East have been discussed three times (April and May 2004, Sept 2005).

Sharing current affairs journalism with daily news

A significant effort has been made over the past year to build on ways of ensuring that the knowledge and expertise residing in the current affairs departments is exploited by daily news and that the newsgathering skills of daily news are maximized by current affairs programmes when big stories break.

In radio, a producer from Radio Current Affairs attends the Radio News weekly planning meeting with a view to sharing contacts and angles as well as doing short versions of original current affairs journalism on the daily outlets. Contacts also happen outside the meetings with individual editors as well as the central planning desk. Typically, though, stories are offered to the central desk which then tries to place them in as many suitable outlets as possible.

Likewise in television, a producer from Television Current Affairs attends the Television News weekly planning meeting. Television News has a Specials Editor,

Frances Weill, who works closely with Television Current Affairs in the planning of special coverage of big events and stories. In addition, the head of Television Current Affairs liaises regularly with the head of Television News about forthcoming investigations and suitable programmes are flagged up to Frances for featuring in daily news.

There are also editorial discussions with bureau heads about on-going current affairs projects, including independent productions.

Departmental variations in editorial processes

The notes below are intended to highlight any significant variations in the editorial processes in each department i.e. they are supplementary to the general description already given rather than a comprehensive account of each department.

Television News

Ten O’Clock News

As a high profile programme which has a particular focus on international affairs – and has its own commissioning budget – the Ten probably maintains a more direct regular dialogue with the Jerusalem bureau and with London-based correspondents and the Middle East Editor than any other outlet.

BBC News 24

The channel aims for high impact through funding themed days and through securing key interviewees for HARDtalk. The themed days usually consist of a day of live outside broadcasts and packages from a location – such as the one from Ramallah on the anniversary of Arafat’s death.

News 24 has a dedicated diplomatic correspondent, Paul Adams - a Middle East expert - who is produced by an experienced Senior Broadcast Journalist. Paul sometimes anchors the themed days.

Newsnight

Newsnight puts substantial effort and resources into reporting the Middle East and in particular the Arab Israeli conflict. Newsnight’s Diplomatic Editor, Mark Urban, has been with the programme for 15 years and before then was a Middle East correspondent for BBC News. The programme also benefits from the expertise of its veteran reporter, David Sells. From 1971-76 he was a Beirut-based correspondent for TV News. He has been with Newsnight since it began in 1980 and has specialised in reporting the Arab Israeli conflict.

Radio News

Since August this year, Radio News has had a central planning desk of 12 staff who report to Ceri Thomas in the new role of Editor, Radio Newsgathering. Ceri and his team liaise with the World Newsgathering Assignment Editors on behalf of all radio programmes. The planners include staff drawn from programme teams and there has been a real advance in co-ordination of coverage as a result of the new desk. A World Service planner is based permanently on the desk, thus helping the flow of material and expertise from World Service to domestic radio output.

Broadly speaking, apart from the bulletins the output on Radio 4 news programmes is as much the result of requests from programmes as offers from the field. Radio 5 Live output is much more reactive to news developments.

An interesting initiative in Radio News is that for the past three years it has sent a producer drawn from any part of the department to do three-week stints in the Jerusalem bureau. The programmes benefit from the knowledge and experience gained by the producers when they return as well as having additional production effort in Jerusalem throughout the year.

More recently, Radio News has decided to base one of its programme producers in Cairo, with a view to improving reporting on the wider Middle East. The first of these six-month attachments is currently taking place.

News Interactive

The nature of News Interactive means that it has to keep current stories up to date 24 x 7 – it is all too transparent if they are not - and in order to do this, core news coverage is produced in W12, drawing heavily on the material filed by Newsgathering correspondents. It has a small intake team which is in touch with the main Newsgathering operation.

Since April 2004, News Interactive has had its own Middle East desk, which has a dedicated team of two experienced journalists, Tarik Kafala (desk editor) and Martin Asser. Both are Arabic speakers and have lived and worked in the region. They write some of the “sidebar” analysis features, though the first port of call for contextual strategic pieces will usually be the Newsgathering bureaux. The bureaux are also asked to provide colour and reportage.

News Interactive has its own dedicated World Affairs correspondent, Paul Reynolds, who writes regular analysis pieces for the website, including articles about Israel-Palestinian issues. He is one of the most experienced of the BBC’s foreign affairs journalists and has worked as a correspondent in Jerusalem.

Inevitably, the ME desk cannot do everything, and the core world news desk, staffed by multi-purpose world affairs journalists, writes a fair proportion of on the day material - and not just at weekends and overnights. This desk is supervised at all times by a world duty editor.

Overseeing them and the world indexes is News Interactive's World Editor, Steve Herrmann. His ability to assess the totality of the online offering on Israel and the Palestinians has been considerably enhanced by the support of the Middle East desk editor. But, as described earlier, day-to-day responsibility for each index rests with individual index editors.

Television Current Affairs

Most television current affairs about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is carried within the existing portfolio of programmes – principally This World but also Panorama. A conscious effort is made to ensure that we carry a range of views about the conflict both within and across these strands. This usually happens in the context of commissioning meetings.

Channel controllers are only involved in commissioning one-off specials and series, such as the recently broadcast series, Elusive Peace: Israel and the Arabs. Once commissioned, editorial control resides with the executive producer.

Radio Current Affairs

Radio Current Affairs programming about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict takes place within the strands, notably From Our Own Correspondent (FOOC) and Crossing Continents and also as part of commissioned special programmes, most usually for Radio 4 and the World Service.

Editorial balance and fairness is given the highest priority in our Middle Eastern coverage. The department's Foreign Editor is across all our coverage and ensures, through conversations with the producers and liaison with the Head of Department, that the different parts of our output are as fair as we can make them. Any programme dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires a two-tick editorial check (by the producer and editor). It is also quite common to consult specialists on the region within the BBC for further comment.

As regards the commissioned programmes on the conflict, proposals are submitted to the networks (most usually Radio 4 and the World Service) and if commissioned the usual standards of editorial procedure are applied.

Editorial control and responsibility rests with the programme editors, most usually in the case of the Middle East, Maria Balinska, the Foreign Editor. Thus the combination of experienced producers, editors and, when appropriate, the Head of Department, should help to deliver fair and balanced coverage.

Other support for journalists

Analysis & Research

BBC News invests in an Analysis and Research Department (A&R) which offers all journalists in-depth research and briefings on a very wide range of topics including the Middle East. Requests to A&R from BBC journalists range from advice on contributors and potential interviewees to background information and specific briefs.

A&R has a Middle East specialist, Louisa Brooke, who has a particular interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Her key tasks are to write briefs for distribution via the A&R intranet website and a twice-daily email bulletin; maintain in-depth sites within the A&R website on Israel and the Palestinians, Iraq and the Arab world; organize seminars and roundtables with senior politicians and academics; and respond to individual queries from journalists and programme-makers.

1) Briefs for A&R intranet site

The briefs are written for News journalists and provide research and analysis on particular subjects. There is an in-depth site specifically on Israel & the Palestinians which contains detailed backgrounders, histories, contacts, useful websites and the latest briefs.

The briefs can be pegged to a specific news event, a broader overview or they can be a more analytical piece that pulls together interesting strands of thinking reported in the regional press. The briefs are available to all in the BBC via gateway and we advertise the latest and most relevant briefs via a twice-daily email bulletin. The email bulletin reaches over 2200 news journalists.

2) Seminars and roundtables

There are various seminars and roundtables for BBC journalists. The seminars are open to anyone in BBC News and are held in Television Centre – we provide both an audio recording and a transcript on the intranet site for those who cannot attend the session. Attendance is usually around 50 people for seminars and they are always chaired by a senior diplomatic correspondent with a background in the region. The roundtables are invite-only events for editors and senior correspondents numbering around a dozen.

Recent seminars and roundtables on Israel and the Palestinians specifically include:

- 29 September 2005 – Nabil Shaath (deputy Palestinian Prime Minister) roundtable on Palestinian politics.

- 19 September 2005 – Shai Feldman (Israeli academic) and Abdul bari Atwan (Al-Quds Editor) seminar on post-Gaza.
- 20 July 2005 – Graham Usher seminar on the Gaza withdrawal. He is the Economist correspondent based in Jerusalem.
- 3 March 2005 – Isaac Herzog roundtable on Israeli politics. Herzog was the Housing Minister at the time.
- 21 January 2005 – Gil Hoffman roundtable on Israeli politics. He is the Knesset correspondent for the Jerusalem Post.
- 8 December 2004 – Palestinian Presidential seminar with Khaled Hroub (author of book on Hamas) and Assad Abdul Rahman (PLO).

Further seminars are planned in the New Year to address the Palestinian and Israeli elections.