

BBC Management's Response to the Independent Panel Report: Impartiality of the BBC's Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

STATEMENT BY THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

The Board of Governors has today published BBC Management's response to the Independent Panel report on the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has issued the following statement:

In October 2005 we commissioned an Independent Panel, chaired by Sir Quentin Thomas, to "assess the impartiality of BBC news and current affairs coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular regard to accuracy, fairness, context, balance and bias, actual or perceived". The Panel's review covered the BBC's UK domestic public service output only.

We published the Panel's report last month and welcomed its finding of no deliberate or systematic bias. We also noted the Panel's conclusion that the evidence showing that most viewers and listeners, at least within the UK, regard the BBC as unbiased presents a different challenge: the audience say they do not understand the conflict and, perhaps for that reason, do not see it as important or interesting.

The Independent Panel found that in some respects the account given of the conflict was incomplete and recommended measures to ensure that as full and fair account as possible was provided and the conflict's complexities properly reflected. As representatives of the public interest it is our duty to ensure that the BBC provides the public with such coverage. We have therefore welcomed in principle the Panel's constructive proposals for improvement and asked Management to provide specific suggestions to follow this up.

The Panel also recommended that there should be a stronger "editorial guiding hand". Governors reviewed the BBC's current editorial structure in the context of the Neil Report on BBC journalism in 2004. Our conclusion then was that the scale of the BBC as one of the world's largest news gathering operations required a devolved structure which places accountability for output with individual programme editors. In doing so, we acknowledged then that such a model requires a team of output editors of the highest quality, working to an agreed set of principles and with appropriate high level guidance and oversight. While there is always likely to be room for improvement, we asked that Management's response to this recommendation from the Panel should be set in the context of the Governors' conclusions to the Neil Report.

On the question of language, the Panel recommended that the word “terrorism” be used in respect of relevant events and offered a definition of what the term means. Governors have discussed this topic on several occasions over the last year. We have not to date been persuaded by arguments to change the Editorial Guidelines but asked Management to review the Panel’s recommendation and give us their view.

Following our request, BBC Management has now provided us with their response to the Independent Panel’s recommendations at our June meeting. The Board of Governors welcomes its recommendations for strengthening coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In particular, we are pleased to note the decision to appoint a West Bank correspondent and the positive proposals to use new technology to provide additional background and context for audiences on-demand.

On the question of the need for an editorial “guiding hand” we concur with Management’s arguments for retaining the current editorial structure, while making improvements to ensure greater oversight and consistency. In particular, we note the proposals for making greater use of the Middle East Editor to provide a more strategic overview of the news agenda from the region, and for a more rigorous process of editorial review. Overall, we remain confident in the guidance and oversight provided by the BBC’s senior Management team.

On the question of language we are satisfied that our previous conclusions about the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines (and additional guidance issued by Management) remain valid. As the Management response makes clear, unlike some other international news organisations, the BBC does not ban the use of the word terrorist. However, the Independent Panel is right that the BBC must strive for consistency in its use of language, and we welcome the Management commitment to a more determined effort in this area. We will seek evidence of this when reviewing the BBC’s performance.

The Governors are responsible for safeguarding the BBC’s independence from any external pressure that might affect its output, and likewise, for ensuring that its output is impartial. On behalf of licence fee payers, we judge that the changes being proposed and implemented by BBC Management in response to the Independent Panel’s report will strengthen the BBC’s coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Board has requested that the BBC Management should report to us on progress of implementing the new measures at the end of this year.

We endorse the Independent Panel’s view that “the nature of the conflict, and the breadth of support for each side among its audience, means that the BBC cannot expect to avoid complaints... Where appropriate the BBC should readily acknowledge any mistakes made without resisting every charge until the last ditch...”. In addition to the new complaints procedures introduced by BBC Management in 2005 (the performance of which is monitored by the Governors’ Programme Complaints Committee, and will be reported on in the

next Annual Report), we have reviewed our appeals procedures for programme complaints. This has included public consultation and provided an opportunity for complainants with experience of the system to submit their opinion. The Governors' Programme Complaints Committee will shortly publish and implement the revised arrangements for complaints on appeal. The changes will provide more transparency and equality of access to materials considered by the Committee by both appellants and BBC Management.

We as Governors are grateful to the Independent Panel members for reviewing the BBC's performance in its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for their contribution to assisting the BBC in providing the best possible news output for all licence fee payers. We have taken particular note of the following statement by the Panel and highlight it here for the benefit of all stakeholders and the Trustees who will succeed us in ensuring the continuing impartiality of the BBC:

“The BBC's most important features are its independence and integrity. Accordingly when, after proper consideration, it is satisfied that its coverage meets the requisite standards it should be robust in its own defence. More important, it should remain robust in providing distinctive and challenging programmes, including where appropriate trenchant professional analysis from its experienced journalists. In our view the interests of the licence fee payer and the audience generally, are best served in this way. There would be greater risks in the BBC becoming more cautious under the pressure of interested parties, than through its maintaining and developing its commitment to high quality and diverse programming.”

The BBC's commitment to impartiality and the efforts by its journalists and editors is ongoing. We believe that independent, single-subject impartiality reviews provide a valuable contribution to our work as Governors in monitoring the BBC's performance. We would commend to the new BBC Trust – which will retain responsibility for ensuring the BBC's impartiality and accuracy under the new Charter – they continue.

The last Governors' review will examine the BBC's reporting of business. We will publish the terms of reference once agreed with the Independent Panel, which has yet to be appointed.

Ends.

19 June 2006

**BBC MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE
INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT ON COVERAGE OF
THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

JUNE 2006

BBC MANAGEMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT ON COVERAGE OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

1. INTRODUCTION

We welcome the Independent Panel's contribution to the continuing debate over BBC News' coverage of Israel and the Palestinians.

The panel has clarified several key issues: we welcome its central finding of "no deliberate or systematic bias in our coverage of the conflict. We also welcome the finding of the BBC's "commitment to be fair, accurate and impartial" and that senior management is committed to high standards, as shown by the recent changes to strengthen performance and the appointment of a Middle East Editor.

We are pleased that the panel praised the "high quality" of our news reporting from location, and "outstanding examples of current affairs programmes." We are also pleased that the audience research (contained in Appendix C) showed that a majority (52%) of respondents believe the BBC to have the best coverage of the conflict, far ahead of our competitors.

However we recognise the need to build further on the quality and depth of our journalism. This report responds positively to many of the recommendations of the Independent Panel and sets out a plan of action for moving forward, including:

- The appointment of a West Bank correspondent to complement the BBC correspondent in Gaza.
- A co-ordinated plan for enhanced current affairs coverage, to be reviewed by our senior editorial adviser on the Middle East.
- The trial of a new BBC News website series "Undercurrent Affairs" to explore background and context. This will take the form of audio and video 'explainers.' We also aim to commission more video explainers to run on our interactive TV loop service. We would wish to podcast "Undercurrent Affairs" but this will depend on the outcome of the general BBC podcast trials.
- An enhanced role for our Middle East Editor in helping to formulate the BBC's overall coverage strategy.
- This role will be re-defined so that the Middle East Editor will contribute to a new quarterly standing item on the News Editorial Board, which will review and plan coverage using his expertise, in-put from the senior editorial adviser on the Middle East and the Jerusalem Bureau Chief.

- As with the Europe Editor, the Middle East Editor will be expected to issue his over view of critical themes to all programme Editors on a monthly basis. The Head of the Jerusalem bureau will also circulate a detailed monthly update of upcoming stories.
- Greater cross promotion of specific items on our website. Our experience is that cross promotion works best when there is a clear focus to it and the viewer or listener is directed towards a specific report.
- A shorter style guide, to be made available to the public.

In putting forward these proposals, we should note that we have reservations about some of the panel's recommendations. While we welcome its backing for our use of terminology, and in particular its conclusion that our policy of not labelling organisations as "terrorist" is the right one, we do not believe that its proposed formulation of what might be construed as "terrorism" is feasible, given the need for a consistency of approach that the panel rightly wishes us to uphold.

We also have concerns about the panel's own framework for measuring impartiality which it has, in effect, extended to include quality.

We are proposing the above editorial changes in preference to accepting the panel's recommendation of an extra layer of editorial management in the form of a "Guiding Hand." As the Neil report, which was endorsed by the Governors after the Hutton inquiry, stated: "In BBC News there are ten times as many journalists as on a national newspaper, broadcasting 120 hours of output each day. Editors, therefore, are the day-to-day custodians of BBC values."

2. OUR STRATEGY FOR COVERAGE

We note a connection between Recommendation 1 of the Independent Panel and Recommendation 4 and propose to deal with them together in this section.

RECOMMENDATION 1: A FULL AND FAIR ACCOUNT

"We recommend the BBC should provide more consistently a full and fair account, that is: improve coverage to enable the reasonable and attentive viewer or listener to come to an informed and independent judgement of the issues and of the respective merits of each side's story. It should do this by providing:

- a) more comprehensive coverage which remedies omissions of significant events and topics;**
- b) more historical and other background and context;**
- c) a fuller account of situations and issues, conceding, in the case of TV, less to events of less inherent importance, but yielding striking (and available) pictures."**

RECOMMENDATION 4: EXPLAINING THE COMPLEXITIES

“We recommend the BBC should make purposive, and not merely reactive, efforts to explain the complexities of the conflict in the round, including the marked disparity between the positions of the two sides, and to overcome the high level of incomprehension among the audience. BBC News viewers and listeners could be directed to the background and analysis pages on the BBC website in trails after transmission of major news reports. In addition, some of the educational concepts from the staff online training module could be made available on the BBC’s public website. The BBC should consider the case for basing a correspondent in the West Bank to facilitate access, particularly once the barrier is complete.”

Our response:

We agree that we should always aim for a full and fair account which is comprehensive and explanatory. To aim for anything less would be to devalue the “gold standard” to which the panel rightly says we aspire and by which we should be judged.

We accept that offering sufficient history and context is a major challenge. In practice, news bulletins face very real constraints of time and space which can limit their comprehensiveness and their educative function. We do not believe that it would be appropriate to place programmes under an artificial obligation to carry a higher number of stories on the conflict than they might judge appropriate, or at greater length than their instincts would allow. Daily news programmes have many parts of the world to cover in a short space of time, and cannot control the events to which they must react.

We have tried to tackle this problem in several ways: firstly, through the recent appointment of the Middle East Editor, whose role is to go beyond “striking pictures” to place stories within a broader, often historical, context and amplify the issue of ‘dual narratives’ (see Recommendation 2, below). Secondly, through the allocation of resources to the Middle East section of the BBC News website which the report praises as providing “valuable historical and other context.” Thirdly, through the commissioning of landmark current affairs, again praised by the report, to go beyond reactive news.

Our future ambition is as follows:

- To carry a more varied diet of stories from the region.
- For our Middle East Editor to explain background and context more extensively on the BBC’s high profile programmes, such as Today and the Ten o’clock news.
- To pilot a new on-demand service on the BBC News website called “Undercurrent Affairs.” This will give correspondents a platform to explore the background, context and history behind big events, not just in the Middle East. It will be trailed on our broadcast outlets. These

“on demand explainers” will be made available in a variety of forms: audio reports that the audience could download; video explainers to run on our interactive TV loop service and on the broadband console on the website.

- To re-design the "quick guides" on the website to give people a rapid catch up on important issues, and we aim to place versions of these guides, predominantly in text but possibly with the odd graphic, on our digital text service (the new Ceefax) and promoted by N24.
- To ensure greater cross-trailing of our output to direct viewers and listeners to the more detailed information that can be found on the BBC News website. Rather than a general exhortation to go to our website, however, our experience, particularly during the last General Election, is that cross promotion works best when there is a clear focus to it, so that the audience knows to which report they are being directed.
- In principle, we would like to make available on the BBC website some of the educational concepts from our staff Online training module, as the panel recommends, but we will first have to resolve some potential fair trading and rights issues.
- We do not regard this training course as a final step, but a first one. The new College of Journalism is already organising seminars as a follow-up to the Online course. The independent panel's report will help to shape the future training of staff.
- We accept the panel's recommendation that we should appoint a West Bank correspondent. This will be a valuable addition to our team, although we note that the panel, despite highlighting what it saw as deficiencies in reporting the sufferings of the Palestinians, omitted to mention the fact that the BBC is the only international broadcaster in the world to have a permanent office in Gaza, staffed by a correspondent and local Palestinians.
- The panel's remit was to examine the BBC's domestic output, but we expect that many of our proposed initiatives will help to support the quality of the BBC's Global output too – for example, the appointment of a West Bank correspondent.
- We will review our coverage with greater frequency in order to monitor the above changes. The BBC's coverage of the Middle East is presently reviewed twice a year by the Journalism Board led by the Deputy Director-General and the News Editorial Board led by the Director of News.
- In future we propose that the coverage is reviewed by the News Editorial Board on a quarterly basis. At each meeting the Director of News will hear reports from the Middle East Editor, the head of the Middle East bureaux and the senior editorial adviser on coverage

issues, both retrospective and prospective, and on complaints. As with all discussions at the Editorial Board, heads of department will ensure that editors take due note of the decisions reached.

- In terms of the reporting of Palestinian issues, the Middle East Editor will be expected to report back to the Editorial Board not just on coverage that has been broadcast but also on reports that he and the Jerusalem bureau offered but which were not broadcast. He will also have an enhanced role in leading the strategic direction of our coverage.

The coverage of Palestinian deaths poses, and will continue to pose, a particular challenge for broadcasters. We do not, of course, regard Palestinian deaths as any less important than Israeli deaths. The casualty toll among Palestinians, however, appears to rise incrementally and regularly, rather than as a result of an occasional, major, event such as a bomb attack, making it harder to report with regularity in a busy news programme.

In the light of the report's recommendation, we will continue to remind our Middle East correspondents to 'pull together' the overall figures on appropriate occasions although we will of course be aware of the sensitivities of doing so if the occasion should be an incident in which many Israelis have died.

We should also note that the BBC News website has abandoned its "running total" of the exact number of deaths in the conflict. This is partly because the website does not itself collect these figures and is unable to report or verify every death that occurs as a result of fighting. Reports that reach it are often contradictory and circumstances of individual incidents are almost always disputed. The news agencies and official Palestinian and Israeli sources frequently do not agree on figures for Palestinian and Israeli deaths. In addition, the overall headline figures for Palestinian deaths can be misleading because they include civilians and militants. The headline figure for Israeli deaths includes civilian, settlers and soldiers.

The Loughborough University researchers who provided the statistics in the content analysis provided for the Independent Panel (Appendix D, pp46ff) acknowledge that their observations on the BBC's reporting of casualties are based on a small sample and that their conclusions are "tentative." They conclude, rightly in our view, that "reporting fatalities is...a complex understanding...(it) clearly calls for a more intensive and extensive research utilising a wider range of research methods."

RECOMMENDATION 2: A GUIDING HAND

"We recommend the BBC should provide an editorial "Guiding Hand": that is, a senior figure with sufficient executive authority to command resources and give direction should be tasked with providing more secure editorial planning, grip and oversight to ensure:

- a) consistent full and fair coverage including of issues overlooked under the pressure of events;
- b) a range of current affairs programmes which, over a period, provides a coherent overview;
- c) consistent exposure of the dual narratives;
- d) greater self consciousness about news and current affairs as a construct, and about the selection of newsframes to avoid conveying misleading analysis;
- e) more systematic monitoring of parity in such matters as outside commentators, official spokespeople deployed on air, vox pops and style of presentation. The Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East has conducted an internal audit of Middle East experts which provides useful background for journalists and should be widely used to ensure correct identification of commentators and experts.”

Our response:

As we set out in our Strategy paper for the panel, BBC News already has in place a firm structure for planning and overseeing our coverage of the conflict to try to provide consistent full and fair coverage. Day-to-day responsibility for the output of radio and television programmes and news channels and for the content of the BBC News website 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.

The main mechanism for the exercise of editorial control and for calibrating the balance of coverage is through scheduled daily and weekly news meetings. In addition, a number of key editorial boards have oversight of the coverage. 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, evaluate output and ensure that Journalism Board policy is disseminated to editors.

In consequence, we disagree with the panel that there is an additional need for a “Guiding Hand” which would add an extra layer of management and would run counter to the findings of the Neil report which were fully endorsed by the Governors. In saying so, we are conscious of the panel’s statement that “to some extent there is a risk...in establishing reviews concentrated on single issues” and to that end we feel that it would be anomalous to create such a post for a single area of the BBC’s coverage, however complex that subject might be.

In disagreeing with the Independent Panel we are reminded that, subsequent to the Hutton Inquiry, the Neil Report stated:

“As BBC News has 10 times as many journalists than a national newspaper, broadcasting 120 hours of output a day, editors are the

day-to-day custodians of the BBC's journalistic values. This includes ensuring producers and presenters clearly understand their responsibilities in adhering to the values.

A key part of the programme editor's role in being the day by day guarantor of these values is to ensure that the journalists reporting to him/her assess where the weight of expert opinion lies in a story without adopting it as a truth or wisdom.

All programmes operating under the BBC's journalistic banner must work to the same values, professional disciplines, and journalistic culture.

This should not impose uniformity on editors. Indeed there is a great strength in programmes developing their own house style and approach to enable them to respond to different audiences as well as developing the diversity and individuality of its journalists. But the BBC's codes of journalistic conduct must be universally observed and practised by all programmes.”

We do, however, propose two changes:

- In future, we will require the Middle East Editor to help lead a monthly editorial meeting in order to provide a strategic overview of the themes that lie ahead. The Middle East Editor's role is a comparatively new one, and is still evolving. The panel's report has helped in that process.
- As with the Europe Editor, the Middle East Editor will now be expected to issue an overview of the big themes from the region on a monthly basis to be disseminated to all programme Editors. The Head of the Jerusalem bureau will also circulate a detailed monthly update of future stories.

We think that this proposal is preferable to the appointment of a “Guiding Hand” which could undermine the independence and accountability of BBC Editors, in direct contradiction of the Neil report's findings. BBC Editors produce a diverse range of programmes for different audiences, and it is their responsibility to achieve impartiality in their output. As the Neil report stated: “the individual editor...is the publisher.”

We agree with the panel that we should offer audiences a “coherent overview” of the conflict in our current affairs programmes, in addition to the noted excellence of programmes such as *Elusive Peace* and *A Year in the Arab Israeli Crisis*.

We propose to make one significant change to the commissioning process:

- The Heads of Television and Radio Current Affairs have been asked to ensure that, over any eighteen month commissioning period, we offer a

broad range of stories and themes which reflect the conflict, connecting with our news coverage in order to fill in the gaps which are, to an extent, inevitable in a fast-moving daily news agenda. These changes will be monitored by the senior editorial adviser.

In making this proposal we are aware that all journalism is inevitably a “construct”, as the report puts it, so that we fully understand the potential risk that our journalism may be vulnerable to unintentional bias and unthinking assumptions in, for example, the way that we select information, put it together and the language and tone that we use.

Our focus is driven solely by serving our audiences who we know want facts clearly explained, opinion from a broad range of viewpoints and objective judgements from people without a vested interest in the story. Our duty is to report what we know, based on our values of truth and accuracy, serving the public interest, independence and impartiality. It is rooted in eye witness, on the ground reportage and authoritative BBC specialist expertise.

We note the panel's view that there is an “asymmetry” in the conflict and that the two sides are not equal. Our aim should certainly be to strive to overcome the very real logistical and security considerations in order to report comprehensively on Palestinian issues. It is not, of course, the BBC's job artificially to compensate for any suggested imbalance in the conflict by producing imbalanced coverage, but to report it as we find it.

As the panel states: “ultimately its (the BBC's) function is to report events, not to seek to play a part in them.”

To quote the report: “the BBC's culture is deeply committed to the attainment of the objectives of the accurate, impartial, fair and balanced representation of news.” That will continue.

We would point out that we do have in place a regular monitoring system, involving both quantitative and qualitative research, which is carried out by the senior editorial adviser on the lines approved by the Governors for the monitoring of our EU coverage.

We do not believe that quantitative analysis alone can inform coverage of the conflict. It can be a blunt instrument when it does not take into account the nature of the interview or broadcast (to use a domestic analogy, politicians from different wings of the Conservative party led by John Major appeared frequently because of their divisions over Europe, but this was not deemed to be ‘favourable’ to the government). This means that qualitative analysis can be more illuminating, and by definition this method is subjective.

Statistics from quantitative analysis can provide factual information but they do not answer editorial questions – in this case, whether there should be a strict balance between Israeli and Palestinian interviewees or reports from each area. We would be reluctant to aim for “parity” as the Independent Panel suggests. While some reports should certainly be balanced, it is not a

requirement of impartiality that all reports should be so, and we would be reluctant to guarantee either side numerical equality. For example, as the panel notes, its review period included the stroke suffered by Ariel Sharon, when it was reasonable to carry a greater number of Israeli voices. Instead we believe that we should seek to improve further the quality and range of our coverage through the mechanisms we have outlined.

The panel's report states that "the evidence shows that most viewers and listeners, at least within the UK...regard the BBC as unbiased. But they say they do not understand the conflict and, perhaps for that reason, do not see it as important or interesting."

We propose one change to improve our knowledge of impact our coverage has with our audiences:

- One of the BBC's public purposes is to sustain citizenship and civil society by providing trusted and impartial news and information that helps citizens make sense of the world and enables them to engage with it. We have assessed our performance against this purpose through a pilot survey that examined the extent to which BBC output, particularly BBC News output, has benefited our audiences in terms of their understanding of current events and their engagement with them. In future surveys, we would propose to question respondents specifically about our coverage of the Middle East, alongside other important subjects.

The Independent Panel's report suggests that there is "no coherent effort to ensure that (the) qualifications and antecedents (of experts) are properly exposed to the audience". In fact, all Editors are in receipt of our Expert's Guide which gives the background to those from all sides who appear on our programmes. Editors are expected to use this when selecting and labelling experts that we use on air.

RECOMMENDATION 3: THE USE OF LANGUAGE

"We recommend the BBC should get the language right, that is: remedy deficiencies on language and ensure consistent application of best practice, when agreed.

In particular:

a) it should consider issuing to staff a crisper and more operationally useable guide to facts and terminology than that currently made available internally to BBC journalists. This should be published so that the public has the same access to this as they already have to many other BBC editorial guidelines;

b) the BBC is right to avoid terms which are a barrier to understanding, and should use words which best express the desired meaning clearly and effectively. The term "terrorism" should accordingly be used in respect of relevant events since it is the most accurate expression for actions which involve violence against randomly selected civilians with the intention of causing terror for ideological, including political or religious, objectives, whether perpetrated by state or non-state agencies. While those immediately responsible for the actions might be described as terrorists, the BBC is right to avoid so labelling organisations, except in attributed remarks;

c) the BBC should continue to draw on international law and the United Nations Security Council in the choices it must inevitably make about the use of language and then be consistent in its use across its output. Though there will always be disagreement between the two sides about any such lexicon, certain usages (such as "occupied territories") are well established."

The present BBC 'key points' guide was issued in 2005 to help our journalists with the terminology they should employ and to use as a reference point for the history of the conflict. This is available on the BBC News Analysis and Research website.

In the Middle East, many terms and many facts are contested so the guide is by no means brief.

- We will, however, produce an abbreviated version that will also be made available to the public as the panel recommends.

Language is fought over by both sides in the conflict, and we have arrived at our choice of words after considerable research and thought. While we do not intend to limit the search for objective and accurate language to describe any given situation which might face us, we are pleased that the Independent Panel and its international law consultant has so strongly backed our chosen terminology and we will, of course, continue to draw on international law.

In one area, however, the panel suggested further consideration in our use of language - recommending the active use of the word 'terrorism.' The report also points out that "it seems clear that there is a risk that describing actors as terrorists may obscure meaning." It goes on to state that "while those immediately responsible for actions might be described as terrorists, the BBC is right to avoid so labelling organisations, except in attributed remarks."

Our policy is contained in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines which were approved by the Governors less than a year ago. Subsequent guidance on this specific issue was endorsed by the Governors in November 2005.

The relevant editorial guideline states:

We must report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly. Our credibility is undermined by the careless use of words which carry emotional or value judgements. The word "terrorist" itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should try to avoid the term without attribution. We should let other people characterise while we report the facts as we know them.

We should not adopt other people's language as our own. It is also usually inappropriate to use words like "liberate", "court martial" or "execute" in the absence of a clear judicial process. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as "bomber", "attacker", "gunman", "kidnapper", "insurgent, and "militant". Our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom.

The later additional guidance that was issued to programme makers made clear that we should distinguish between 'terrorists' and 'acts of terrorism.'

Careful use of the word "terrorist" is essential if the BBC is to maintain its reputation for standards of accuracy and especially impartiality. This is especially true when we use the word to describe a person or a group as opposed to an action or event ("the terrorist group", say, as opposed "an act of terror" or "terrorist tactics" or "terrorism. That does not mean we should emasculate our reporting or otherwise avoid conveying the reality and horror of what has occurred; but we should consider the impact our use of language may have on our reputation for objective journalism amongst our many audiences.

This guidance also pointed out the difficulties of this distinction:

Some will argue that certain events are so evidently acts of terror (and, therefore, perpetrated by "terrorists") that those descriptions are reasonable, and non-judgemental. However, the language we choose to use in reporting one incident cannot be considered in isolation from our reporting of other stories. So to use the word in incidents which we may consider obvious creates difficulties for less clear-cut incidents.

We agree with the Independent Panel that consistency of language is the key, and that in the past we have not always managed wholly to achieve this across both domestic and international services. We are determined to do so. Staff are, of course, required to complete our compulsory Middle East training courses, as outlined previously.

We do not, however, think that the search for consistency can be achieved through the panel's own definition of 'terrorism.' The panel suggests that the term should be used "*in respect of relevant events since it is the most accurate expression for actions which involve violence against randomly selected civilians with the intention of causing terror for ideological, including*

political or religious objectives, whether perpetrated by state or non-state agencies."

As some commentators have pointed out, such a definition would, for example, exclude attacks on soldiers. It would, in our view, introduce the very value judgements the guidance to the Editorial Guidelines is asking us to avoid.

A further difficulty, pointed out by the panel's international lawyer Noam Lubell in appendix E, is that defining terrorism becomes "slightly more complicated" when applied to the actions of a state.

He says "while it might be automatically deduced that anyone responsible for an act of terrorism is a terrorist, this is not usually followed in practice...."

"This appears to result in a situation in which the members of a group which engages in terrorism are labelled as terrorists, while the same acts by a state might be described as an act of terrorism without the state being labelled terrorist. Logically if there is an act of terrorism then there is a terrorist behind it, but the use of the term 'terrorist' may be fraught with even more difficulty than 'terrorism.'"

He continues: "One solution might be to label the act as terrorism, in accordance with the definition chosen, but refrain from labelling the actors as terrorists.... This would be a legally correct even if not wholly satisfactory approach; but then neither is an approach which uses the word 'terrorist' only when describing actions of non-state groups..."

The panel concludes that there is "no perfect solution" to the 'terrorist' issue. This is true. Dictionaries may offer definitions but after half a century the United Nations has still not agreed upon one.

Instead of a definition, the BBC guidance to editors suggests:

On a breaking news story, ask yourself, first of all, is the use of the word "terrorist" accurate? Do we know, or do we suspect? It may be better to talk about an apparent act of terror or terrorism than label individuals or a group.

As the facts become clearer we will also wish to describe what has happened as accurately and as clearly as possible. Give as much information as possible. "Bomb attack" conveys more information more quickly than "terrorist attack", similarly "suicide bomber", "bomber", "assassin", "gun man" help fill in the picture.

We also need to ask ourselves whether by using "terrorist" we are taking a political position, or certainly one that may be seen as such. Words can be used with deadly precision to make clear what has happened and still convey the awful consequences without needing to resort to labels.

Whilst some other major news organisations ban the use of the word “terrorist”, we do not. However we do caution against its use without attribution. We believe the present BBC guideline and recently published additional guidance provide the best way forward for the BBC in the context of a global news organisation striving to achieve accuracy, impartiality, trust and consistency.

In the absence of an agreed definition, we think that our present formulation is preferable in the interests of a consistent approach which we will make renewed efforts to uphold, both domestically and internationally.

OTHER ISSUES: OUR COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

There is one issue which we would like to clarify about our complaints procedures.

In 2.23 the report claims that “there is not now a systematic feedback mechanism to ensure that those involved in the programme which gave rise to the complaint are aware of it and its outcome.” This is incorrect.

The vast majority of complaints about BBC News coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are answered with the direct involvement of the team responsible for the programme. If the complaint is escalated to the Editorial Complaints Unit and is upheld, it is compulsory for the programme editor to document that he or she has acknowledged the upheld complaint and to state what action has been taken to ensure the mistake does not happen again.

Programme editors are always consulted if any appeal is made to the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee. Across the wider BBC, the lessons learned from all upheld complaints are shared through the Complaints Management Board which meets monthly and is chaired by the Deputy Director-General.

Ends

June 2006