

Society of Editors speech – 11 November 2014

What we're up to – and what we're up for.

Good morning, there was an item on PM a few weeks ago in which Eddie Mair asked the audience what the collective noun for spies should be. My favourite suggestion was a mince – a mince of spies. And, as I was coming here, I was wondering what the collective noun for editors might be. A bar of editors? A quarrel of editors? Then I remembered what I would have said as a reporter – and, no doubt, our newsrooms would generally agree - a surfeit of editors. Anyway, this is a roundabout way of saying that, whether you've got me here as a former member of the best club in the country or as a fellow traveller who's now down on his luck and ended up in the broadcasting business, it is great to be amongst the Society of Editors and I'm extremely grateful to Bob for inviting me. Thank you.

Before I get going, I know people are interested in what's happening on the Panorama on Mazher Mahmood: This is a seriously good piece of work, extremely revealing and squarely in the public interest. But the worst of all worlds is when you get the big picture right, and trip up over a detail. So when some information we'd been asking to see for many days was sent to us by Mazher Mahmood's lawyers at seven o'clock last night, we, as a responsible broadcaster, had to consider it. We're looking at it, and we'll make sense of it as quickly as we can, and then we'll broadcast it.

Today, I'd like to talk briefly about what we're up to at the BBC, what we've been trying to do in news – and what we're up for.

First, the BBC as a whole. When Tony returned to the BBC 18 months ago, we were looking at our feet. He's got us to look up. He started out by asking how we might ensure that we do the best creative and editorial work of our lives at the BBC. Then he set about clearing up what the Chinese call 'the problems left over from history' - i.e. Payoffs and DMI. Then he asked: where next? The answer being more consumer choice through the iPlayer and greater personalisation through MyBBC. He then refuted the lazy and wrong arguments about value for money and the licence fee. He articulated the resources problem we've got - around a 26 per cent reduction in funding over the course of the licence fee period. Then, he confronted it by proposing closing BBC 3 as a TV channel and moving it online. And, finally, we've created a mechanism to ensure efficiency is built into the system through 'compete or compare'. Now, the BBC is setting out to demonstrate to audiences what it does in the Arts and Music. We have had colossal hits such as Sherlock in drama. There'll be more. And the next steps are delivering on screen and on air: what will our generation of Blue Planets be in the run up to the battle for the future of the BBC? That battle – what is the future of the licence fee? What are the ambitions of the BBC for the next Royal Charter? – is the work that lies ahead.

Now, let me talk about what we've been trying to do in news since I was appointed in April last year.

First, we have had to get to grips with the issues that we faced. That has meant:

- a full financial review, culminating in a £50 million savings programme, and 415 post closures

- restructuring of News and Current Affairs to drive digital innovation, enable original journalism and reboot current affairs.
 - regeneration of talent: following the departures, among others, of Jeremy Paxman, Nik Gowing and Robin Lustig, we have brought on – and brought in – people such as Mishal Husain, Ritula Shah, Kamal Ahmed, Reeta Chakrabarti, Laura Kuenssberg, Lucy Manning and, of course, Evan Davis into Newsnight. We have reaffirmed the principle of specialists: Carrie Gracie as China Editor, Nikki Fox as disability correspondent, Jon Sopel in North America, Katya Adler into Europe and Ian Pannell and Paul Wood in frontline reporting.
 - refreshed line-up of editors: Ian Katz at Newsnight, Ceri Thomas at Panorama, Jamie Angus at Today, Adam Bullimore at Breakfast.
 - And a new team running News: Fran Unsworth taking over World Service, Jonathan Munro recruited to run Newsgathering; Fiona Campbell appointed to run Current Affairs; (We have also cut BBC News HQ costs by just over 30 per cent.)
- Second, we believe in an ambitious BBC and we have set out to renew our ambitions:
- reminded ourselves that this is the best news organisation in the world and encouraged us to have the confidence to go after our own stories, to put an emphasis on our original journalism
 - reset our global ambitions with a target of 500 million global audience in a decade, so as to avoid resting on our laurels or indulging in misplaced World Service nostalgia, but, as Howard Stringer set out, exploit technological and commercial opportunities, as well as new partnerships, to grow and improve
 - renewed our sense of purpose in local and regional news, taking on the wrong-headed criticism of the BBC as the problem in the local newspaper industry and, instead, making clear our desire to be part of the Revival of Local Journalism by establishing a group to work up plans with papers, other broadcasters and digital news start-ups.
 - set in train a proper strategic effort to consider the future of news, both for the news business as a whole and for BBC News itself. The aim is to prepare for the decade to come to ensure we give people what they will want, expect and need of the news.
- And, third, very practically, we're all aware of the political spin, puffery and PR we're up against. The BBC too needs to lean into the news. To do that, we've conducted:
- Overhaul of the agenda of daily, weekly and monthly meetings to focus on editorial output - including new 6.40 meeting of 6&10, World News, Newsnight and Today to enable information sharing; weekly meetings with on-air editors to flush out ideas and encourage argument; monthly meetings with the Director of News of key output, ranging from Today to 6&10, World Tonight to 5live, Online to Panorama to focus on particular editorial projects.
 - and we're rebooting Current Affairs – we're a third of the way through: we have new people in with a clearer sense of what we are trying to do; we need to restructure; and then make it happen.

Which brings me to what we're up for. And, in short, we're up for more. More partnerships, more openness, more trying things out.

There will be some here today who are skeptical about this. Come to think of it, a skeptic tank of editors is not bad. The skeptics will say: oh, here we go, the BBC's charter renewal process is hoving into view and here they come trying to cosy up to the papers. Yes, there's a fair amount of BBC bashing in the press and I admit that if you work for the BBC it is, to put it mildly, tiresome. And, as much as I'd love to convince hardened BBC critics amongst

you that the BBC does more for this country's reputation globally than any other British organisation that operates today around the world, I'm not going to let my sunny disposition get the better of me.

But, as far as the future of the newspaper business is concerned – a business, I don't think I need to remind anyone, I love and believe in - I don't think that the BBC is the problem. Look at countries, such as the US, where there is no BBC. The newspaper industry is in much worse shape. And, in fact, if you take a considered look at the data, as Mediatique have done, then you find that:

- The UK is among the most successful online news markets in the world, giving UK audiences unprecedented choice and acting as a great British export. Lead UK providers – the Daily Mail and Guardian (two of the top three newspaper websites in the world), the FT and BBC - have together c.400m UUs pm, two-thirds of which are ex-UK
- At the same time, new entrants are scaling in online news faster than ever before (the rapidity with which they reach \$50m revenues doubles roughly every 5 years) and are generating new revenues from the UK (c£90m in 2013) supporting new jobs in journalism. There are significantly more journalists per capita in the UK than the US
- Overall, UK online news revenues are now close to £500m pa (up 65% in 2 years)

And let's consider for a moment a news industry in Britain without the BBC. We take your reporting, your op-eds, your editorials seriously. We act, I hope, as a megaphone for independent journalism in the public interest. A Britain without the BBC will lose that platform for your work. It will not mean more news, it will mean more PR. It will mean more people getting their political information from direct mail from the Conservative Party, Labour, the Lib Dems – from the political parties. It will be more consumer information relayed by retailers, wholesalers, people with a product to sell. The BBC reinforces the role of newspapers. The news media is in danger of getting disintermediated – as political spin doctors, corporate communications departments, pressure groups, celebrities and powerful people harness new technological platforms to speak directly to people. They are in the business of circumventing the media. I think a strong, healthy, confident BBC is in the interests of the newspaper industry and journalists in this country. I'd like you to consider a Britain without it and think who will take your journalism seriously - and you might come to that conclusion too.

So, in two very specific ways, I'd like to suggest that the BBC and Britain's newspapers can do more together.

In June, we hosted a conference in Salford entitled the Revival of Local Journalism. My point then was that the pessimism around local journalism is overdone. There's a revival under way. It's much needed. I'd like the BBC to be part of it. And I'd like to see what, in meaningful ways, we can do with local news organisations of all kinds to make it happen. We talked about a host of practical cooperation. We put in place a working group, headed up by David Holdsworth, and as a result of it, things are happening.

The pilot in West Yorkshire to improve linking to other news sites from the BBC Local Live module is continuing and has had good feedback from regional newspaper groups. Our statistics suggest the module is generating extra external links. We have agreed to run a second pilot in the North East which will also extend to sport. Sport has been identified as an area where the BBC can offer valuable links. We have also agreed to pilot possible BBC syndication of content to other local news providers in the North East by identifying the three most attractive pieces of content a week and assessing the appetite and implications of making this content available to all local news providers. There are differing views within the working group on whether the BBC should pay for more local content. We have agreed an audit in two regions (West Yorks and Bristol) of how many stories are sourced by the BBC from other providers and what kind of funding stream that might offer.

We have also discussed the idea of a fund to ensure local courts are covered in a more comprehensive way and whether the licence fee might contribute to such a fund. Conversations are planned with PA and the Ministry of Justice. We made available video footage of the Commonwealth Games to local newspapers. And consider, this year's BBC Sport Price of Football study. This year, for the first time, we shared the data under embargo with the rest of the media and it was a resounding success. More than 100 national and regional newspapers and websites from the Daily Mail to the Kidderminster Shuttle covered the study.

And our working together extends to training and building better journalism for our communities. In January we will host the first of our joint industry events looking at data journalism at a local level.

It's in our self interest to see a thriving local news business. I believe it's in the local news business' self interest to see a thriving BBC. If we want to, we can make that happen. We're open to it.

And, finally, the future of news. I've written to many people here to invite them to participate in the project. The aim is to produce something that is open to everyone to watch, listen to, read, interact with. It's a chance for everyone with a stake in the future of news to set out what they do, what they aim to do. Many, many people in a host of news organisations – from Twitter to Vice, the New York Times to the Cambodia Daily, from the Telegraph to the FT – have already been extremely helpful. The biggest and best thing that we can achieve with this is to remind people, who in recent years may have lost sight of this fact, that, in a democracy, news is the essential public service. Our country, our freedoms, our government cannot function without it. It is the guarantor of liberty, justice and value for money. When it does what it should, when it questions and explains the world we live in, journalism can empower the individual, improve society and enable democracy. We all have an interest in making that case. And I hope you and your news organisations will want to take the chance to be part of a BBC effort that does just that.

Thank you.