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BBC Orchestrates Anti-Conservative Heckling Following Long Tradition of Staging By Media, Government [1]

The other night an email flashed across my screen with a catchy subject line: "BBC: Oye." It could only mean one thing: the BBC had shot itself in the foot, again.

The email was from a member of our local chapter of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, who knew that colleagues who have been through the fire in broadcast newsrooms would immediately click on the attachment.

Yes, the BBC was in hot water again, in reports also carried in the U.S., this time for staging a protest where BBC-orchestrated hecklers with BBC-supplied microphones hurled insults at Conservatives challenging Prime Minister Tony Blair in the current election. And the BBC decided to heckle only the Tory challengers, with such amplified taunts as "You can only trust Tony Blair" and "[Conservative leader] Michael Howard is a liar." According to the reports, Tony Blair and his fellow Labor Party candidates were never heckled by the BBC, leading the Conservatives to cry foul.

BBC officials matter-of-factly said the event was intended to be a segment about "the history and art of political heckling," even though the action was completely staged – and only against the Conservative Party.

This explanation comes from the same BBC that ridiculed the rescue of Private Jessica Lynch as "one of the most stunning pieces of news management ever conceived."

And this comes from the same BBC management that, as reported here, has been knowingly incorporating in its newscasts video news releases funded by the British Ministry of Defense without identifying the source.

(Of course, in the U.S., the Bush administration has continued to send government-funded video news releases to television stations, although this White House has been charged with being more pregnant on this than the Clinton administration, which also used them.)

But this is also the same BBC that in a recent documentary revealed staged propaganda by Saddam Hussein's followers, propaganda that received worldwide publicity for claims Iraq's national museum had been robbed by looters in 2003 in the days following Hussein's fall. Evidently alone among the assembled global journalists, the BBC had the enterprise to check out the claims immediately by sending a camera team led by historian Dan Cruickshank, who had just hosted a BBC documentary on that very same museum. The result was an hour-long documentary, seen in the U.S. under the title "Raiders of the Lost Art." Taped in April, 2003, in the days after the claims of "looting," the BBC crew photographed conclusive and thoroughly

unexpected evidence that the "looting" had in fact been done by Saddam's appointed museum staff or by people to whom the staff had given keys.

"Keys had obviously been obtained," reported Cruickshank, " whether stolen, handed over under duress, or being used by renegade staff - because they were found in the storerooms.

The BBC crew also stumbled across and photographed, also to the surprise of the British journalists, compelling evidence around and inside the museum – evidence including "parts of a machine gun, a hand grenade and a box containing an Iraqi rocket-propelled-grenade."

"Clearly during the battle for the museum this storeroom - with its high level slit-windows opening on to the street - had been used as a fighting position, reported Cruickshank. "How had the Iraqi soldiers got in - did the museum staff let them in? It's not clear, but certainly this use of a storeroom compromised the museum's status as a cultural building. "

So the BBC documented a clever propaganda coup staged by Saddam's followers – the "looting" of the national museum – which was relayed unquestioningly by the international press corps. As usual, the correction never quite catches up with the initial lie.

However, these and other examples of BBC enterprise have been marred of late by a series of missteps, notably the erroneous 2003 report by BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan that charged the British government deliberately distorted the issue of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. That led to the resignation of Gilligan, of the BBC Director-General, and of the chairman of the BBC's board of governors.

Of course sleight of hand is nothing new to the media, to NGO's, to governments or to those opposing governments, and sometimes they are in cohoots. Seemingly spontaneous televised demonstrations are more often than not carefully staged by protest organizers. During the Vietnam war, antiwar protest leaders at Columbia University would call our newsroom at WCBS-TV to let us know when the demonstrations were taking a lunch break. That was so our assignment editors would know when to tell the CBS camera crews when they, too, could take their union-mandated meal break. The demonstrators knew the union rules as well as the newsroom, and they planned accordingly.

More recently, there was the now famous NBC News "Dateline" broadcast that showed how GM trucks with sideways fuel tanks would explode when struck from the side. The trucks did, indeed, explode on cue on camera. But what NBC didn't tell viewers was that the network's producer had rigged the trucks to make them explode. That deception led to the resignation of the President of NBC News.

But why was anyone surprised? Television news producers routinely stage events. That's why there are television news producers. Think of all the times we see the subject of a news story walking down a hallway into his or her office, where they leaf through papers on their desks, talk on the phone or type on a computer keyboard, all on cue from the producer. Did you think those were all accidents, captured by chance by network camera crews?

Now think of when you listen to public radio and hear the bustle of an office punctuated by a ringing telephone, answered by someone who happens to give the location of the taping. Yes, it has become a public radio cliché, and no, it's not an accident. By definition, those stories are staged.

Then there are those taped TV interviews where the reporter conducting the interview sits and nods in agreement while the subject is talking, and then the interviewer asks a question on camera. But in almost all cases, those are staged. Those nods and questions, called "cutaways," are recorded by the reporter after the interview is over. That's because there is only one camera – two cameras would cost more money – so the interviewer later has to reenact his or her part of the interview, often rephrasing the questions. The original interview and the staged reenactment are then edited together to show on TV newscasts.

Print reporters have been lately caught crossing ethical lines. On April 13, the Boston Globe published a story by a freelance reporter about a seal hunt. It was just that: a story. She wrote it before the event was scheduled to take place, and she later admitted some of what she "reported" never took place.

A sports reporter for the Detroit Free Press also wrote a story about a basketball game the day before it was scheduled to happen. His account included an account of two former players at the game. They had told the reporter they intended to go, but they eventually decided to skip it. Too late: the "news" of their visit was already in print, to the newspaper's chagrin.

Some say a little staging is okay, for dramatic license. For example, newsmakers are told to wave their hands in the air when they are on television, because consultants say body language on TV is more important than what you say. Expert tip: Be sure your hands are above your waist, so they are in the shot, but not in front of your face.

But more and more, we're hearing about overeager producers who take things too far, such as giving partisan hecklers microphones and sending them to a news event to stage a made-for-TV scene for what is passed off to the public as a news documentary.

Oye.