

Book Review: Stumbling Over Truth: The Inside Story and the ‘Sexed Up’ Dossier, Hutton and the BBC

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*The 2004 Hutton Report ushered in an age of self-doubt and caution at the BBC. It was also the end of the most extraordinary experiment in news management Britain has ever seen: the decade of Alastair Campbell, the Blair courtier who delivered New Labour’s mission to ‘create the truth’. In **Stumbling Over Truth**, Kevin Marsh tells of his growing disillusion with the British media’s appetite for holding power to account. An important book for anyone who wants to understand the toe-to-toe confrontations between Tony Blair’s government and the BBC, and the fight to keep BBC journalism independent in the face of unprecedented government pressure. Reviewed by **Patrick Weir**.*



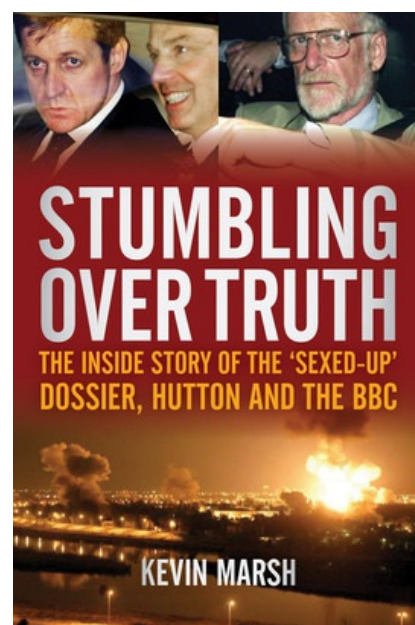
Stumbling Over Truth: The Inside Story and the ‘Sexed Up’ Dossier, Hutton and the BBC. Kevin Marsh. Biteback.

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Stumbling Over Truth is a micro-level account of crisis management at the highest editorial and management echelons of the BBC. This crisis ultimately forced the resignation of the Director General, seriously weakened the corporation’s reputation and poisoned its relationship with senior politicians. This is not 2012 but 2003, and surrounds the intelligence dossiers used to support the case for war in Iraq, rather than the alleged criminality in light entertainment circles.

The crisis centred on the relationship between the BBC and Alistair Campbell and specifically, the [death of the weapons expert Dr. David Kelly](#) after he was revealed as the source Andrew Gilligan’s infamous “6:07 broadcast” on the *Today* program. It was in this broadcast that Gilligan said that the government “probably knew” that the claim that Iraqi WMD could be deployed “within 45 minutes”, was “wrong”. Kevin Marsh, editor at *Today* during the crisis, has waited for ten years to publish his side of the story. Emblematic perhaps of the maxim – truer nowhere more than in public life – that revenge is best served cold.

It’s perhaps no surprise then, that Marsh’s professional contempt for Alistair Campbell runs through the heart of the book no less than the “story” about Dr Kelly, Gilligan and the dossiers. Campbell is, variously, “A bully” and in government “Given power no unelected, party political appointee should have”(p.52). He is no less critical of New Labour’s media management project of “truth creation”, and scorns the view that the media should be steered towards reporting facts in a certain, favourable light – and undermined or ridiculed if they proved non-compliant.



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Amongst the forensic recollections, some of which are too detailed to be convincing, of precisely who-said-what-to-whom-when, important points do emerge which add to the history of the story. Firstly, in the initial chapters outlining the period immediately after Gilligan's broadcast, both Marsh and his superiors believed that the entire "story" about the "45 minute claim" would die down. It was seen as simply one more unremarkable spat between the BBC and Campbell's media management machine. Given this version of events, Marsh's claim that the "re-starting" and subsequent escalation of the row weeks later was a calculated political decision by Campbell seems highly plausible. More importantly though, Campbell's ability to frame the issue as one of the BBC questioning his integrity, rather than his role in the political representation of uncorroborated intelligence as un-qualified fact seems to have caught Marsh and his bosses by surprise. The subsequent escalation of the row emerges, in his account, as one in which the BBC was being called upon to defend and justify accusations it had not and was not making.

Marsh clearly feels let down by the BBC, which leads to the second and most mystifying element of the entire affair: why, as the program editor, was he not called to give evidence to the Hutton enquiry? Marsh offers his own reasons in chapter 8: Lord Hutton's terms of reference were too narrow, and his interpretation of them during the inquiry even more so. That he was too close to the establishment, with no interest in digging for answers relating to the political management of the intelligence picture. Or, more tellingly, that the BBC's legal team at the enquiry took against him, concerned that his testimony and refusal to backtrack on the substance of Gilligan's claims could be "toxic" to their strategy: to "admit everything" and not to engage in the vital questions of nuanced editorial and journalistic language which caused the row in the first place. Regardless of these personal interpretations, it still seems astonishing that Lord Hutton felt no need to hear evidence from the editor of the program under investigation, preferring to call his superiors, who only became directly involved *after* the re-starting of the row.

Perhaps most curiously though, what emerges from this account of is an interesting narrative on the interpretation of the term "single source". A central plank of Lord Hutton's criticism of the BBC and Gilligan was that to question the integrity of anyone involved in the production and presentation of the dossier based on a meeting with a "single anonymous source" (Dr Kelly) was bad journalism. What made this even worse was when it emerged that Gilligan's recollection of his conversation with Dr. Kelly may not have been totally accurate, such were his poor organizational skills. However, parallel to this is the "45 minute" claim, the claim which was the subject of Gilligan's report in the first place. This was regarded as "weak" by the intelligence community precisely *because* it was "single sourced". This the claim later turned out to have from a taxi driver who subsequently denied all knowledge. What this raises, and Marsh acknowledges, is the comparison but also potential double standard between journalists and the intelligence services "Both of whom turn to secret sources to acquire information against the wishes of those who'd rather keep it secret"(p.97)

Any culpability on the BBC's part he lays squarely at Andrew Gilligan's door. The extent of his criticism though, seems to stop at poor preparation and presentation, rather than the more serious charges of lack of integrity and misreporting of conversations with Dr. Kelly, as Lord Hutton was later to impugn him with. The irony of this book appearing so long after the events but so soon after another institutional debacle at the BBC in 2012 is plain to see. The glacial pace at which crisis and danger are perceived and acted upon within the BBC's management structure seems to be ever-present between the lines. This incapacity of corporate governance to design robust crisis management procedures, and to learn from previous mistakes in order to deal with emergent contingencies is, then, perhaps the strongest criticism that can be levelled at the BBC currently. *Stumbling over Truth*, perhaps accidentally, adds further weight to this argument.

Patrick Weir is a PhD student in Cultural Geography at the University of Exeter, where he arrived after completing an undergraduate degree in Philosophy at Glasgow University and an MLitt in International Relations at St Andrews. Patrick's PhD research surrounds cultural geographies of foreign news, with a focus on re-examining the media representations of distant suffering in light of non-representational theories. [Read more reviews by Patrick.](#)

