

Right royal rumpus puts journalism on trial

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If BBC1 controller [Peter Fincham](#) had been a BBC veteran, rather than a millionaire ex-independent producer then perhaps he wouldn't be in the [mess](#) he is now. This ex-musician made his money through comedy not politics, and [doubts](#) were expressed when he was hired about how he would fit in with the essentially political public service ethos of the BBC. The ghastly [blunder](#) over mis-representing Elizabeth Windsor in a promo for a fly-on-the-wall docco would have been bad enough he she was a WAG or MP. The fact that she is Head of State has dropped Fincham in it big time with his boss Jana [Bennett](#) (head of BBC *Vision* – how weird and how big does the BBC bureaucracy get?), with the Establishment and with the newspapers. They are delighted that the BBC has had to 'grovel' to the Queen as the [Daily Mail](#) so correctly put it. It is certainly one in the eye for the Republicans at the BBC. I heard one BBC radio presenter chortling over Her Majesty's little tantrum only hours before the Corporation realised it had lied about the most respected woman in Britain.

But does this matter? surely this was a cock-up by the independent company [RDF](#) who made the documentary and the promo. This is no little kitchen film company, this is the multi-million pound business responsible for [Wife Swap](#) and it is run by legends of documentary lunchtimes such as former BBC documentary editor [Stephen Lambert](#). He is paid a shed-load of licence-fee payer's money precisely to make sure this kind of offensive mistake is avoided. If anyone should be spending more time with their Bafta award collection at home then it is Lambert and his mates at RDF.



But let's try to get this in perspective. It was a simple case of human error and if it hadn't been the Queen then we wouldn't be bothered. It's not as if the BBC screws up like this all the time is it?

Well, that's true up to a point. But it does matter for one political reason and one big journalistic reason.

Politically it shows that for the BBC to survive and thrive it must be trusted to make the right decisions and to prioritise public service over ratings chasing. One suspects neither RDF or Fincham bothered to check a story that was literally too good to be true. When I was at the BBC we spent monotonous days rehearsing the Queen Mother's obituary protocol. It was utterly galling when we wanted to spend our time on 'real' journalism. In the end digital TV made the preparations redundant, the BBC didn't close down its networks and play funereal music when she kicked the silver-plated bucket. But it was a manifestation of the care and attention that BBC management paid to getting the political things right.

I don't think this latest spat will hurt the BBC big time but it does show that the bloated ranks of management aren't doing their job of inculcating the kind of checking that makes for trustworthy programming. After the [Blue Peter](#) debacle this was the last thing the BBC needed.

But it goes much deeper than that. The future of journalism is at stake. In a multi-channel, multi-platform world where [public service journalism](#) is increasingly diffused across a variety of outlets and formats, it is vital that the BBC retains its integrity. Anything that undermines that damages a brand legacy earned over more than half a century. TV journalism (and I suppose this 'documentary' counts as that) relies on a suspension of disbelief. The viewer knows that we have filmed and edited a version of reality that they are supposed to believe is a pretty close match with the truth. It is incredibly easy to cut corners and use images falsely. But every time we cheat and every time we misrepresent reality we undermine the whole basis for visual journalism. That is why Lambert and Fincham should be taking this a lot more seriously than I think they are at present.

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