

**Investigation into  
“A Year with the Queen”**

**STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**

# **Introduction**





the previous evening was wrong. It took too long to for anyone to address this and to ask, “How did this happen in the first place?”

## **Narrative**

### **The BBC One Press Launch**

**A Year with the Queen** is a five part documentary series which, according to the BBC press handout, has:

*...remarkable behind the scenes access, this momentous series reveals how the Monarchy impacts on so many aspects of British*

sequence showing Annie Leibovitz photographing the Queen. The Chief Creative Officer knew that in doing this, the sequence shown in the rushes tape was being changed.

A shot of the Queen striding towards the photo-shoot in which she is heard to say, obviously disgrunt

## **2. “It’s the Queen!”**

Various BBC executives told us that the significance and high profile of this series was recognised but there is no evidence that this led to it being managed differently from any other observational documentary series.

The BBC has a Managed Programmes Risk List that is monitored at senior editorial meetings in the BBC. This list is mainly to track programmes that have identifiable editorial dangers such as undercover filming, possible defamation or issues of taste. However, it is also intended to cover reputational risk to the BBC. Had this series been on the list it is possible extra questions might have been asked about its progress and editorial oversight.

No-one at any level in the Vision or Marketing, Communications and Audiences divisions seemed to spot that a series with unprecedented access to the Royal Household had the potential to explode in the BBC’s face. Several BBC staff interviewed referred to this in retrospect as if it were obvious but this awareness, if it existed, seemed not to inform the way that the project was handled from the outset.

## **3. “Just a stupid oversight.”**

In May, Red Bee Media, the company contracted by the BBC to make the BBC1 launch tape, asked RDF for filmed material from the series to include in the tape. The launch was to take place on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> July.

RDF had only about 60 minutes of material that was in a format suitable for inclusion. This included the MIP compilation, which was sent to Red Bee along with the other suitable material.

No-one at RDF thought to look at the tapes before sending them to Red Bee. In fact, there was other uncleared footage on the MIP tape with the potential for causing displeasure at the Royal Household. “It was just a stupid oversight” we were told by RDF. It did not register that the sequence mis-edited for MIP was being sent.

## **4. “We resist sending material due to pressure of deadlines.”**

Red Bee’s clients are the MC&A division of the BBC and the channel controllers. Red Bee’s guidelines for the production of launch tapes make clear that they are answerable only to these clients who alone are

responsible for signing-off the tapes. Programme makers are excluded from the process as getting sign-off from fifteen or more producers can hold things up. “It’s a matter of principle” a Red Bee producer told us.

Thus, when RDF asked in three separate e-mails (albeit cast in low key terms) as well as telephone calls, to see the launch tape they were fobbed off, even though RDF’s edit suite was only a few minutes walk away from Red Bee and the director/cameraman had offered to come in.

Red Bee say they had no reason to question the material sent as RDF was a known and trusted supplier.

Red Bee has to complete a compliance form for programme trails but not for launch tapes.

## **5. “They have some AMAZING stuff.”**

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the RDF executive producer met the BBC executive producer to discuss scheduling and the number and duration of programmes. He also gave an update on the filming. Recollections of this meeting differ.

The RDF executive says he had his portable DVD player with him and thinks, though he is not certain, that he showed the MIP tape at the meeting. The BBC executive is certain that he did not.

The BBC executive producer made detailed notes of the meeting and within 30 minutes of it ending, he sent an e-mail to the channel controller and others. It said:

*I think they have some AMAZING stuff, both in the can, and planned, especially in America for the State Visit. Sequences in the can include HMQ provoked into a huge fit of pique by photographer Annie Leibovitz and storming out of room...*

He copied that email with the channel controller’s response (“That sounds really quite exciting”) to the RDF executive who acknowledged it. He says its contents did not register with him although “I am aware that I must at least have speed read it”. He challenged nothing in the description of the incident.

This meeting was the first time that the erroneous notion that the Queen walked out of the photo-shoot took hold in the BBC. The RDF executive



says that he did not mislead the BBC executive producer, but concedes that the BBC executive producer must have misinterpreted something he said, or gained the wrong impression from the MIP tape if indeed he had shown it to him. The BBC executive producer took detailed notes at the meeting, wrote the e-mail with the conversation fresh in his mind and copied his account to RDF.

## **6. Sign Off**

The channel controller and the head of communications for BBC1 viewed the launch tape three times before signing it off. Two other people from the channel team also saw the finished version. No one questioned what the sequence appeared to show. Nor did anyone grasp the potential news value of what they saw.

Several senior people in Vision already believed that there was such a sequence in the series from the earlier briefing note so, as far as they were concerned, the tape was simply corroborating what they had been told.

There was no editorial check of the tape by anyone connected with the programme. This was custom and practice. Only the BBC's Controller, Fiction previews launch tapes for editorial approval.

Even if the sequence had been authentic, questions arise as to whether the material should have been released at this early stage, and whether the Palace knew and was happy that it was being included.

## **7. "No need to run by Palace."**

There had been a meeting of BBC publicity, RDF and the Buckingham Palace press office at the beginning of the year to discuss publicity arrangements. It was agreed by all parties then that the RDF executive producer would be the main point of contact with the Palace until the BBC team began working on publicity for the transmission of the series and had been fully briefed about the content. At the time of the launch that was a week away. Of the written material for the launch the RDF executive producer advised, "No need to run by the Palace."

The BBC publicity team did not inform Buckingham Palace about the launch. This was left to the RDF executive producer who did so by e-mail two days beforehand. The Palace assumed that any clips shown would be from the edited material they had already seen and knew nothing about the MIP tape. Nor were they aware that DVDs of the tape would be

handed out at the launch and that two thousand more were to be sent out afterwards. (This mass mailing was later prevented). The RDF executive could not tell them about this

access by demonstrating the quality of the edited films and that no changes were made as a result.

It should also be said that RDF had invited the BBC executive producer to the cutting room to see work in progress before the Palace viewings; “come for a sneaky peek” he was told. He was carrying a considerable workload, however, and decided to wait for the formally scheduled viewings. Nevertheless, this invitation does make clear that RDF were not trying to conceal anything from the BBC in advance of a private viewing with the Palace.

## **9 “Editorial control rests with the BBC”**

In both publicity and editorial matters BBC Vision and BBC MC&A devolved too much of the relationship with the Palace to the independent producer. The RDF executive producer encouraged this as he had built up his relationship with the Royal Household over several years and was understandably protective of it.

However, the independent producer has a temporary relationship with Buckingham Palace, the BBC an important and long term one. It is this that stands behind all BBC projects with or about the Royal Household.

The contracts between the BBC and RDF and RDF and the Palace both stated that editorial control lay with the BBC.

The corporation should have asserted its own position and interests more clearly and more forcefully.

## **The Aftermath.**

### **1. “That’s not what happened.”**

The first sign that something was wrong came early in the afternoon of July 11<sup>th</sup>. The series publicist spoke on the phone with the RDF executive producer and told him about the launch. She mentioned the “storming off” and he replied that this “doesn’t sound right.” He thought there had been “a mistake in the editing of the launch tape.” He asked to see the launch tape and one was biked to him immediately, arriving at about 4.15pm.

Soon after this call the RDF executive producer was rung by the **Sun** asking for a comment on the “Queen walking out”; the reporter said he was at that moment showing the DVD to his boss. The RDF executive producer tried to explain “that’s not what happened.”

**Recollections differ in some important respects as to what happened thereafter.**

**2. At RDF: “We both realised.”**

The director/cameraman of the series, working that afternoon in Buckingham Palace,.”

The channel controller is quite certain, however, that he was not told by anyone on Wednesday night that RDF might have been responsible, that he did not put it to the CCO of RDF, and that the CCO of RDF did not concede that it was RDF's responsibility.

There is, in fact, nothing in the channel controller's behaviour over the next 22 hours, or in any other evidence I have seen, to suggest that he did know on the Wednesday evening and much to suggest he did not.

If the channel controller's recollection is accurate, it means that RDF waited almost twenty-four hours before admitting what they knew to be the case – that the the mis-edited sequence had its origin in the MIP tape, edited by them and provided to Red Bee. In the intervening period, the BBC struggled to manage the story and came under considerable critical fire.

### **3. Wait “to check the temperature”**

Three-way conversations took place that evening about what statement should go out. For the BBC, the channel controller and the Head of Communications for BBC1 handled this, for RDF it was the Chief Creative Officer and the series executive producer, and for Buckingham Palace, the Queen's assistant press secretary.



## **5. Behind the story.**

The following morning the story played prominently in the papers. On the Today programme a **Sun** journalist said he understood that the shots in the clip had been switched. BBC News, however, carried the story that the Queen had stormed out of the photo shoot throughout the morning, and, like other news channels, began running the offending clip.

At 8.58 am the BBC's Royal Liaison Officer, by now briefed by the BBC

itself became the subject of the story and continued to be carried in bulletins and on News24. Eventually, af



Recollections of the meeting differ. The channel controller recalls that he put it to RDF that they were in fact responsible for the mis-edit and that the reply from RDF's Chief Creative Officer was something like, "So it appears." The meeting then went ahead.

The Chief Creative Officer of RDF, however, remembers it differently; that it was "*not news*" to the controller at that meeting that RDF was responsible for the mis-edit. It was simply a confirmation of something already disclosed.

the tape to the BBC may have been human error; the original mis-edit in the MIP tape was deliberate.

In the meantime, the BBC had come under considerable criticism for the initial error, which was assumed to be the BBC's, and for the delay before an apology was issued. The BBC was openly accused of "lying" about the Queen, and there were public calls for the resignation of the channel controller. A vital relationship – that between the BBC and the Royal Household - had been, at the very least, placed under strain, and the reputation of the BBC, already having sustained recent damage over the issue of trust, was tarnished further in the eyes of the licence fee paying public.

## **Recommendations**

### **RDF**

It is not for me to make recommendations for RDF though they did furnish me with their new compliance procedures, including procedures for promotional material. These include the introduction of compliance forms for these materials as there are for completed programmes. The company has taken heavy financial punishment for its mistakes both in its share price and in the comm

The BBC should introduce a contractual requirement for independents to inform BBC executive producers of any intended viewings of unfinished programmes by participants.

### **Launches for Channel, Network or Genre.**

There should be a formal compliance procedure for completed launch tapes. There is no practical difference between broadcasting on air and broadcasting to the press especially when DVDs of the material are to be distributed.

All material supplied by productions for launch tapes and for trails should

The BBC should conduct an audit of the differing press, publicity and marketing skills in MC&A to ensure that the right mix and experience is in place in the content divisions.

The BBC should review the level of press support available and how it is brought together in crises.

Directors of the chief content divisions, News, Vision and Audio should receive a morning press briefing either one to one or through an editorial meeting.

When anyone in the BBC becomes aware that the corporation has put something misleading or untrue into the public domain a correction must be issued at the earliest opportunity. It must be understood that the BBC's honesty with the public has to be the first concern.

### **The BBC and Buckingham Palace.**

When the BBC commissions any programme with or about the Royal Household from an independent producer the BBC must establish its own direct editorial and publicity or press office link with the Royal Household.

All programmes with significant coverage of or content about the Royal Household should be flagged in the Managed Programmes Risk List. BBC antennae must be sensitive here. This is not to do with deference, although deference to the head of state would not be out of place; it is about recognising the Queen's constitutional role as well as her personal standing as someone widely and fondly admired.

A senior member of the BBC Press office should be appointed as a permanent press liaison with Buckingham Palace press office. This

or commercial activities staff are aware of the possible risks attached to that programme and act accordingly.

This list should be more actively managed in the divisions.

### **BBC Induction and training**

The BBC should introduce crisis spotting and crisis management