

BBC Chief Attacks U.S. Media War Coverage

By Merissa Marr

LONDON (Reuters) - U.S. broadcasters' coverage of the Iraq (news - web sites) war was so unquestioningly patriotic and so lacking in impartiality that it threatened the credibility of America's electronic media, the head of the BBC said on Thursday.

BBC Director General Greg Dyke singled out for criticism the fast growing News Corp. Ltd.'s Fox News Channel, owned by media baron Rupert Murdoch, and Clear Channel Communications Inc., the largest operator of radio stations in the United States, with over 1,200 stations, for special criticism.

"Personally, I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war," Dyke said in a speech at a University of London conference.

"If Iraq proved anything, it was that the BBC cannot afford to mix patriotism and journalism. This is happening in the United States and if it continues, will undermine the credibility of the U.S. electronic news media."

Dyke singled out Fox News, the most popular U.S. cable news network during the conflict, for its "gung-ho patriotism," saying: "We are still surprised when we see Fox News with such a committed political position."

A spokesman for Fox News declined comment.

The British media veteran also attacked U.S. radio broadcaster Clear Channel and warned against British media becoming "Americanized."

'SHOCKED' BROADCASTER INVOLVED IN RALLIES

"We are genuinely shocked when we discover that the largest radio group in the United States was using its airwaves to organize pro-war rallies. We are even more shocked to discover that the same group wants to become a big player in radio in the United Kingdom when it is deregulated later this year," Dyke said.

Officials for Clear Channel said that any pro-war rallies linked to the company have been organized by individuals, such as popular disc jockey Glenn Beck, or individual stations, rather than as a result of overall corporate policy.

"The idea for Glenn Beck Rallies for America actually started with a DJ at a Susquehanna Media radio station in Dallas trying to show his son -- due to ship overseas -- that there was indeed support for U.S. troops in this country," the company said in a statement.

John Hogan, president and chief executive officer of Clear Channel's radio division, told Reuters: "to categorize this as a Clear Channel policy is just laughable."

"Clear Channel Radio stations are operated locally. Local managers make their own decisions about programming and community events -- including rallies to thank and support the men and women in their communities who are serving in the armed forces," he said.

CORPORATE OFFICES NOT INVOLVED

"At the urging of their listeners, a few, about one percent, of these local managers chose to have their stations participate in pro-troop rallies. The corporate offices of Clear Channel Communications are not directly involved in the Rallies for America," he said.

In terms of plans for investments in the U.K., Clear Channel said it has no investments in U.K. radio stations and has no immediate plans to change that. "The company is not currently in talks with anyone to purchase U.K. radio assets," it said in a statement.

Dyke said, "For the health of our democracy, it's vital we don't follow the path of many American networks."

U.S. broadcasters came under attack for "cheerleading" during the Iraq conflict, with what some critics saw as gung-ho reporting and flag-waving patriotism. In one example, a U.S. network described U.S. soldiers as "heroes" and "liberators."

Dyke suggested the problem stemmed from the recent fragmentation of media, with no single network having the clout to stand up to the U.S. government.

"This is particularly so since Sept. 11 when many U.S. networks wrapped themselves in the American flag and swapped impartiality for patriotism," Dyke said.

Dyke defended the BBC in the face of accusations -- some from the British government -- that the broadcaster had been soft on Saddam Hussein (news - web sites)'s government.

"In times of war, British governments of every persuasion have sought to use the media to manage public opinion ... it's only a problem if the BBC caves in," Dyke said.