

## 5. The Liberal Gatekeepers: State-Corporate Power's Little Helpers

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On the BBC Six O'Clock News on March 20, 2006, diplomatic correspondent Bridget Kendall declared solemnly: "There's still bitter disagreement over invading Iraq. Was it justified or a disastrous miscalculation?" It was a wonderful illustration of how the world's most respected broadcaster limits the range of acceptable debate; even thought. Kendall could have asked: "There's still bitter disagreement over invading Iraq. Was it justified or an example of the supreme war crime, the waging of a war of aggression?"

But this is what the media does relentlessly: exclude possible viewpoints - in fact, accurate depictions of events - that would lead the public to fundamentally question the motives and legitimacy of power. Silence is to Western democracy what the iron fist is to Big Brother-style totalitarianism.

But how can silence about Western crimes reign in ostensible democracies? First, consider that most of what the public hears about politics, including foreign policy and environmental issues, comes from the corporate media. The industry is mostly made up of large profit-seeking corporations whose main task is to sell audiences to wealthy advertisers - also corporations, of course - on whom the media depend for a huge slice of their revenues. This advertising revenue is as much as 75% of a newspaper's total income, even for the so-called quality press like the *Guardian* and the *Independent*.

Remember, too, that media corporations are typically owned by wealthy individuals or giant conglomerates, and are answerable to shareholders which means they are legally obliged to subordinate

human and environmental health to maximise revenues in minimum time at minimum cost to themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences for democracy of such media ownership are normally brushed aside, but sometimes the truth pops up comically. Thus, after giving evidence to the Leveson inquiry in April 2012, the owner of the *Independent*, Evgeny Lebedev, tweeted:

Forgot to tell #Leveson that it's unreasonable to expect individuals to spend £millions on newspapers and not have access to politicians.

Even a *Guardian* report had to note:

It was a funny and refreshingly honest message after all the recent humbug and hypocrisy from media magnates about not wanting to influence the political class.<sup>2</sup>

The Leveson inquiry also delivered a nugget from David Yelland, the former Sun editor, who said that all Rupert Murdoch's editors "go on a journey where they end up agreeing with everything Murdoch says... 'What would Rupert think about this?' is like a mantra inside your head".<sup>3</sup>

But corporate news agendas are not only shaped by the commercial and profit interests of owners and shareholders. The corporate media is heavily dependent on governments, the military and big business sources for an endless supply of cheap news. News media are also subject to intense pressures from big business and establishment interests that control the economy and politics. An oil giant is far more able to intimidate a newspaper than, say, Greenpeace.

What kind of a view of the world would we expect to emerge out of this system? Obviously, it would be one that represents elite interests, the business sector, the government and other institutions and people with power. And, indeed, that's how it turns out.

Let's be clear: the system is not one giant conspiracy. To understand why, imagine making a shallow square wooden frame and pouring a bucket-load of marbles over it. You'll find the marbles arrange themselves into a regular pyramid structure. The marbles aren't conspiring; they're responding to framing conditions that inevitably build a pyramid. A few marbles bounce out because they don't find a place in the structure. And that's basically how the corporate news system works too.

The media's framing conditions were explained by Edward Herman

and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model in their landmark book, *Manufacturing Consent*.<sup>4</sup> They began their analysis by pointing to the highly concentrated nature of media ownership in private hands. This acts as an effective 'filter' that helps to shape the news that's 'fit to print', to quote the *New York Times* masthead logo. Then add the other four news filters of the propaganda model: advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media if they deviate too far from state-corporate ideology; and 'anticommunism' - or, more recently, 'anti-terrorism' - as a patriotic pressure and control mechanism; and Beeb's your Big Brother! The model provides a powerful means of understanding how news agendas are routinely shaped in the interests of elite sectors of society. (For its application in relation to the entertainment industry, see Alford and Fisher, Chapter 6.)

### This Far and No Further

The most highly respected 'liberal' media in this country - notably the BBC, Channel 4 News, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* - play a special role in this propaganda system. How? By delimiting the 'progressive' end of the acceptable spectrum for 'mainstream' news and debate. In effect: this far, and no further.

Consider first the role of the corporate media as a whole in supporting the aims of power. So, for example, if the US and UK governments decide that Iraq or Libya or Iran should be the focus of attention and concern, then news reports heavily reinforce that focus. In a world full of suffering and violence, the government is able to highlight just *this* suffering or *that* alleged threat by a 'rogue' country, which then becomes 'the story'. Regardless of whether the threat is real - a 'nuclear-armed' Iran? - government and media propaganda have the power to make it seem of overwhelming importance requiring urgent attention; perhaps even 'humanitarian' intervention by Western forces.

Media editors perceive their job as being one of supporting 'democracy' by reporting the opinions of political leaders and government spokespeople at face value. To seriously challenge government claims and motivations, to highlight state hypocrisy and point to past and current crimes, is seen as sabotaging this democracy-supportive role; perhaps even undermining Western democracy itself.

This is denounced as 'biased', 'partial' or 'crusading' journalism.

This does not mean that there is no dissent in the corporate media. On the contrary, the system strongly requires the appearance of openness. In an ostensibly democratic society, a propaganda system must incorporate occasional instances of dissent. Like vaccines, these small doses of truth inoculate the public against awareness of the rigid limits of media freedom. The honest dissident pieces which occasionally surface in the 'mainstream' are almost as important to the successful functioning of the propaganda system as the vast mass of power-friendly journalism. Dissidents - whatever tiny number of them are permitted - also have their place in the pyramid. The end result, however, is an overall performance that tends strongly to mould public opinion to support the goals of state-corporate power.

Is the appearance of honest dissent in the corporate media really so damaging? Why does it matter so much? How can it possibly do any harm? It does when you realise that a crucial limiting feature of liberal dissent is that it takes as a given the key propaganda claim that the state is basically benevolent and well-intentioned. So, as we saw above, the BBC's Bridget Kendall reported that the 2003 invasion of Iraq might be considered 'justified' or a 'mistake', but not what it very obviously was: a major war crime. Reporting the West's war of aggression on Iraq as 'the supreme international crime', the legal term adopted by the post-WW2 Nuremberg judges, would threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the 'democracy' which the BBC is supposed to support.

Why should there be such scepticism about the BBC? It is paid for by the British public and it is obliged to uphold high standards of fair and accurate journalism. So what is our problem with it? Well, just ask yourself: how can the BBC possibly be relied upon for 'balanced' news when its senior managers, invariably high establishment figures, are appointed by the state? When 'impartiality' is upheld by the BBC Trust whose members are Establishment grandees with fingers in numerous state and corporate pies? And when the BBC's 'public service' remit is under the thumb of governments whose policies are distorted by the dictates of power and elite financial-economic interests?

Likewise the *Guardian*, famously owned by the non-profit Scott Trust - as the paper's editors and journalists are fond of reminding their readers - is managed and operated by influential people with extensive ties to the establishment, political parties, banks and big business.<sup>5</sup>

The *Guardian* is just as grubbily commercial as other corporate media organisations. A media insider revealed to us recently that the *Guardian* has a business plan to address its current massive loss-making (a common affliction in today's newspaper industry with the increasing

leakage of advertising from papers to the internet). Apparently, when a media website is ranked in the top 10 in the US, the floodgates of online advertising open and its coffers fill up. The online *Guardian* has therefore been marketing itself to US audiences as heavily as it can; its Comment is Free website being one of the key components of that strategy. The *Guardian* is at the threshold of accessing that advertising revenue.

Even debating any of the above issues is forbidden in the corporate media; and the liberal component of the system is no exception. Indeed, as Media Lens has found, to criticise journalists for their silence and hypocrisy is to become an instant hate figure; someone intolerable, and to be ignored.

## The Golden Rule of State Violence

One of the cardinal principles of Western elites is that ‘we’ are, by definition, ‘the good guys’ and anyone ‘we’ attack are ‘the bad guys’. You could say that the golden rule of Western state violence is: terrorism is what they do; counterterrorism is what we do.

In 2007, we wrote a joint media alert with Nikolai Lanine, a journalist and former Soviet soldier who had taken part in Moscow’s occupation of Afghanistan which lasted from 1979–1989. The aim of the alert was to highlight the extraordinary similarities between the Soviet media’s earlier coverage of the Soviet occupation, and British media coverage of the current occupation of Afghanistan. The parallels are uncanny. For example, in 1980, the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya* wrote that the invasion was an act of self-defence to prevent a “neighbouring country with a shared Soviet-Afghan border... [from turning] into a bridgehead for... [Western] aggression against the Soviet state”.<sup>6</sup>

The leading Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, insisted that the Soviet-backed Afghan army had conducted military operations “at the demand of the local population” and because of “the danger to lives and property of citizens” posed by the Afghan resistance. The Soviet government insisted that its aim was “to prevent the establishment of... a terrorist regime and to protect the Afghan people from genocide”, and to provide “aid in stabilising the situation and the repulsion of possible external aggression”. The rhetoric will be familiar to consumers of Western propaganda about ‘our peace mission’ and the ‘battle for hearts and minds’ in Afghanistan today.

Reporters in the West are happy to pour scorn on the obvious

rhetoric of enemy states, but have done very little, if anything, to expose the shame of Western propaganda. Not even the *Guardian's* Seumas Milne or the *Independent's* Robert Fisk would ever offer an institutional analysis of the corporate media, especially the liberal newspapers that employ them, as a system of propaganda. For example, they could look into the history and theory of elite control of society, as Noam Chomsky often does. The facts are easily accessible to them and not at all too complex to understand and explain. But they never write about them.<sup>7</sup>

It's easy to understand why Milne, Fisk, George Monbiot, Jon Snow and the tiny handful of other 'crusading' journalists don't expose the propaganda system, especially their own employer's role. To do so is to risk alienating influential elements on the paper - the costs of even minor dissent could be high and ultimately career-terminating. Anyone who has worked in a corporation knows that everything revolves around profit-maximisation - woe betide anyone who criticises the senior management, the product, or the advertisers, in front of customers. If that criticism seriously cost the company, it would certainly not be tolerated. And remember - these are some of the most progressive and prominent journalists working in the corporate media. They are about as radical as it is possible to be and still appear regularly in the media. So this is why the *Guardian*, *Independent*, Channel 4 News and the BBC are crucial to upholding the façade of liberal democracy in this country.

Consider the glaring lack of historical context provided by corporate journalism when reporting on issues of UK foreign policy, even in the best liberal media. Often journalists simply don't know much of it. We have found in over 11 years of running Media Lens that journalists are surprisingly ignorant about the history and wider political context of what they're reporting. The real problem is that explaining the historical context tends to complicate the media's Manichean - 'us' good, 'them' bad - view of the world.

If you accept the evidence that the corporate media is a system designed to serve corporate profits and the state power that supports business, then it's clear that the media is not in the business of making sense of the world. Quite the reverse: 'Ignorance is Strength.'

## Game Over for the Climate

It's not just foreign policy. Take the very real risk of climate catastrophe. Leading climate scientist James Hansen, who was the first to alert the US Congress of the dangers of global warming in 1988, warns that:

President Obama speaks of a “planet in peril,” but he does not provide the leadership needed to change the world’s course.

He adds:

The science of the situation is clear - it’s time for the politics to follow. ... Every major national science academy in the world has reported that global warming is real, caused mostly by humans, and requires urgent action. The cost of acting goes far higher the longer we wait - we can’t wait any longer to avoid the worst and be judged immoral by coming generations.<sup>8</sup>

If proper action doesn’t happen soon, Hansen says it’s “game over for the climate”.

And yet even liberal media outlets repeatedly present as fact that there has been government ‘failure’ to respond to climate change. They do very little to report that big business, acting through and outside government, and the media itself, have been fighting tooth and nail to prevent the required action.

We have seen for ourselves that media debate on how best to respond to environmental crisis has barely moved in a generation. For years, the public has been assailed by the same anodyne editorials urging ‘the need for all of us to act now’. But how serious can the corporate media be about challenging the lethal activities of their big business allies when, for example, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* rely so heavily on advertising revenue?

The media are silent about the inherently biocidal logic of corporate capitalism. They are silent about the reality that politics in the US and UK is “a two-party dictatorship in thralldom to giant corporations,” as Ralph Nader has observed.<sup>9</sup> They are silent about the role of the media, and media advertising, in normalising what should be an obviously untenable notion, given the planetary limits, of unrestrained consumption. The corporate media are key elements of a system that, as mentioned above, puts profits above all other concerns.

As for media employees themselves - especially those well-rewarded as editors, senior journalists and influential columnists - they are an integral part of a corporate system that, unsurprisingly, selects for servility to the needs and goals of corporate power. Just like senior officials in any corporation, they are expected to toe the company line. And all the more effective if they are untroubled by doing so, or even

blind to the limits of permissible reporting and commentary. ‘Nobody ever told me what I can or can’t say’ is the familiar refrain from corporate journalists. It’s not a sensible argument. Typically, media professionals are recruited precisely because they believe the right things and hold the right values.

Of course there are exceptions, but these individuals soon learn to compromise or they end up being filtered out of the system. This isn’t merely our view; it’s the view of honest voices from within the system. So, for example, the former *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Cook once told us:

Every time we *Guardian* journalists walked into the office, we subtly realigned our personal views to accord with those of our employer. For most *Guardian* journalists, this was rarely a dramatic realignment. The paper seems leftish to most; the few there who struggled ideologically, eventually myself included, drifted away or were forced out.<sup>10</sup>

## A Sustained Act of Mass Deception

Corporate media reporting of the global financial and economic crisis of recent years fits the pattern we’ve presented so far. From the perspective of power, it is important that a steadying hand is applied to the tiller of news and commentary on the crisis, as well as the global economy itself. The liberal media has its role to play in shoring up public confidence in a discredited, unjust system.

In the *Guardian*’s comment pages, star columnist Jonathan Freedland was permitted to express a glimmer of dissent in 2008, near the start of the current crisis. “Turbo-capitalism is not just unfair,” he wrote, “it is dishonest and dangerous.” He pleaded: “surely this is the moment when Labour and the centre-left can dare to question the neoliberal dogma that has prevailed since the days of Thatcher.” Any hope that the then Labour government would step in to challenge neoliberalism was seriously misguided, given its egregious record in expanding Thatcherism after the party came to power in 1997. But since this timid expression of dissent, somehow Freedland’s blind faith in Labour had been restored.<sup>11</sup>

And so his dissection of the crisis was limited at best, timidly suggesting that “you could argue” that “capitalism is always... parasitical on the state.” What Freedland called for was a kinder, gentler form of capitalism instead of the “turbo-capitalism” which is happy to rely “on



us, the public, and our instrument, the state, when it gets in trouble.” Thin on details, he concluded weakly: “Now we should demand a say the rest of the time, too.” It was grim fare indeed.

Economist Harry Shutt, author of several books including *The Trouble with Capitalism*, notes astutely that one of the most striking features of the ongoing crisis is:

the uniformly superficial nature of the analysis of its causes presented by mainstream observers, whether government officials, academics or business representatives.’ This applies very much to journalists too, not least in the liberal media.

Shutt continues:

Thus it is commonly stated that the crisis was caused by a combination of imprudent investment by bankers and others... and unduly lax official regulation and supervision of markets. Yet the obvious question begged by such explanations - of how or why such a dysfunctional climate came to be created - is never addressed in any serious fashion.

He sums up:

The inescapable conclusion... is that the crisis was the product of a conscious process of facilitating ever greater risk of massive systemic failure.<sup>12</sup>

Shutt observes that an alarming symptom of what is wrong with current economics is the increasingly desperate and cynical measures taken by powerful states, corporations and investors to maintain faltering public confidence in global capitalism. Just as Enron, WorldCom and a host of other large corporations committed accounting fraud, so governments have falsified figures on inflation, output and unemployment to present a false picture of a healthy economy up to, and even including, the current global recession.

For example, the US government deliberately exaggerated GDP growth rates in order to disguise the economy’s poor performance since the mid-1970s; in the developed world, growth rates actually declined over succeeding decades. As David Harvey notes in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*,<sup>13</sup> aggregate global growth rates stood at around 3.5 per cent

in the 1960s. Even during the difficult 1970s, marked by energy shortages and industrial ‘unrest’, it only fell to 2.4 per cent. But later growth rates languished at 1.4 per cent and 1.1 per cent in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, and struggled to reach even 1 per cent after 2000.

In terms of managing public perception, however, Western governments and financial institutions have largely succeeded. They have maintained the fiction that they can manage the economy effectively and that global capitalism is the only game in town. How has this been possible? Shutt points to a “media campaign of uncritical propaganda and pro-market hype”. This “sustained act of mass deception (in which the establishment has seemingly come to believe in its own propaganda) has had disastrous consequences.”<sup>14</sup>

Those consequences encompass wars motivated by the desire for geostrategic power, including access to, and control of, hydrocarbon resources and economic markets; crushing levels of poverty and inequality; global climate instability; and the most rapid loss of species in the planet’s history.

## **Beyond the Propaganda Wall**

The best way to break down the wall of silence surrounding the corporate media’s role in global crimes and abuses - with the liberal media a vital accessory - is to work hard collectively to expose and challenge it. First, one has to show that the corporate media is less a window on the world than a barrier to understanding. Then one has to highlight the hidden assumptions and expose them with rational arguments and credible facts and sources.

At a larger scale throughout society, what needs to be done is the same as it’s always been: to build and strengthen grassroots efforts to raise public awareness of the issues confronting humanity, and to challenge the powerful elite interests that are crushing so much of the planet’s people and ecosystems. Tackling the serious risk of climate instability with the required radical action represents a very real threat to elite interests in the corporate, financial, media, government and military sectors. We could begin by challenging corporate media to reject advertising for climate-wrecking products and services; just as tobacco advertising is now regarded as unacceptable.

We need to challenge the mantra of endless economic growth and rampant mass consumption. We need to expose the myth that ‘our’ leaders have essentially benevolent aims and humane priorities; as

opposed to so-called ‘national interests’, a phrase which is all too often newspeak for corporate greed, imperialism and military violence. We need to confront political and media elites, and show that what passes for ‘democracy’ is largely a sham so long as people are immersed in a propaganda system of relentless brainwashing to promote state-corporate goals.

But people can and do resist this brainwashing. The power of propaganda is only as effective as we allow it to be.

## Notes

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- 1 See Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (London: Constable, 2004).
  - 2 Simon Hatterstone, ‘Evgeny Lebedev: Don’t call me an oligarch’, *guardian.co.uk*, 5 May, 2012.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/may/05/evgeny-lebedev-evening-standard-oligarch>>
  - 3 Michael White, ‘Rupert Murdoch killed softly with Leveson lawyer’s words’, *guardian.co.uk*, 26 April, 2012.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/apr/26/rupert-murdoch-leveson-lawyers-words>>
  - 4 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
  - 5 As we discussed at greater length in our book, *Newspeak in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).
  - 6 Media Lens media alert, ‘Invasion – A Comparison Of Soviet And Western Media Performance’, 20 November, 2007.  
<[http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=526:invasion-a-comparison-of-soviet-and-western-media-performance&catid=21:alerts-2007&Itemid=38](http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=526:invasion-a-comparison-of-soviet-and-western-media-performance&catid=21:alerts-2007&Itemid=38)>
  - 7 See Media Lens media alert, ‘Silence of the Lambs: Seumas Milne, George Monbiot & ”Media Analysis” In The Guardian Wonderland’, 25 January, 2012.  
<[http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=662:silence-of-the-lambs-&catid=25:alerts-2012&Itemid=9](http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=662:silence-of-the-lambs-&catid=25:alerts-2012&Itemid=9)>
  - 8 James Hansen, ‘Game over for the climate’, *New York Times*, 9 May, 2012.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/game-over-for-the-climate.html>>
  - 9 Interview with Paul Jay, The Real News Network, 4 November, 2008.
  - 10 Jonathan Cook, email to [editor@medialens.org](mailto:editor@medialens.org), 4 March, 2011.  
<<http://www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3173>>

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- <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Freedland, 'The free-marketeers abhor the crutch of the state - until they start limping', *The Guardian*, 23 January, 2008.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2245256,00.html>>
- <sup>12</sup> Harry Shutt, *Beyond the Profits System* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>14</sup> Harry Shutt, *The Decline of Capitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 36-7.