

A Journalist's Duty is to Inform. Have Western Press Forgotten This in Ukraine?

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Whenever the public right to know comes under attack, a heavy responsibility falls on the journalist. When I was 17, my teacher told the class this salient information. Did the Western mainstream media learn it too or have they simply forgotten it?

"News is what someone wants to stop (you) from printing; all the rest is ads."- William Randolph Hearst.

Johnson's Russia List (JRL) was first published in 1996. I'd guess that every single working journalist with a passing interest in Russia is a subscriber – except me. However, it seems I might have been a tad foolish to ignore this resource. Note to self – less Groucho Marx, more Mark Twain.

The JRL is published daily, but occasionally increases frequency. As for the founder, I know zilch about him and we certainly have never crossed paths. However, this week, Mr. Johnson piqued my interest for the second time this autumn. The first was when he published a list of, what amounted to, US propaganda outlets which are anti-Russia by default. That was extremely useful for indicating to friends which news services to avoid for coverage of the region.

However, this (second) time, Mr. Johnson has asked some extremely legitimate questions and they deserve an airing. The collator linked to two extremely interesting pieces from two wildly disparate sources, firstly The Kyiv Post, a ferocious supporter of "Euromaidan," the resulting coup and the subsequent Kiev government.

Secondly, RT, the very organization on whose website you are reading this. RT could be, accurately, described as an enthusiastic supporter of Russia, its government and the breakaway republics in Eastern Ukraine. Fair is fair. While RT is a much larger organization than the Kyiv Post, the Ukrainian-based newspaper has punched above its weight during this year's crisis. Indeed some of its work is of a very high standard and it deserves credit for attempting to expose corruption in that country.

Both articles JRL referred to concerned the Neo Nazi Right Sector organization's vicious assault on an opposition lawmaker named Nestor Shufrych. During an attempt to hold a pre-election press conference in Odessa, the politician was administered a beating which led to concussion and a head injury. This followed an incident in Kiev where another opposition figure, Duma Deputy Vitaly Zhuravsky was forced into a trashcan.

Johnson asks a number of questions. Initially, if "anyone has seen a comment by any of the mainstream experts on Russia and Ukraine or government officials expressing criticism of

Kiev regime violence?" I personally haven't, but if anyone has feel free to use the comments section below to outline them.

Next, JRL queries "Has anyone criticized the term 'Anti-Terrorism Operation' or the ubiquitous characterization of the opposition in the east as 'terrorists'?" Again, can't say I have.

Johnson's final question: *"Is the proliferation of vigilante justice okay? There must be examples of unease that I have missed in view of the high regard that experts have for human rights and the rule of law."* I'm afraid, I have also missed this. I decided that if anyone would feel strongly about this, it would probably be Amnesty International so I checked the Twitter feed of their "Media lead on Amnesty International's Global Campaigns" - a gentleman named Maxim Tucker. I featured Mr. Tucker in a previous op-edge, where I tried to support his battle to prevent the UK government from introducing legislation to allow GCHQ to snoop on private citizens (known as DRIP). Hence, I was hopeful that Tucker would be active in highlighting these abuses in Ukraine. Instead, I found a Twitter feed peppered with news about Ukraine - but almost exclusively from one side (Kiev), except a single retweet from Vice News. Disappointing.



Ukrainian servicemen drive an armoured vehicle on the road near the eastern Ukrainian town of Horlivka, October 1, 2014. (Reuters/David Mdzinarishvili)

In recent days, Russian TV channels been *"reporting (in Ukraine) mass graves, numerous cases of civilians pulled out of their cars and summarily shot, mass graves of people shot with their hands tied in their back and tortures, tortures and more tortures: systematic beatings, branding with swastikas, knife wounds, broken bones, heard trauma (and) damaged kidneys"*, according to [Russia Insider](#). Some of these reports may be exaggerated but, on the assumption of no smoke without fire, there must be some truth. Western media haven't bothered to assess the issues.

BBC did run a report which, loosely, touched on the story but instead focused on an error by Russia's independent REN TV. They, correctly, pointed out that REN had used a photo of MH17 body bags to illustrate a report about the alleged East Ukrainian atrocities. BBC then went to state: "The second image used by REN TV appears intended to support the reports of 'mass graves.' The reality is rather different."

"An OSCE report on 24 September about the graves mentioned by the Russian media said that two of them contained two bodies apiece. It said that at another site there was a mound resembling a grave marked by a plaque bearing the names or initials of five individuals and suggesting they had been killed on 27 August. There was another inscription saying they had died for 'Putin's lies', the OSCE noted," the writer, Stephen Ennis, continued.

So by BBC logic, a potential five-person grave is not a "mass grave?" Certainly, the British usually murdered far more than five people on their killing sprees, indeed there's a mass grave in my hometown in Ireland containing more than 600 victims of British barbarity. Nevertheless, five does count as a "mass grave" in the civilized world, even if the Brits once aimed for higher numbers. The BBC then goes on to complete the article by referring to Alina Kabayeva, whom it describes as "the former gymnast and MP who has been romantically linked to Putin." This is the kind of stuff one would expect to read in Hello! magazine, not a serious news organization as the BBC purports to be. That said a number of recent Western media features, including an infamous Newsweek front-page piece have been straight out of Hello!'s stylebook.

Meanwhile in Germany, a country which, unlike the UK (and Russia) has, largely successfully, dealt with its sordid past, state-owned ARD came in from criticism from its own board this week. They found that "The station's coverage had 'given the impression of bias' and appeared to be directed against '*Russia and Russian standpoints.*'"

According to the Hannover-based Telepolis, the report "criticizes the absence of any fundamental analysis of the negotiations between the European Union (EU) and Ukraine on the Association Agreement. It criticizes the fact that 'NATO's political and strategic intentions' with regard to its policy of eastern enlargement were not raised. Nor was any critical analysis made of the legitimacy of the 'so-called Maidan council.' The same applies to the 'role of the radical nationalist forces, particularly Svoboda' and their activities during the failure 'of the agreement to resolve the crisis in Ukraine of 21 February.'"

The "*constitutional and democratic issues*" involved in the removal of President Yanukovich and the role of right-wing forces in his overthrow were also not adequately investigated by ARD. In addition, there was no critical analysis of the role of politicians such as Yulia Tymoshenko and Vitaly Klitschko.

"The council also challenged the station's coverage of the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. There was no proper investigation made of the procedure and legality of the Crimean referendum, its international legal status, the significance of popular participation in the vote, and the role of historical issues and the ethnic groups in Crimea in the secession process," Telepolis continues. If other Western media was subjected to the rigorous examination foisted on ARD, one wonders how different coverage might become.

All this nonsense brings to mind Western movies, a genre I'm inordinately fond of. The Irish-

American director John Ford (or Sean O’Fearná), who basically invented the category, used a simple, and ugly, methodology in his American films. The Americans were the good guys, and the Indians the baddies. The distinguishing feature of Ford’s Cowboy and Indians-themed Westerns is that his Native American characters always remained separate from white society. However, in Ford’s Irish movies, the English took the Indian role.

In the Western media discourse, Russia is the Indians, the bad guys who must be kept separate and apart. Indeed, at this stage Marvel Comics are more nuanced in their superhero stories than much of the EU and US press and that’s saying a lot. United Artists, and later MGM’s, representation of Bond movie Russian villains had nothing on this.

There is no doubt that sections of the Russian media are, often, guilty of hyperbolic reportage. However, much of the Ukrainian-media is completely one-sided propaganda. In a conflict situation, it’s the duty of the independent press, from nations not directly involved, to sift through the information (and disinformation) and produce a narrative which accurately describes the reality.

Too often, in this year’s Ukrainian turmoil, coverage has been completely of one hue, a yellow and blue one. This is wrong. It must stop.

“A community needs news, for the same reason that a man needs eyes. It has to see where it’s going.” – Rebecca West.

Bryan MacDonald is a journalist, writer, broadcaster and teacher. He wrote for Irish Independent and Daily Mail. He has also frequently appeared on RTE and Newstalk in Ireland as well as RT.

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