

All Journalism Is ‘Advocacy Journalism’

By [David Edwards](#)

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[Media Lens](#)

Writing for the Washington Post in June, Paul Farhi [wondered](#) if, in breaking the story of the US National Security Agency’s spying programme, the Guardian’s Glenn Greenwald had ‘become something other than a journalist in the activist role he has taken’.

Farhi paraphrased comments from Edward Wasserman, dean of the University of California at Berkeley’s journalism school, who said that having a ‘social commitment’ did not disqualify anyone from being a journalist: ‘But the public should remain skeptical of reporters who are also advocates’.

Farhi concluded that ‘the line between journalism — traditionally, the dispassionate reporting of facts — and outright involvement in the news seems blurrier than ever’.

Interestingly, the claim that journalism ‘traditionally’ involves ‘the dispassionate reporting of facts’, that journalists are typically *not* ‘advocates’, was advocated by a paid employee of a media corporation, the Washington Post. A few weeks later, Farhi [reported](#) that his newspaper had been quite literally bought by retail billionaire Jeffrey Bezos, a story to which we will return below.

Writing in Rolling Stone magazine, Matt Taibbi supplied a rare and refreshing [challenge](#) to this standard claim for the media’s role:

‘All journalism is advocacy journalism. No matter how it’s presented, every report by every reporter advances someone’s point of view. The advocacy can be hidden, as it is in the monotone narration of a news anchor for a big network like CBS or NBC (where the biases of advertisers and corporate backers like GE are disguised in a thousand subtle ways), or it can be out in the open...’

Taibbi offered a striking example of the bias in ostensibly neutral reporting:

‘Try as hard as you want, a point of view will come forward in your story. Open any newspaper from the Thirties or Forties, check the sports page; the guy who wrote up the box score, did he have a political point of view? He probably didn’t think so. But viewed with 70 or 80 years of hindsight, covering a baseball game where blacks weren’t allowed to play without mentioning the fact, that’s apology and advocacy. Any journalist with half a brain knows that the biases of our time are always buried in our coverage.’

Like ‘terrorism’, it turns out that ‘advocacy journalism’ is a sin committed only by opponents of established power. The [atomic bombing](#) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – quintessential terrorist acts – are not described as ‘US nuclear terror’. Similarly, reporters and commentators who endlessly obscure and even celebrate their government’s crimes are not described as ‘advocacy journalists’.

Mark Weisbrot provided a nice example of award-winning bias in his [analysis](#) of an episode of the US radio show, 'This American Life', which won the prestigious Peabody Award 'for distinguished achievement in electronic journalism'.

The episode described a horrific massacre in 1982 by Guatemalan government forces of 200 people, almost the entire village of Dos Erres. The episode was courageous and impressive in many ways, Weisbrot noted:

'But there is one striking omission – the U.S. role in what the UN Truth commission in 1999 later determined to be genocide. The UN specifically noted Washington's role and President Clinton publicly apologized for it – the first and to my knowledge the only apology from an American president for U.S. involvement in genocide.'

It is clear that the programme's host, Ira Glass, was well aware of the US role in the Guatemalan genocide – he travelled to Central America and protested US war crimes in the region. And yet Glass chose not to mention his own country's deep involvement in the crimes. Weisbrot concluded:

'That's what makes this such a compelling illustration of how censorship and self-censorship operate in the U.S. media. It demonstrates, at the micro level, something that I have seen countless times in the past 15 years of talking with journalists about these issues. They have a good idea what the boundaries are and how much truth they can get away with. I have met many good journalists who try to cross these boundaries, and some succeed – but they often don't last very long.'

Bezos - Benevolent Billionaire

Similarly, on the BBC website, Tara McKelvey's ostensibly 'objective' journalism [reported](#) that Jeffrey Bezos, the founder of online retail giant Amazon, had bought the newspaper Washington Post, the employer of Paul Farhi, cited above. What is Bezos' motive? 'Is it vanity, philanthropy – or good business sense?' The possibility that Bezos might be driven by greed for influence, power and profit did not appear on McKelvey's list. Instead, she gave credence to the benevolent explanation:

'Jeff Jarvis, author of What Would Google Do?, says he hopes Bezos will shake things up at the Post and help it adapt to a post-print world.

"In some ways it has to be a philanthropic act," says Jarvis of the purchase. "Bezos is trying to protect an American institution."

McKelvey had nothing to say about the implications for democracy and truth-telling of the fact that a major 'free press' newspaper can be bought by a billionaire worth \$25.2bn as though it were a car or a football club. She did not question whether media corporations owned by tycoons and oligarchs can report honestly on a world dominated by tycoons and oligarchs. But even a mainstream stalwart like former CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather understands the problem:

'We have few princes and earls today, but we surely have their modern-day equivalents in the very wealthy who seek to manage the news, make unsavoury facts disappear and elect representatives who are in service to their own economic and social agenda... The "free press" is no longer a check on power. It has instead become part of the power

apparatus itself. And this is dangerous.’ (Dan Rather, *Rather Outspoken – My Life In The News*, Grand Central Publishing, 2013, pp.291-292)

Like covering US baseball in the 1930s or 1940s without mentioning racism, McKelvey insulted common sense by pretending that what matters a great deal does not matter at all, indeed does not even exist. Her ‘objective’ conclusion:

‘In the end, the story of the sale is about the future of the industry. Former Washington Post editors, journalists – and just about everyone who is interested in the news – are hoping things will work out for Bezos.’

So we should all keep everything crossed for Bezos, the philanthropic billionaire! No journalist, of course, condemned this as an example of ‘advocacy journalism’.

The Daily Telegraph also [cheered](#) Bezos on:

‘All of this bodes well for the Washington Post, and the chances that it will continue to attract the levels of investment required to break important stories. But it also bodes well for the wider newspaper industry.’

Again, no problems for democracy, truth-telling or freedom of speech were identified.

Matthew Norman [wrote](#) along similar lines under the title, ‘Hail the saviour of the press – if it’s not too late; Jeff Bezos,’ in the [oligarch-owned](#) Independent:

‘Anyone who loves and values newspapers, and comprehends that for all their failings, conceits and occasional misdemeanours, they are essential defenders of democracy, should rejoice at this startling turn of events.’

If that reads like a spoof, none of it was intended ironically.

Roy Greenslade commented in the Guardian: ‘

If we put commercial considerations to one side, it’s plausible to see Bezos’s purchase as an act of philanthropy.’ (Greenslade, ‘The future: Does mogul have solution to old media’s woes?’, Guardian, August 7, 2013)

Greenslade supported this bizarre comment by referring to an expert source:

‘As Emily Bell of the Tow centre for digital journalism at Columbia Journalism School has argued, there are wealthy men who, fearing the demise of old media, believe journalism “still constitutes a benefit to society”.’

In fact, Bell is Greenslade’s former colleague, someone cut from very similar corporate cloth. She set up Media Guardian in 2000, where Greenslade publishes his work.

Scouring the media for some sign of rational dissent, we managed to discover [this](#) from Richard Saintvilus on CNBC:

‘The most popular opinion is that Bezos, by the kindness of his heart, somehow “wants to save journalism.”’

In reality, the purchase ‘is about power and influence’:

'Bezos sees how rivals like Wal-Mart get killed in the press for a host of issues from disputes over low wages and killing off "mom and pop shops," to sourcing products from China. Wal-Mart, despite all the good the company does, has never been able to catch a break. Amazon, meanwhile, has always gotten "pass" from the media. This is even though Amazon has employed similar sales tactics as Wal-Mart... I don't believe for a second that there is any "humanitarian cause" to Bezos buying the Washington Post. Rather, this move has everything to do with preserving Amazon's retail and media empire.'

Saintvilus concluded acerbically:

'I don't expect that we'll see many "Amazon should pay taxes" articles from the Post anytime soon.

' Bezos has form. He donated money to oppose an initiative to institute an income tax on the top one per cent of earners in the state of Washington. In 2010, under heavy political pressure, Amazon refused to continue hosting the WikiLeaks website. As a result, the WikiLeaks main site and a sub-site were inaccessible from the US and Europe as Amazon servers refused to acknowledge requests for data. Earlier this year, Amazon also [agreed](#) a \$600 million cloud-computing deal with the CIA. <

In 2007, Dominic Lawson, former editor of The Sunday Telegraph, no radical, [said](#) on editorial control:

'Essentially I think that what happens is that newspaper proprietors/owners... will appoint an editor and that will be informed possibly by their world view or what they want.'

And ownership is only one of a series of extremely powerful internal and external pressures shaping media conformity to elite interests. Others include the profit-orientation of corporate media, their dependence on corporate advertisers, their reliance on subsidised, cheap news supplied by government and business, their vulnerability to political and economic flak, and the pressure to endorse 'patriotic' causes.

Ironically, the myth of 'professional', 'objective' journalism was born out of corporate greed about 100 years ago. Edward Herman, co-author with Noam Chomsky of *Manufacturing Consent*, [explains](#):

'Professionalism arose in journalism in the years when the newspaper business was becoming less competitive and more dependent on advertising. Professionalism was not an antagonistic movement by the workers against the press owners, but was actively encouraged by many of the latter. It gave a badge of legitimacy to [corporate] journalism, ostensibly assuring readers that the news would not be influenced by the biases of owners, advertisers, or the journalists themselves.' (Edward S. Herman, 'The Propaganda Model Revisited,' *Monthly Review*, July 1996)

Herman notes that 'professionalism has made journalists oblivious to the compromises with authority they are constantly making'.

It has also ensured that many readers remain oblivious to the same compromises.

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