

Conversations on Palestine: The Role and Failure of Journalism

By [John Pilger](#) and [Frank Barat](#)

Global Research, September 23, 2013

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As part of an ongoing series of interviews for the radio show "[Le Mur a Des Oreilles: conversations for Palestine](#)", [Frank Barat](#) talks to John Pilger, one of the most influential journalists of the last few decades, about the war in Syria, the colonisation of Palestine, the relationship between the corporate media and government propaganda and the actions of a few very brave men, Snowden, Assange and Manning.

FB: Quick question before we start, have you finished working on a new film?

JP: Yes, I've almost just finished a new film, which will be premiered at the National Film Theatre here on October 3 and shown on the ITV network in Britain on the December 17. It's called "Utopia" and is about Indigenous Australia and a struggle that is the secret of Australia, which long ago embraced an apartheid that often has dared not speak its name.

FB: Let's start, so Syria is regularly headline news at the moment, what do you make of the corporate media reporting on the issue and as a reporter, do you recognise yourself in this type of journalism?

JP: No, I don't recognise myself in the kind of journalism that misrepresents the Middle East as a matter of routine. This isn't to say that there are not able and some fine journalists at work in the Middle East but we rarely glimpse them in what we call the mainstream, or the corporate media. There is a kind of Kissinger style to a lot of the western reporting, reflecting the way that Henry Kissinger made an art form of hypocrisy and looking the other way while the United States went about its rapacious business, giving an impunity to Israel. If we are to understand the difficulties of the Middle East, their historical roots and how they might be resolved then we must overcome the notion of Israel's impunity, which the media reinforces. Israel, of course, is at the core of the problem: a colonial state reminiscent of those that were de-colonised with it was beginning; it's an anachronism and largely an extension of the United States.

FB: Would it be a fair portrayal if I say to you that I can't really see a difference between corporate media reporting on Syria and Government propaganda? It seems like they are the same sort of arms of the same Institutions in a way.

JP: Most of the mainstream reporting is an extension of what I would call an establishment prevailing view. It's usually the government speaking with a different voice. Mainstream broadcasters make no secret of the fact that they frame their political and International coverage on the agenda of the political elite: the Westminster class in Britain, the Beltway class in Washington, the Press Gallery in Canberra, and so on.

FB: Talking about journalists such as yourself that we normally call investigative journalists, it seems like it is a dying breed, would you say that people like Snowden and Assange are the new journalists nowadays?

JP: I don't believe investigative journalists are a dying breed, There is great enthusiasm among young journalists to be real journalists: that is, to investigate as agents of people, not power. There are those in the United States like Jeremy Scahill and Gareth Porter; [Gareth Porter](#) who writes only on the Internet, is an outstanding investigative journalist. So we are not dying off; we are always under threat and I suspect we always were: that's an occupational hazard.

Of course, our most reliable source is the whistleblower. This is where our scoops come from: the truth, in other words. The whistleblower is the equivalent of the conscientious objector in wartime; Bradley Manning played that part with great distinction and courage. Edward Snowden is an exemplar of this and represents many others within the so-called national security establishment. The biggest threat is WikiLeaks because it has provided a secure means by which whistleblowers can make contact and leakers can leak. It is an organisation based on the principle of transparency – as Julian Assange has articulated. One of the most revealing documents leaked by WikiLeaks a few years ago came from the Ministry of Defence in London. It was entitled 'How to Stop Leaks': something like that. And of course it was leaked. It described the three major 'threats' to the West. The third most worrying threat were Russian spies; the second most important threat were terrorists; the paramount threat came from investigative journalists. The subtext of this is an aware the public is the greatest threat.

FB: Coming back to the Middle East, you've reported on Palestine for many years. How difficult is it to report on Palestine and what do you make of channels such as the BBC calling for impartiality on the issue? Can a journalist be impartial when the situation is so unbalanced on the ground?

JP: Well, they don't mean impartial. This word has become Orwellian as in 'war is peace'. Impartial is partial; it means propagating a Western point of view, In the coverage of the Middle East, it means understanding that the Israeli point of view is the truth. If you contravene this rule as a BBC reporter, you're in trouble. I made a film about this in which reporters talked about the intimidation they had experienced: of being terrified of a call from the Israeli Embassy. This is fairly routine at the BBC and BBC reporters have learned to sanitise; they call this 'being impartial' or 'being objective'. The BBC refers to an Israel-Palestine 'conflict.' In fact, there is a military occupation, which is almost never reported as such, neither is Israel's consistently illegal actions reported as lawless. If the law was the criteria for reporting Palestine, the coverage would be entirely different. If morality was the criteria... well that's off the scale: beyond consideration.

FB: You made a film called "Palestine is still the issue" in 2003, if you had to make one again today, what title would you give it and why?

JP: The first film I made about Palestine was in 1974 and called "Palestine is still the issue". The next film I made was in 2002 and called "Palestine is still the issue". If I make another it will be called "Palestine is still the issue".

FB: You mentioned words before, for journalists and for propaganda purposes

from governments or mainstream media, how important are words? You talked about Orwellian words, it seems they can actually change the meaning of wars, they would call a “massacre” a “pacification”, “ethnic cleansing” becomes “moving borders” etc, can you tell us something about that?

JP: A simple word like ‘war’ is a deception. A war implies there are two sides of more or less equal power facing each other. The word ‘war’ is applied whenever the West threatens to attack Syria or Iran. There is no war. There is the threat of aggression and if the threat is carried through, there is invasion. There was no war when the West attacked Iraq. It was a mostly unopposed invasion. The same thing happened in 1991. I saw the state of the Iraqi army shortly before Iraq was attacked in ‘Desert Storm’; it was incapable of defending the country. Iraq was defenceless. The US mostly attacks defenceless countries, because it learned a lesson in Vietnam which, in spite of terrible losses, was able to defend itself. In Vietnam, western reporters used the word ‘involvement’. The US, they said, was ‘involved’ in Vietnam. ‘Involved’ is a useless word that doesn’t really mean anything. In fact, US had *invaded* South Vietnam, a country it was meant to be defending, at least according to its propagandists. ‘Invasion’ was almost never used.

FB: One of your last film that is called “The war you don’t see”, the people we often don’t see are the people on the ground, the people that are fighting imperialism, fighting for an intervention. Following our interview tonight, we are going to talk to a woman activist from Nablus, a Lady called Beesan Ramadan, what would be your message to people on the ground that are suffering from Western interventions?

JP: I think we all depend on people like that; we draw inspiration from them because they are remarkable. The Palestinians inspire us because they keep going; they don’t give in. The attacks on Palestine have not divided them. Yes, Gaza has been physically divided from the West Bank, the Occupied Territories, but even that has not really succeeded. I remember the spectacle of Palestinian children going to school dressed up in their school uniforms, spic and span, making their way through rubble, often having had disturbed nights and perhaps disturbed themselves by the relentless attacks from the air; and yet there is a sense of purpose about them that is so moving. They’re an inspiration.

So Palestine is still the issue. Until there is justice in Palestine there will be no peace in the region, and in the world beyond.

FB: Thanks John, thanks again.

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