

How the Western Media Support State Terror - While Millions Die

Five academics examine our media's coverage of foreign affairs, in a piece censored (and then rejected) by a leading liberal publication.

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[War Agenda](#)

When [Noam Chomsky](#) first observed that the United States had attacked [South Vietnam](#), he was upending a particularly tedious case of media conformism from that era, namely that the West was fighting Communists in the North to defend Saigon. However, the young professor was spectacularly right. By the end of the war, [two thirds](#) of US bombs – twice the total tonnage detonated in the Second World War – had [fallen](#) on the South.

The leading military historian Bernard Fall – who believed in the US presence there – said at the time that

‘Vietnam as a cultural and historic entity... is threatened with extinction... [as] the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size.’

Yet, as Chomsky [argued](#), mainstream media opinion saw US actions in Vietnam either ‘as a “noble cause” that could have been won with more dedication,’ or, on the other side of the political spectrum, the critics spoke of “a mistake” that proved too costly’.

The war consumed everything like a vortex: Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, even Bernard Fall himself was killed by a landmine.

Timor limited

Similarly, when [Indonesia](#) invaded [East Timor](#) in 1975, Chomsky and his co-author, [Edward S Herman](#), cut lonely figures in observing that the attack had even happened. Aerial bombing, mass executions and enforced famine claimed 200,000 lives, but the occupation received almost [no](#) US coverage [whatsoever](#).

We found that reporting on East Timor in Canadian papers like *The Globe and Mail* [declined after the invasion](#) and virtually flatlined as the atrocities reached their peak in 1978. Two decades on, Elaine Brière’s documentary [Bitter Paradise: The Sell-Out of East Timor](#) (1996) told the story but was itself bought – and then [buried](#) – by a major Canadian outlet.

The other exception was John Pilger’s [Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy](#) (1994), which was broadcast in Britain by ITV. Pilger, director David Munro and journalist

Christopher Wenner had entered Timor posing as representatives of a travel firm and the film exposed Western complicity in what most analysts consider [genocide](#).

Pilger cited former CIA officer C Philip Liechty, who was stationed in Jakarta, [saying](#) that Indonesian

president Suharto 'was given the green light [by the US] to do what he did. We supplied them with everything they needed [from] M16 rifles [to] US military logistical support.... When the atrocities began to appear in the CIA reporting, the way they dealt with these was to cover them up as long as possible.'

Paired examples

As [media scholars](#) critically engaged with Herman and Chomsky's work on [propaganda](#), we are particularly interested in [perspectives](#) that are [ignored](#) in the mainstream, especially by the most [progressive news media outlets](#).

Over the past 10 years, in a [series of peer-reviewed studies](#) about Western media representations of numerous countries, we have observed that the West's enemies are still [portrayed very differently](#) to [those of its allies](#) such as those Cold War-era dictatorships in South Vietnam and Indonesia.



Crimes by 'anti-Western' [regimes](#) in places like Serbia/Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, [Iran](#) and Syria routinely prompt [media campaigns](#) for external intervention. While such moral indignation can be justified, the US and UK - alongside allies such as [Israel](#), Egypt and [Colombia](#) - commit atrocities that are [given a constructive spin](#) or only token coverage.

Some coups are cool

For example, our work shows how Venezuela has been [demonised](#) in [the media](#) as a 'socialist dictatorship' since the 1998 presidential election of the wildly-popular Hugo Chavez.

Following a 2002 coup, the *New York Times*, for example, [endorsed](#) a short-lived [US-backed](#) dictatorship in Venezuela as a '[refreshing manifestation of democracy](#)'. And the mainstream press - not to forget some blood-curdling [video games](#) - have [continued](#) to [advocate](#) another coup against Chavez's successor Nicolás Maduro, elected president in 2013, which the media justify on the grounds of his alleged economic mismanagement.



When, on 30 April 2019, opposition politician and self-appointed president Juan Guaidó called on the Venezuelan military to overthrow Maduro, Western media outlets were reluctant even to call this an attempted coup.

A survey by the US media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found that literally [no elite](#) US commentators opposed the April 2019 coup attempt, describing it as an '[uprising](#)', a '[protest](#)', or even an '[opposition-led military-backed challenge](#)'.

Fresh [US/UK sanctions](#) have been celebrated in the mainstream media, even as they [exacerbate](#) the crisis. The United States has blocked the importation of insulin, dialysis machines, cancer and HIV medication, including those Venezuela had [already paid](#) for.

As a result specifically of the sanctions, 40,000 Venezuelans died between August 2017 and December 2018 alone, according to a [report](#) produced by leading economists at the Washington-based Center for Economic and Policy Research. The report establishes in detail how in the absence of sanctions a state with such 'vast oil reserves would... have the ability to avoid this kind of an economic crisis'.

As part of a March 2019 Veterans For Peace delegation to Venezuela, [Dan Shea](#), a US veteran from Portland, Oregon, asked us why,

'if America is there out of humanitarian concerns, does the US put sanctions on people, to starve them, to take their medications away, to not allow them to have some quality of life? It is against the Geneva Conventions to stop medical supplies and food from coming in. They're stopping everything from coming in and then the US turns around and blames the Maduro government for it.'

The sanctions were [formally condemned](#) at the United Nations, with a former secretary of the UN human rights council [describing them](#) as akin to a medieval siege and a 'crime against humanity.' None of this information has appeared in any mainstream national publication in the US or UK, [except](#) in one report for the *Independent*.

War of altruism

Venezuela is merely the rule, not the exception. Back in February 2011, when conflict erupted between the Libyan government and opposition groups, our news media depicted the actions of the Libyan government as indiscriminate crimes, ordered by the [highest levels of government](#). However, it transpired that the Libyan security forces had [not indiscriminately targeted](#) protesters [after all](#), as the UK house of commons later confirmed.

One of just two *New York Times* articles critical of the subsequent French-led NATO

intervention in Libya, identified in a [systematic](#) postgraduate study, lamented the ‘folly’ of ‘endless wars of altruism’. They also opposed the war for tactical reasons while ignoring the views of [academics](#) critical of the intervention at much more fundamental levels.

It thus hardly mattered for the news media when the NATO intervention, [according to a study in the high ranked journal *International Security*](#), magnified the death toll in Libya by at least seven times.

Mideast murders



In Egypt, after the military overthrew the country’s first democratically-elected president, Mohamed Morsi, on 3 July 2013, protesters occupied Rab’a al-Adawiya Square in Cairo, calling for Morsi’s reinstatement.

On [14 August](#), Egyptian security forces under general Abdel Fatah al-Sisi – a valuable Western ally who would become president in 2014 after a coup – killed [817 people while dispersing the Rab’a al-Adawiya sit-in](#).

Human Rights Watch [called](#) it ‘one of the world’s largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history’ – but it led only to mild rebukes in the Western news media and among the diplomatic community.

Al-Sisi, after all, was considered to be a more stable leader, in the mould of former president Hosni Mubarak. To this day, the *New York Times* refrains from labelling al-Sisi a ‘dictator’ – despite him now being due to rule until 2034 – instead referring to him as a ‘[bulwark against Islamist militancy](#)’.

Not that the West is opposed to Islamic fundamentalists per se. Another key Western ally, Saudi Arabia, is only now starting to struggle with its human rights narrative. Saudi’s [war against the people of Yemen](#) has become the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

At the same time, US [intelligence](#) concluded that its dictator ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The grisly killing and dismemberment of the *Washington Post* journalist was widely reported and condemned in the media, but coverage of the war in Yemen [has been woeful](#), especially in [the first years of the conflict](#).

In an incredible rationalisation that passed without comment, the UK’s foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt recently insinuated in *Politico* magazine that by being the [second largest weapons dealer to Saudi Arabia](#), the UK is uniquely placed to help [stop the violence](#) soon. Somehow, sometime – after four years and counting.

War is peace, indeed.

Red herring

And then there's '[Russiagate](#)', the jaw-dropping master narrative, long touted by US Democrats, that Russian president Vladimir Putin secretly controls US president Donald Trump by threatening to expose his secrets - and has interfered with ballot boxes and social media to manipulate US foreign policy and fix the 2016 US presidential election.

The long-awaited Mueller report into these alleged dealings [substantially weakened](#) the Trump-Russia conspiracy theory, even while far more evident influences, such as [massive corporations](#) and the [Israeli government](#) and, indeed, [the enormous influence of the US itself on other countries' democratic systems](#), has been softballed.

The 'Russiagate' narrative also collapses when we examine the political advertising data. According to Facebook, a Russian firm, the Internet Research Agency, spent about \$100,000 on Facebook ads during the 2016 US presidential election cycle. In contrast, the Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump election campaigns together [spent](#) \$81 million on Facebook ads.

Furthermore, unlike the Russian agency, the Trump and Clinton campaign teams also worked with the social media giants to strengthen their performance online. Facebook even sent staff to [assist the Trump campaign](#) as it spent tens of millions on the platform.

As communications scholars Daniel Kreiss and Shannon McGregor [comment](#):

'Facebook's role during the 2016 presidential election has come under extraordinary scrutiny.... But our research shows another, less discussed aspect of Facebook's political influence was far more consequential in terms of the election outcome. The entirely routine use of Facebook by Trump's campaign and others - a major part of the [\\$1.1 billion of paid digital advertising](#) during the cycle - is likely to have had far greater reach than Russian bots and fake news sites.' (The \$1.1bn includes spending by politicians and groups outside the Trump and Clinton campaigns.)

Yet, the last time a 'Russiagate' sceptic was allowed on MSNBC, the most liberal television network in the US, was in [January 2017](#), just as Trump took office.

'Russiagate' has provoked a [new Cold War](#). Moreover, the media's obsession with Russia has shifted media attention yet further away from the Trump administration's other, more dangerous, [actions](#) on issues such as [climate change](#), [abortion rights](#) and [corporate bailouts](#).

Not all [news values](#) are determined by powerful forces. Nor is it surprising or necessarily harmful that consensus forms around certain ideas. But power is strikingly relevant and [consensus views clearly correlate with](#) elite interests.

As [global mass movements](#) react to multiple foreign policy failures in an [era of misrule](#), major media institutions still routinely [support](#) their state's narrative lines.

Mass distraction

Perhaps they did so most [spectacularly](#) over [Iraq](#) and the weapons of [mass destruction fiasco](#). Major studies on [US](#) and [UK media reporting](#) of the Iraq War suggest that news

discourses mirrored the views held by powerful political and military elites. It was [hardly on the agenda](#) of the media that the invasion-occupation of Iraq constituted aggression, the supreme international crime in international law.

That said, at least the cameras were rolling when the 2003 invasion began a campaign that contributed to a [six-figure number of violent deaths](#) – by even the most [conservative](#) estimates.

One might ask where were those great Western pens and lenses in the preceding decade, when [sanctions](#) led to an [explosion](#) in [child deaths](#) – the numbers are still [debated](#) but the best indications are that they were [comparable](#) to the extremely high casualties caused by the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation.

Similarly, [our work](#) suggests that the war in Syria has been reported in a highly partisan fashion mirroring the media's poor performance during the Iraq War. According to veteran correspondent [Patrick Cockburn](#),

'Western news organisations have almost entirely outsourced their coverage to the rebel side' of the conflict.

As a consequence, according to Cockburn,

'fabricated news and one-sided reporting have taken over the news agenda to a degree probably not seen since the First World War'.

Lies in Syria



To add one further example: the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has been tasked to investigate alleged chemical attacks in the Syrian conflict via its [Fact-Finding Mission \(FFM\)](#).

In 2019, anonymous OPCW whistleblowers [leaked](#) inside information about the fact-gathering process of the FFM, as well as an [engineering assessment](#) that was seemingly suppressed by the OPCW.

These leaks to the UK-based 'Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media' (WGSPM), together with [other facts assembled by the WGSPM](#), indicate that some of the OPCW's reports had been manipulated by the technical secretariat that heads the FFM.

[A report](#) by the WGSPM suggests that the technical secretariat has been co-opted by an alliance of state parties led by France, the UK and the US.

It further suggests that some of the OPCW's reports have excluded or ignored evidence that some of the alleged chemical attacks in Syria might have been staged.

These revelations indicate that Syrian opposition forces might have [manufactured atrocities](#) to incite 'humanitarian' military intervention by the West.

In fact, one of the alleged chemical attacks whose authorship is now in question was the April 2018 attack in Douma that [triggered a series of strikes](#) by France, the US and the UK.

This story of the OPCW leaks has exploded in the independent media but has been largely confined in the mainstream to the columns of [Peter Hitchens](#) in the *Daily Mail* and [Robert Fisk](#) in the *Independent* (the story has also been reported by [France24/AFP](#) and Fox News).

Abuse, not truth

National media systems everywhere, far from challenging state-corporate abuses, as they invariably [claim](#), routinely [defend](#) them. This is a problem in both autocracies and [democracies](#), and in [both](#) the [East](#) and [West](#). It is a situation that conforms to the predictions advanced by Herman and Chomsky's [Propaganda Model](#) with regard to [patterns of media performance](#).

Millions [do](#) die. These are avoidable deaths caused by powerful individuals and institutions in the West through the predictable consequences of economic and military warfare.

None of this is even to touch on the long-trailing bloodstains left in the wake of certain bloated and coddled industries operating from our shores – notably tobacco, [mining](#), and armaments, or the [grossly disproportionate](#) effect that Western militaries have on pollution and global warming, or what fresh hell might be unleashed at any minute over [Iran](#) or even [China](#) and [Russia](#).

[Uncontested contrary facts](#), reliable analysis and [well-presented](#) alternative narratives can be found in a wide range of [sources](#), such as [Media Lens](#), but in even the most laudable corporate outlets they are [piecemeal](#) at best.

The media is complicit. And it happens all the time.

In fact it just did.

How this article was censored

We set out in Spring 2019 to write a short and very readable article for the mainstream press, which critiqued the media's treatment of Western foreign policy. As we expected, our efforts were roundly ignored.

However, as fate would have it, one leading liberal publication was excited by the project. Not only that, they worked closely with us for several weeks to create a version of the piece we all thought was exceptionally well done.

Its editor even generated a uniquely stark headline: 'How Western media amplifies and rationalises state-sanctioned war and violence - while millions die'.

The article was due to be published on a Thursday morning in April but the head editor intervened as a final check. An hour later, we were called on the phone by the first editor to say there was a problem and delay.

'While millions die' had been deleted from the title. All references to Western involvement in East Timor, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Venezuela had been removed. Our references to Ed Herman, Noam Chomsky, and even our own status as scholars of propaganda had been removed.

The head editor was confused by our criticism of the *New York Times*, supposing that their twisted use of criticism of the NATO intervention in Libya (lamenting the 'folly' of 'endless wars of altruism') was a 'good thing' by our terms. Would it be a good or legitimate criticism of, say, Syrian dictator Assad, we responded, to lambast him for pursuing 'endless wars of altruism'?

Our paragraph on the NATO bombing of Libya was annotated with: 'Needs line in here about nature of Gaddafi regime. Can't ignore its atrocities.' In response, we observed that [official sources](#) made it clear that it was our side and our 'rebels' in Libya, specifically not the Gaddafi government, who conducted [large-scale human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing](#) - against black Africans.

Our piece had been extensively hyperlinked to the most thorough and reliable sources available, including our own original peer-reviewed journal articles. We responded to every query raised and maintained weekly contact with the publication for over a month before finally being told that we should take it elsewhere.

Noam Chomsky wrote to us as the events unfolded:

'Quite a tale. While these statements [about historical US war crimes] were highly controversial at the time, I thought even the mainstream might tolerate them today - transmuting them to ancient history, mistakes, and so on.' Amidst Chomsky's 'shock' and 'surprise' at the unusually-pointed and clearly-documented nature of our publishing experience, he observed that 'unfortunately, it's the norm'.

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