

# Mainstream Media and the Illusion of Debate

The Great White 'Nope' - Genevieve Jacobs, Paul Mason and Alain De Botton

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Global Research, June 11, 2014

[Media Lens](#)

When corporations own the news and advertisers 'sponsor' the shows, journalists know they are above all answerable to the company managers and allied interests who pay their salaries. The mere public, especially voices of dissent, can be treated with indifference, even contempt. Journalists have power without responsibility, and they know it.

On March 6, the fast-talking presenter of ABC Radio Triple 6's Mornings with Genevieve Jacobs in Canberra [described](#) the shameful suffering of indigenous Australians exposed by John Pilger's important film, [Utopia](#).

'What veteran filmmaker John Pilger had to present for his film was in many ways a Third World country, a place where there is despair and dispossession, desperate injustice.'

Jacobs [quoted](#) football legend and 'Australian of the year', Adam Goodes, on 'mainstream' Australia's response to Pilger's film:

'Our response, our muted response, is a disgrace. It is disturbing and hurtful that we just don't evidently care all that much.'

Jacobs then interviewed Pilger, asking him:

'So what does that say about the state of the national debate?'

It was a good question, one that would soon return to haunt the questioner.

Like so many journalists responding to so much serious criticism, Jacobs breezily insisted that her organisation was different, it had embraced all points of view: 'John, that's a debate we're very aware of here in Canberra... I think we're *well aware* of that, John!' she told Pilger repeatedly, who exposed the usual, key flaw in the argument:

'Intensely discussed, yes, you're absolutely right. But discussed in the narrowest terms.'

This recalled the sublime moment when Noam Chomsky rendered a brash young Andrew Marr temporarily speechless, after the BBC interviewer had [commented](#) of the [Gulf War](#):

'There was a great debate about whether there should have been a negotiated settlement.'

Chomsky interrupted: 'No, sorry, no, that's *not* [the] debate...'

Jacobs, though, was insistent:

'Certainly here in Canberra we do have that discussion vigorously and often... I have spoken to people in the studio... I think that has been widely discussed.'

Given that the issues had in fact been endlessly discussed, what on earth was the point of Pilger's film? Jacobs asked again:

'That's my question though - what do you bring that is new to this?'

Pilger replied: 'Well, have you seen the film?'

Jacobs: 'I haven't seen the film, but...'

Like her audience, Jacobs knew exactly what was coming next:

'Well then, how can we...? This is the problem, you see. And forgive me for raising it. How can you have a discussion with me about a film you haven't seen?... You say you're having a lot of debate there, but you apparently haven't watched the film that we're supposed to be talking about!'

Pilger's voice dropped and slowed as he circled the flailing interviewer like a 'Saltie' [croc](#):

'I'm giving you the opportunity to explain to me and your listeners why you haven't, why you haven't watched the film before you discuss with the filmmaker the film?'

Jacobs explained that she hadn't seen the film 'because my producer suggested to me this morning that it would be a really good idea to discuss this'. But there was no place to hide:

'You run a programme, and with all respect to you, that's what Adam Goodes is talking about - that people like you cannot be bothered! And that's what he's writing about. Don't you find this so exquisitely ironic?'

Jacobs instantly shut down the debate and turned to emailed comments sent in by listeners. Would these be favourable to the guest who had just sunk the host? Jacobs blurted:

'Gus says to me, "Doesn't 'Triple 6' ever get tired of having people on the radio to lecture us about how racist we are? Didn't we say sorry? Are we going to move on?"'

And by way of balance:

'Rob says, "While I don't disagree with Pilger on many issues he's tackled over the years, his holier than thou, patronising tone alienates those who support his efforts and hardens the attitudes of those who don't.'"

### **Paul Mason - 'Yeah, But I Deal In Fact'**

The collision between the idea of what a free press is supposed to be about - telling the truth, standing up for the oppressed, holding power to account - and the reality of a corporate media culture that just 'cannot be bothered' is tragicomic indeed.

In March, we [challenged](#) Channel 4's Paul Mason (formerly of BBC Newsnight, now economics editor of Channel 4 News) to explain why he believed the failure of the US to bomb Syria in August 2013 was a '[Disaster!](#)'

Mason [invited](#) us to email him, which we did. He failed to reply. After repeated nudges, he promised to reply when he had the time. More than two months later, journalist Ian Sinclair reminded Mason that he had still not responded. Mason [replied](#):

'Believe it or not, I still have more important things to do'

We [answered](#):

'Well, Chomsky - famously, the world's busiest human - typically replies within 24 hours with detailed comments'

Mason's sage [response](#):

'yeah but I deal in fact, not ideology'

We [replied](#) again:

'Time allowing, you should read @ggreenwald's new book, No Place To Hide - it might relieve you of that conceit.'

This is one of the passages in Glenn Greenwald's book that we had in mind:

'As we are told endlessly, journalists do not express opinions; they simply report the facts.

'This is an obvious pretense, a conceit of the profession. The perceptions and pronouncements of human beings are inherently subjective. Every news article is the product of all sorts of highly subjective cultural, nationalistic, and political assumptions. And all journalism serves one faction's interests or another.' (Greenwald, No Place To Hide - Edward Snowden, the NSA and the Surveillance State, Penguin, digital edition, 2014, p.471)

Greenwald concludes of the US press:

“Objectivity” means nothing more than reflecting the biases and serving the interests of entrenched Washington. Opinions are problematic only when they deviate from the acceptable range of Washington orthodoxy.’ (p.474)

Mason’s magnificently daft, one-word [reply](#) to the suggestion that he might read Greenwald’s book:

‘nope’

Like Pilger’s interviewer, Mason simply cannot be bothered, just as he cannot be bothered to answer us. We have previously discussed similar [unfulfilled promises](#) to respond from the Guardian’s Seumas Milne.

### **Debunking De Botton**

Alain de Botton also has no time for dissident views in his latest book *The News: A User’s Manual* (Penguin digital edition, 2014). In what affects to be a penetrating analysis of contemporary news media, de Botton warns that ‘when news fails to harness the curiosity and attention of a mass audience through its presentational techniques, a society becomes dangerously unable to grapple with its own dilemmas...’. (p.38)

De Botton really is arguing that ‘presentational techniques’ should be a key focus for media reformers, who need to deal with the fact that ‘no one is particularly interested’ in news. (p.98)

The solution, then, ‘is to push so-called serious outlets into learning to present information in ways that can properly engage audiences. It is too easy to claim that serious things must be, and can almost afford to be, a bit boring.’ (p.38)

In the grand tradition of no-holds-barred dissent, de Botton adds:

‘Why do news organisations focus so much on the darkness? Why so much grimness and so little hope? Perhaps they think that their audiences are a little too innocent, sheltered and pleased with themselves...’ (p.89)

Instead, society’s news should ‘train and direct its capacity for pride, resilience and hope’. (p.54)

Key problems with the media are thus identified: they don’t try hard enough to be interesting, they’re too boring, they’re too focused on negative events – a desperately superficial and misguided analysis.

De Botton’s discussion is so disconnected from the reality of today’s corporate media that it does not merit close attention. But he is a bestselling author whose book sales have been measured in the millions.

The word ‘corporate’ features *once* in *The News*, the word ‘corporation’ twice. At no point does de Botton even mention that the media is corporate in nature, let alone discuss the implications. At no point does he mention the disastrous reliance on corporate advertising, with even ‘quality’ newspapers like the Guardian dependent to the tune of 60 per cent of

their revenues.

In a rare gesture in the direction of dissent, de Botton comments that 'foreign reporting implicitly defers to the priorities of the state and business, occupying itself almost exclusively with events which touch on military, commercial or humanitarian concerns'. (p.106)

But note, he is arguing that foreign reporting defers to particular *types* of 'events' that are of interest to state and business, not to an elite *worldview* through which foreign reporting typically interprets those events. In reality, foreign reporting focuses on 'humanitarian concerns', for example, only when those concerns suit the needs of state-corporate power. Embarrassing humanitarian concerns are not on the agenda. Unwilling or unable to recognise this level of structural bias, de Botton is able to declare:

'To become powerful once more, foreign news needs only to submit itself to some of the processes of art.' (p.115)

The key, again - presentation needs to be more humanly interesting.

De Botton reverses the truth of public exclusion:

'The financial needs of news companies mean that they cannot afford to advance ideas which wouldn't very quickly be able to find favour with enormous numbers of people.' (p.93)

Like the endless [promotion of wars](#) in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, perhaps - including the Guardian and Independent's tireless advocacy for the West's supposed 'responsibility to protect' - despite the clear disfavour of readers and viewers. In fact, the financial needs of newspapers mean that they cannot afford to advance ideas which fail to find favour with the 1 per cent, and above all the 0.1 per cent, which owns and controls them.

Ours, it seems, is an innocent age:

'The news is committed to laying before us whatever is supposed to be most unusual and important in the world.' (p.8)

Again, an exact reversal of the truth described by Chomsky:

'The basic principle, rarely violated, is that what conflicts with the requirements of power and privilege does not exist.' (Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1992, p.79)

De Botton observes that 'newspapers and news bulletins are in truth thimblefuls of information arbitrarily pulled out of a boundless ocean of data by hard-pressed editors, daily forced to do no better than guess at the desires of a putative "average reader". Inevitably, they don't always get it right.' (p.296)

In fact, their job is to shape, not indulge, the political and material desires of their readers on behalf of elite owners, parent companies, advertisers and state allies. De Botton contradicts his own claim that news content is 'arbitrarily' pulled out of an ocean of information:

'We should at least be somewhat suspicious of the way that news sources... seem so often to be in complete agreement on the momentous questions of the day.' (p.90)

And why might that be? Could it be related to the fact that the media are all giant, profit-seeking, ad-dependent corporations owned by even larger profit-seeking conglomerates owned by wealthy individuals?

Reading *The News* was a particularly depressing experience for us. De Botton is an intelligent, well-intentioned individual, and he has previously (albeit in private) commented positively on our own work. Moreover, we had written to him on November 30, 2012:

'Hi Alain

'Hope you're well. Interested to hear about the topic of your new book on Twitter. Are you reading Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, or watching the documentary about Chomsky's media analysis of the same name? Fascinating stuff. Can you say any more about the book?'

'Best wishes

'David Edwards'

De Botton replied:

'Dear David,

'Thanks for your interest. Yes, I'm reading Herman and Chomsky carefully - many thanks. I can't say more for now - and respect your and Medialens's activities very much.

'With good wishes,

'Alain'

It may be that de Botton's intention was to avoid triggering a negative reaction from media gatekeepers, to reach readers with at least *some* analysis of the news. Or it could be that, like so many commentators, he was wary of alienating a corporate system that has made him a household name. But what is interesting, disturbing, and such a feature of our time, is that de Botton surely *did* read unfiltered, accurate analysis of the media, and chose to ignore it.

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