

Newly Unearthed CIA Memo: Media Are the “Principal Villains”

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A new declassified CIA report unearthed by the FOIA investigative cooperative MuckRock contains some shocking commentary on how the intelligence community views and interacts with the media. The 1984 series of internal memos, part of the CIA's recent [CREST release](#) (CIA Records Search Tool) of over 900,000 newly declassified documents, were drafted in response to a study on unauthorized leaks and disclosures written by legendary CIA officer [Eloise Page](#).

The CIA Inspector General [IG] was tasked by CIA Director Bill Casey to investigate and review CIA vulnerabilities to media scrutiny. One of Eloise Page's suggestions involved CIA and agency friendly individuals gaining influence at universities and journalism schools in order to change and shape curriculum. As MuckRock explains:

The IG passed the task onto someone on his staff, who produced a four page SECRET memo for IG James Taylor, who passed it onto Director Casey. The IG specifically endorsed the proposal for a program where the Agency would intervene with journalism schools, which is discussed further below.



The most startling sections from the CIA memos - all marked “SECRET” - reveal how CIA views the first amendment and journalistic freedoms:

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and the power of the media to publish in this country is nearly absolute.”

Below are among the most significant sections from the 1984 formerly Secret report.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely”: Ironically enough these are actual words coming out of the CIA applied not to itself - a secretive spy agency which frequently operates above and outside of the law (Iran-Contra, COINTELPRO, Operation Mockingbird, Church Committee findings... to name a few examples) - but these are words applied to the media. The CIA further likens investigative journalism with enemy foreign espionage:

“we can cite precise parallels in methods and results, if not in motivations, between the media's attempts to penetrate us and our opposition's attempts to do the same.”



“Maybe it’s time for an offense [against the media]”: The 1980’s was a time when the CIA continued to be on the defensive in the face of startling findings by the 1975-1976 Church Committee. The Congressional committee, chaired by Frank Church, uncovered rank and pervasive lawlessness by the CIA and other government agencies like the FBI and NSA, including foreign assassination plots, illegal wiretaps, widespread domestic spying and post office infiltrations, planting fake media stories, and embedding spies and agency-friendly journalists in American and foreign newsrooms. Many of these programs had been reportedly rolled back or eliminated by the 80’s. The 1984 document perhaps represents a period of CIA internal regrouping or reorganizing for a new offensive in shaping public perceptions.



Watch: “CIA Admits Using News To Manipulate the USA (1975)”

“Remember that the organization has official contacts with influential people outside... We have periodic sessions with college and university presidents, some of them undoubtedly with schools of journalism.” This is the section Director Casey got excited about, which he called attention to as the brief was circulated among departments. The idea of direct campus influence is aimed at shaping the end media product, and to have some influence very early on in young journalists’ careers, resulting in a “challenge to the practice of publishing indiscriminately” - that is, ensuring CIA consultation prior to news being published. Perhaps the most sinister line in the below passages is “given some curriculum changes, the next generation of reporters might show some elevation of ethics.”



CIA Do’s and Don’ts - “direct CIA sponsorship [of media influence campaigns] would be pilloried”: The CIA prepared a practical guide on how to subtly combat the media while avoiding Congressional oversight, including providing the public with a “sanitized list of examples” of media disclosures the CIA sees as hurting its mission, as well as setting up proxy organizations to shape the media indirectly in order to conceal the CIA’s role. Another section of the full document, which can be accessed [here](#), speaks of a hoped-for chilling effect that prosecution of a prominent journalist might induce: “A single well-publicized, high-level conviction would do a lot.”

We are of course reminded of today’s war on WikiLeaks and whistleblowers. Current CIA Director Mike Pompeo recently declared WikiLeaks “[a non-state hostile intelligence service](#)”. The CIA is now actively working to destroy the media and whistleblowing organization which has broken endless stories while partnering with news outlets around the world.



CIA to its staff of intelligence officers: Don’t announce a program to curb the media’s excesses... Don’t forget that public confidence in the press is low.



Later CIA documents and historical studies confirm that much of the strategy laid out in these memos was carefully implemented and developed. One example among many can be seen in a 1997 classified internal CIA study called, [Managing a Nightmare: CIA Public Affairs and the Drug Conspiracy Story](#). The now declassified paper was authored by the agency's Center for the Study of Intelligence, which is a kind of inhouse think tank which also works closely with CIA Public Affairs - the official media relations wing.

"Managing a Nightmare" details the steps the CIA went through to crush California journalist Gary Webb's investigative series exposing [CIA-Nicaraguan Contra drug running](#). The CIA report boasted of "a ground base of already productive relations with journalists" which was leveraged to quell "a genuine public relations crisis." It also admitted to using proxies and friendly journalists in major news rooms to attack both Gary Webb and his investigative story.

Similar to the 1984 memos advising on the public relations importance of avoiding "frontal attack" of either the press or Constitutional protections like free speech, the [1997 study](#) admits of subtle behind the scenes maneuvering to bring about the desired end:

"In the world of public relations, as in war, avoiding a rout in the face of hostile multitudes can be considered a success."

And added further that,

"We live in somewhat coarse and emotional times-when large numbers of Americans do not adhere to the same standards of logic, evidence, or even civil discourse as those practiced by members of the CIA community."

Likely, such declassified papers constitute the tip of the iceberg in terms of revealing the depths that US intelligence agencies have gone to in studying how to manipulate public perception and opinion. No doubt the more extensive content still remains classified and hidden.

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