

“Progressive” Journalism’s Legacy of Deceit

By [James F. Tracy](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Progressive-left media persist in acting as propaganda outlets for the US-NATO destabilization of Syria, thus placating a politically conscious audience that might otherwise be mobilized against acts of imperialism and violence. The historical record suggests how this is not the first time “Progressive publicists” were used to sell a war.

A recent report in the UK Guardian by Charlie Skelton explains that Western news outlets remain willing victims (or accomplices) in a propaganda campaign for US -NATO led Syrian intervention being carried out by skilled and well-financed public relations practitioners. According to Skelton, “the spokespeople, the ‘experts on Syria’, the ‘democracy activists’ ... The people who ‘urge’ and ‘warn’ and ‘call for action’” against the Assad regime are themselves part of a sophisticated and well-heeled public relations effort to allow NATO forces to give Syria the same medicine administered to Libya in 2011. “They’re selling the idea of military intervention and regime change,” Skelton reports,

“and the mainstream news is hungry to buy. Many of the “activists” and spokespeople representing the Syrian opposition are closely (and in many cases financially) interlinked with the US and London – the very people who would be doing the intervening. Which means information and statistics from these sources isn’t necessarily pure news – it’s a sales pitch, a PR campaign.”[1]

If one thinks that a revelation of this magnitude would be cause for other major Western news media to reassess their reportage of the Syrian situation they would be greatly mistaken. Amy Goodman’s Democracy Now is a case in point. Since the beginning of the “Arab Spring” color revolutions the foremost broadcast venue of “independent” progressive-Left journalism in the United States has used its reportage to obfuscate and thereby advance the campaign for regime change in Egypt, Libya, and now Syria. The tactics of disinformation and death squads employed in Libya and Syria should be easily recognizable since they were refined against popular Central American moves toward popular enfranchisement by the Reagan administration during the 1980s.

As Finian Cunningham recently observed [2] Democracy Now’s adherents look to Goodman on a regular basis because of her perceived credibility; she is the self-avowed “ exception to the rulers”—a tireless crusader against the restrictive corporate media where there remains a “deafening silence ... around the issues—and people—that matter most.”[3] Today Goodman’s vaunted program is contributing to the very violence being committed by Western-backed mercenaries against the Syrian people.

Goodman and similar Left media are engaging and convincing precisely because of their posturing against corporate media control, economic exploitation and war mongering.

Occupying the outer contours of National Public Radio's milquetoast programming, Democracy Now's self-described "independent" reportage takes on a certain aura of authenticity among its supporters—mainly progressives with concerns for social justice and human rights.

Such characteristics make Goodman and Democracy Now among the most effective sowers of disinformation. Further, their role in assuaging an educated and otherwise outspoken audience serves only to aid and abet the wanton military aggression Goodman and her cohorts claim to decry. In light of the program's broader coverage of the "Arab Spring," such reporting must be recognized and condemned as sheer public relations for NATO and the Obama administration's campaign of perpetual terrorism and war on humanitarian grounds.[4]

On July 19, shortly after interviewing a mysterious "Syrian activist" who allegedly participated only with the assurance of anonymity, Democracy Now brought on McClatchy's Beirut correspondent David Enders, who presented the US-NATO-backed mercenary army's actions that resulted in the deaths of high-level Syrian government officials as part of a spontaneous popular revolution that was gaining momentum.

"We've seen the rebellion grow in numbers and as far as its organizational capability. And they've attempted to strike at Assad and his inner circle multiple times ... I think what we're seeing is just the government crumbling under the weight of a massive rebellion. It simply can't put it down." [5]

Goodman and Democracy Now are in fact upholding progressive journalism's greatest perversion: consciously using the public's faith in its performance and moral rectitude to promote the latest war—a tradition that dates back almost one hundred years. At that time journalists with public personae remarkably similar to Goodman's were employed to persuade the American public on US entry into World War One. This was done with the government's careful consideration of how ostensibly liberal crusaders were held in high regard by the broader public.

In April 1917, when Democratic President Woodrow Wilson led America into the war that he promised would "make the world safe for democracy," he called on some of America's foremost progressive journalists to "sell" the war to a reluctant American population through the greatest propaganda campaign ever put together. Wilson's anxiety over securing liberal support for the war effort brought him to recognize how well known "Progressive publicists" exercised credibility in the public mind through their previous work in exposing government and corporate corruption. One such journalist was George Creel, who Wilson tapped to lead the newly formed Committee on Public Information (CPI). New Republic editor Walter Lippmann and "father of public relations" Edward Bernays were also brought on board the elaborate domestic and international campaign to "advertise America."

Because of Creel's wide-ranging connections to Progressive writers throughout the US, Wilson was confident that Creel would be successful in getting such intellectual workers on board the war effort, "to establish a visible link between liberal ideals and pursuit of the war," Stuart Ewen observes. "On the whole, Wilson's assumption was justified. When the war was declared, an impassioned generation of Progressive publicists fell into line, surrounding the war effort with a veil of much-needed liberal-democratic rhetoric."

Well known for his derisive critiques of big business interests, such as the Rockefellers and their infamous role in the Ludlow massacre, Creel was the perfect candidate to lead a propaganda apparatus at a time when suspicion toward “a ‘capitalists’ war” was prevalent. “When the moment to lead the public mind into war arrived, the disorder threatened by antiwar sentiments—particularly among the lower classes—was seen as an occasion that demanded what Lippmann would call the ‘manufacture of consent.’” [6]

The sales effort was unparalleled in its scale and sophistication. The CPI was not only able to officially censor news and information, but to manufacture it. Acting in the role of an advanced and multifaceted advertising agency, Creel’s operation “examined the different ways that information flowed to the population and flooded these channels with pro-war material.”

The Committee’s domestic organ was comprised of 19 subdivisions, each devoted to a specific type of propaganda, one of which was a Division of News that distributed over 6,000 press releases and acted as the chief avenue for war-related information. On an average week, more than 20,000 newspaper columns carried data provided through CPI propaganda. The Division of Syndicated Features enlisted the help of popular novelists, short story writers, and essayists. These mainstream American authors presented the official line in a readily accessible form reaching twelve million people every month. Similar endeavors existed for cinema, impromptu soapbox oratory (Four Minute Men), and outright advertising. [7]

Creel himself recalls the unparalleled efforts of the thought control apparatus he oversaw to sell the war to a skeptical American public

“It is a matter of pride to the Committee on Public Information, as it should be to America, that the directors of English, French, and Italian propaganda were a unit in agreeing that our literature was remarkable above all others for its brilliant and concentrated effectiveness.”[8]

Alongside Creel’s recollections, out of their experiences in the CPI the liberal-minded Lippmann and Bernays wrote of their overall contempt for what they understood as a malleable and hopelessly ill-informed public that could not be trusted with serious decision-making. In their view, public opinion had to be created by an “organized intelligence” of technocrats (Lippmann) or “engineered” by “an invisible government” (Bernays), with the average citizen relegated to the role of idle spectator.[9]

Given the backdrop of progressive-left journalists’ lengthy and ardent opposition to the Bush-Cheney policies of Nazi-like atrocities and plunder, venues such as Democracy Now are poised to serve as platforms for disseminating the necessary disinformation to make the Obama administration’s color revolutions and “humanitarian” policy of military interventions seem palatable to the very audiences whose sensibilities are most opposed to violence and imperialism.

The phenomenon attests to the sophistication and efficiency of modern publicity efforts that genuinely alternative news outlets have long pointed to, the gullibility of many on the Left, and the extent to which vintage propaganda techniques never truly die. Rather, they are consistently refined and expanded in anticipation of shifting public sentiment and rationales for deception.

Notes

[1] Charlie Skelton, "The Syrian Opposition: Who's Doing the Talking?" Guardian, July 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/12/syrian-opposition-doing-the-talking>

[2] Finian Cunningham, "'Democracy Now' and the 'Progressive' Alternative Media: Valued Cheerleaders for Imperialism and War," July 13, 2012, GlobalResearch.ca, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=31874>

[3] Amy Goodman with David Goodman, *The Exception to the Rulers: Exposing Oily Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media that Love Them*, New York: Hyperion, 2004, 7.

[4] Fact Sheet: A Comprehensive Strategy and New Tools to Prevent and Respond to Atrocities, White House Press Release, August 4, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/23/fact-sheet-comprehensive-strategy-and-new-tools-prevent-and-respond-atro>

[5] Democracy Now! "Back From Syria Reporter David Enders Says Assad Regime Crumbling to 'Grassroots Rebellion,'" July 19, 2012, http://www.democracynow.org/2012/7/19/back_from_syria_reporter_david_enders. The observation, emblematic of Democracy Now's overall Libyan and Syrian coverage, stands in stark contrast to the stories from genuine alternative news outlets providing important reports and analyses explaining the root causes of the Syrian unrest. For example, see Thierry Meyssan, "How Al Qaeda Men Came to Power in Libya," *Voltairenet.org*, 7 September 2011, <http://www.voltairenet.org/How-Al> Qaeda-men-came-to-power-in; Tony Cartalucci, *A Timeline & History: One Year Into the Engineered 'Arab Spring,' One Step Closer to Global Hegemony*, December 24, 2011, *Land Destroyer Report*, <http://landdestroyer.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/2011-year-of-dupe.html>; Webster Tarpley, "NATO-Backed Death Squads Basic Cause of Syria Unrest," *PressTV*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/240482.html>; Stephen Lendman, "Syria at the Crossroads: Is US-NATO Contemplating a Plan B?" *GlobalResearch.ca*, April 2, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=30087>.

[6] Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin*, New York: Basic Books, 1996, 109-110.

[7] Aaron Delwiche, *Propaganda: Wartime Propaganda: World War I*, The Committee on Public Information, Accessed July 20, 2012 at <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/ww1.cpi.html>; George Creel, *How We Advertised America*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920. Available at <http://archive.org/details/howweadvertameri00creerich>

[8] Creel, 113.

[9] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York: Free Press, 1997 (1922); Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, New York: Ig Publishing, 2005 (1928); See also Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, New York: Transaction Publishers, 1927, and *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, New York: Bonni and Liveright, 1929.

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James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at [MemoryHoleBlog.com](#), [TracyLegalDefense.org](#), and [jamesftracy.wordpress.com](#).

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