

Robert Fisk: Death of a ‘Controversial’ Journalist. His Legacy Will Live

By [Media Lens](#)

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Robert Fisk, the Independent’s Middle East correspondent, died on 30 October aged 74. In reviewing his life and career, the newspaper for which he worked for more than two decades [wrote](#) of their star reporter:

‘Much of what Fisk wrote was controversial...’

As John Pilger [noted](#), in describing Fisk’s journalism as ‘controversial’ the Independent was using a ‘weasel word’.

The Washington Post published a [piece](#) titled:

‘Robert Fisk, daring but controversial British war correspondent and author, dies at 74’

Al Jazeera’s [piece](#) was subtitled:

‘The Independent newspaper confirms its acclaimed and controversial journalist died following a short illness.’

A [piece](#) in Le Monde was titled:

‘La mort de Robert Fisk, grand reporter au Moyen-Orient et personnage controversé’ (Christophe Ayad, Le Monde, 4 November 2020)

The trend is clear. When The Times subjected Fisk to one of its full-on hit pieces in April 2018, it [wrote](#): ‘Fisk is no stranger to controversy.’

So why *do* ‘mainstream’ commentators feel obliged to red-flag Fisk’s journalism with ‘controversial’ in this way, and why is it a ‘weasel word’?

Consider that the likes of the BBC’s Andrew Marr, the Guardian’s Martin Chulov and The Times’ David Aaronovitch, and numerous others, will never be described as ‘controversial’, despite their highly controversial, in fact outrageous, warmongering bias.

Marr is not labelled ‘controversial’ for [supporting](#) a ground invasion of Serbia in 1999:

'I want to put the Macbeth option: which is that we're so steeped in blood we should go further. If we really believe Milosevic is this bad, dangerous and destabilising figure we must ratchet this up much further. We should now be saying that we intend to put in ground troops.' (Marr, 'Do we give war a chance?', The Observer, 18 April 1999)

Was that 'controversial'? How about [this](#)?

Was it 'controversial' for the Guardian to [write](#) this of the country that has relentlessly waged war and supported tyranny around the world since 1945:

'Joe Biden looks to have done enough to win the White House... He will have to reassert America's role as the global problem-solver.' (Our emphasis)?

Was it 'controversial' for the supposedly impartial global news agency, Associated Press, to [write](#) this of the United States:

'For decades, the U.S. has been an advocate for democracy abroad, using diplomatic pressure and even direct military intervention in the name of spreading the principles of a pluralistic system with a free and fair vote for political leaders'?

An awesome level of gullibility is required to believe that the direct military 'interventions' (wars) in oil-rich Iraq and Libya were about spreading pluralistic principles. Whether or not Iraqis have had 'a free and fair vote' since 2003 is a matter of complete indifference to Western politics and journalism.

It turns out that the term 'controversial' is only applied in corporate media to political writers and leaders deemed 'controversial' by elite interests.

This was unwittingly made clear by the big brains at the BBC who [noted](#) that Fisk 'drew controversy for his sharp criticism of the US and Israel, and of Western foreign policy'. If Fisk had drawn 'controversy' from China, Iran or North Korea, the 'weasel word' would not have appeared in the Beeb's analysis.

A second [piece](#) in the Independent also allowed us to read between the letters that make up 'controversial':

'Often writing and speaking of his pity for the people he saw being killed at the same time as becoming a forthright critic of the US and Israel. His writing could be controversial - such as his later reporting on Syria...' (Our emphasis)

Fisk is not alone, of course. The BBC controversially echoed numerous other media in [describing](#) Hugo Chavez as 'Venezuela's... controversial president'.

If Chavez was 'controversial', which national leader is not? Should they *all* be described as 'controversial'? By the way, Biden very controversially [described](#) Chavez' successor Nicolas Maduro as a 'tyrant', adding:

'I was among the first Democratic foreign policy voices to recognize Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader and to call for Maduro to resign.' (See [here](#) for more on Biden's grim record.)

As we have [discussed](#), these were deeply embarrassing propaganda claims in pursuit of regime change. Even the BBC was eventually [forced](#) to give up the pretence that Guaidó was 'interim leader', reverting to the title 'opposition leader'.

Although Obama bombed seven Muslim countries from 2009 to 2017, all but destroying Libya, the BBC would, of course, never refer to 'America's controversial president, Barack Obama', or even to 'America's controversial president, George W. Bush'. Specific Bush policies might be described as 'controversial', but the term would never be applied as a broad brush description of who he is.

In corporate media newspeak, 'controversial' can actually be translated as 'offensive to power'. The term is intended as a scare word to warn readers that the labelled person is 'dodgy', 'suspect': 'Handle with care!' The journalist is also signalling to his or her editors and other colleagues: 'I'm not one of "them"!'

The same effect can be achieved by praising establishment figures. Peter Osborne did not cover himself in glory by [tweeting](#):

'Tony Blair has emerged as probably the most authoritative and persuasive voice during the Covid crisis.'

As we [noted](#):

'If it was some other leader of some other country who had waged an illegal war of aggression killing one million people, Osborne might not have sent this.'

Journalists and leaders who serve power, including 'Teflon Tony', somehow retain fundamental 'respectability', are welcomed by elite media and the powers that be. (For completists interested in this subliminal misuse of language, the same use is made of the term 'narcissist': Julian Assange, Russell Brand, George Galloway, Glenn Greenwald, Seumas Milne, John Pilger, Edward Snowden, Hugo Chavez, and - alas! - us at Media Lens, have all been repeatedly accused of 'narcissism'. Recently, Andrew Rawnsley [wrote](#) of the almost comically humble and selfless Jeremy Corbyn:

'Many things have been said about his character over the years, but one thing has not been said enough: he is a narcissist.'

An unwitting, backhanded compliment from the Observer's great warmonger. (See our book 'Propaganda Blitz' for more discussion on 'narcissism', Pluto Press, 2018, pp.54-55)

'How Do They Get Away With These Lies?

In 2004, at a time when all of US-UK journalism was [celebrating](#) the 'transfer of sovereignty' from the forces still occupying Iraq and stealing its oil, Fisk was a rare voice mocking the

charade:

'Alice in Wonderland could not have improved on this. The looking-glass reflects all the way from Baghdad to Washington... Those of us who put quotation marks around "liberation" in 2003 should now put quotation marks around "sovereignty".' (Fisk, 'The handover: Restoration of Iraqi sovereignty - or Alice in Wonderland?' The Independent, 29 June 2004)

In 2014, after Tony Blair made one of his frequent attempts to exonerate himself in relation to Iraq while calling for more violence to bomb Syria better, the Guardian editors performed painful contortions in declaring Blair's analysis 'thoughtful' if 'wrong-headed'. Fisk's [response](#) to Blair was different:

'How do they get away with these lies?'

Fisk was also a virtual lone 'mainstream' voice [contesting](#) the US-UK's audacious, [well-funded](#) attempts to re-run their Iraq 'weapons of mass destruction' scam in Syria:

'Washington's excuse for its new Middle East adventure - that it must arm Assad's enemies because the Damascus regime has used sarin gas against them - convinces no-one in the Middle East. Final proof of the use of gas by either side in Syria remains almost as nebulous as President George W. Bush's claim that Saddam's Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.'

For this, as the obituaries make unsubtly clear, Fisk was never forgiven.

An obituary in The Times commented on Fisk:

'While he was an outstandingly poetic writer, he developed an emotional obsession with the plight of the Palestinian people and a visceral dislike of the Israeli government and its allies, especially America. In the jargon of news reporting he "went native", unable to provide a dispassionate account of events and their context.' ('Robert Fisk: Obituaries - Trenchant yet lyrical foreign correspondent who interviewed Osama bin Laden three times and was often accused of "going native"', The Times, 3 Nov 2020)

Given the appalling racism and ethnic cleansing faced by the Palestinian people, the reference to Fisk 'going native' was a grotesque observation.

The Times noted, of course, that Fisk 'remained no stranger to controversy'. It asked us to believe that 'critics poured cold water on Fisk's writing', although 'awards committees did not'. In translation: Fisk was subjected to exactly the kind of ugly propaganda smears from 'critics' contained in The Times' obituary.

The comments are no great surprise, given the honesty with which Fisk [described](#) his departure from The Times to join the Independent in 1989:

'The end came for me when I flew to Dubai in 1988 after the USS Vincennes [a US Navy guided missile cruiser] had shot down an Iranian passenger airliner

over the Gulf. Within 24 hours, I had spoken to the British air traffic controllers at Dubai, discovered that US ships had routinely been threatening British Airways airliners, and that the crew of the Vincennes appeared to have panicked. The foreign desk told me the report was up for the page-one splash. I warned them that American “leaks” that the IranAir pilot was trying to suicide-crash his aircraft on to the Vincennes were rubbish. They agreed.

‘Next day, my report appeared with all criticism of the Americans deleted, with all my sources ignored. The Times even carried an editorial suggesting the pilot was indeed a suicider. A subsequent US official report and accounts by US naval officers subsequently proved my dispatch correct. Except that Times readers were not allowed to see it.’

Fisk said that he believed Murdoch did not personally intervene. However:

‘He didn’t need to. He had turned The Times into a tame, pro-Tory, pro-Israeli paper shorn of all editorial independence.’

Echoing virtually every other obituary, the Guardian commented that Fisk ‘tended to absolve the Assad regime of some of the worst crimes credited to it’, which had ‘provoked a backlash, even among his anti-imperialist acolytes’.

It is ironic that the Guardian should highlight Fisk’s supposed tendency to ‘absolve’ Syria of ‘the worst crimes credited to it’. Whistleblowing revelations relating to OPCW and the alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria, while almost completely ignored by the ‘mainstream’, have overwhelmingly vindicated Fisk and made a nonsense of official claims. See recent comments [here](#) from Noam Chomsky, and excellent in-depth analysis [here](#).

The Guardian naturally deployed the ‘weasel word’ in [noting](#) ‘all the controversy generated by his later commentary on the evils of western, and specifically US, involvement in the Middle East’. This was followed by a distorted version of ‘balance’:

‘Some of Fisk’s most ardent admirers have suggested that to describe his journalism as controversial is a vulgar slight.’

Some people might think so, but only ‘ardent admirers’, ‘acolytes’ – themselves controversial narcissists.

Who knows where this unsubtle red-flagging of Fisk’s journalism as ‘controversial’ would have ended? The intent behind ‘mainstream’ propaganda, particularly on Fisk’s Syria reporting, has increasingly been to suggest that Fisk was morally tainted; that he got it badly, shamefully wrong. Flitting like barely-glimpsed bats at the back of the readers mind are supposed to be terms like ‘Assad apologist’, ‘genocide denial’. Not Holocaust denial exactly, but a shameful mutation of the same moral blindness.

Another rare, excellent ‘mainstream’ journalist, Patrick Cockburn, dispensed with the herdthink, copycat smears, and [captured](#) the truth of a journalist who was ‘a meticulous and highly-informed reporter, one who responded sceptically – and rigorously investigated – the partisan claims of all parties, be they gunmen, army officers or government officials’. Cockburn added:

'He took nothing for granted and was often openly contemptuous of those who did. He did not invent the old journalist saying "never believe anything until it is officially denied" but he was inclined to agree with its sceptical message. He was suspicious of journalists who cultivated diplomats and "official sources" that could not be named and whose veracity we are invited to take on trust.'

This explains exactly why Fisk was and is viewed as 'controversial'; a word that did not appear in Cockburn's summing up.

The Invisible Tweets

A storm had been made to brew around Fisk's reputation in recent years. But it had not yet reached the Category 5 propaganda hurricane that engulfed Jeremy Corbyn who, like Fisk, 'drew controversy for his sharp criticism of the US and Israel, and of Western foreign policy'.

Corbyn was not just accused of anti-semitism and Holocaust denial; he was accused of being a de facto Nazi who 'wants to reopen Auschwitz'. These [claims](#) were baseless and insane, but not 'controversial'.

By contrast, we discovered what *is* deemed 'controversial' on Twitter on November 3. That day, we tried three times to tweet a link to a Red Pepper [article](#) by Lynne Segal as she 'looks back on her experience of 40 years as a party member in [Corbyn's] constituency'. We [tweeted](#) a screenshot of this important passage from Segal's excellent piece:

'Right now, along with the many other Jewish activists I know in Islington North, I am simply devastated that this process has climaxed in the suspension of our cherished MP, and former leader. It's so hard to accept that I must repeat again what every Jewish member I know in Islington North has frequently confirmed and it is we who actually know and regularly meet with Jeremy Corbyn - unlike most of critics. What we can confirm is that as Jews in North Islington we have always felt more than safe, more than welcome, unfailingly supported, in everything we do in the borough, and the Party. As it happens, we often feel this all the more strongly as Jews, knowing that - unlike Corbyn - so many who choose to speak in our name completely disrespect our commitment to antisemitism and racism of all kinds in struggles for a better world, including the vital struggle for Palestinian rights.'

We also [tweeted](#) a screenshot of this passage:

'So, let me provide a few pertinent facts. Over the years, Corbyn has had mutually supportive relations with the practising Jewish community in Islington, attending Shabbat dinners with the orthodox Chabad Rabbi, Mendy Korner, and attending numerous other official Jewish events in North London. Against some local resistance, Corbyn promoted the installation of a plaque on a demolished synagogue site in 2015 to celebrate Jewish life in the borough. Unlike most of his critics in Westminster, Corbyn unfailingly turned up to vote for motions addressing anti-Semitism in Parliament, just as he worked tirelessly against racism on every front.'

This is extremely powerful, credible evidence exposing the claims against Corbyn, not just as a sham, but as a monstrous reversal of the truth.

We know what our readers like and we know how they will likely react to our tweets, so we

were surprised that the two tweeted screenshots did not immediately pick up a few likes and retweets. In fact, after four hours, they had not been liked or retweeted by *anyone*. We tried tweeting the screenshots again, and again they received no likes or retweets. We checked with friends and it became clear that while these tweets were visible to us, they had been secretly [rendered invisible](#) to everyone else by Twitter without us knowing. Unlike the smears unleashed on Corbyn for five years, our words had been banished because they were deemed 'controversial' by a giant, profit-maximising tech corporation. And we are not alone; we discovered that independent journalist Glenn Greenwald had earlier [tweeted](#):

'I posted this tweet 3 times and all 3 times it just won't appear in my time-line, allowing nobody to see it. Genuinely confused. Is anyone else experiencing this problem?'

No surprise, Greenwald is also 'controversial', having, like Fisk, Corbyn and us, attracted 'controversy' 'for his sharp criticism of the US and Israel, and of Western foreign policy'.

On Twitter, in response to corporate media censoring Donald Trump, science writer Marcus Chown [commented](#):

'This is what we DESPERATELY need in the UK. We need our media to interrupt speeches by Johnson and others and point out to viewers their lies. Retweet if you would like to see [sic] this happen.'

If giant, profit-maximising, advertiser-dependent corporate media decide it is their job and right to censor political leaders like Trump and Johnson, they will have no qualms at all about censoring you, us, and everyone else. Is that what we want? What on earth qualifies Big Business as an arbiter of Truth?

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